

The Empathy Diaries: A Memoir by Sherry Turkle (review)

Amy Ione

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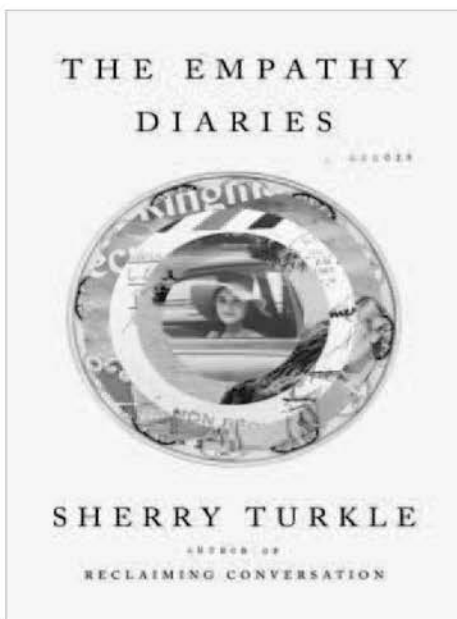
THE EMPATHY DIARIES: A MEMOIR

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Reviewed by Amy Ione
Director, the Diatropé Institute,
2342 Shattuck Avenue, #527,
Berkeley, CA 94704, USA.
Email: ione@diatropé.com.

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Sherry Turkle's exemplary research on technology as it relates to humans, personal relationships and children has provided key insights as the computer has ingrained itself in our world. While her early chronicles on innovative technologies were impressive, I felt that the more important contributions were her insights challenging the unbridled enthusiasm of innovative technologists and how technology often compromised privacy. This memoir—primarily devoted to the period from her childhood through her tenure appointment years (1948–1985)—presents more details related to the person behind early works like *The Second Self* than the researcher who later penned *Life on the Screen* and *Alone Together* [1]. That said, the book does cogently capture how Turkle came to the interdisciplinary framework that has often set her apart. Or, as she puts it, “I found my life’s work by navigating as a bricoleur, trying one thing and stepping back, making new con-



nections, and most of all, by listening” (p. 241).

The volume is divided into three parts. The first part introduces her from childhood to her early college experience (1948–1968). We discover that while she felt a part of her family as she grew up, she simultaneously developed the sense (and the clarity) of an outsider. Some of this came about because her mother believed that any “reality” could be claimed as real. Turkle therefore had to decipher how her mother was interpreting reality because her mother’s “facts” didn’t always conform with the world Turkle experienced.

By contrast, her biological father’s love of science made it easy for him to lose touch with the human needs of his family. Then, once her parents divorced, her mother’s second marriage created identity problems because her mother wanted Turkle to use her second husband’s last name even before she was legally adopted. The upshot of this was that Turkle grew up with two deep convictions: One, she felt something was wrong with her because of her name. In addition, she understood that four loving adults—her grandparents, her mother, and her Aunt Mildred—had made her the center of their lives. We also learn she was an exceptional student intent on going to Radcliffe: “I was focused on finally leaving home. But I had tried to take what I most admired: my aunt’s intelligence and

integrity; my grandmother’s empathy and resourcefulness; my grandfather’s tenacity. As for my mother, I wanted her capacity for joy in small things, the energy she brought to every moment” (p. 77).

This section of the book allows the reader to understand how Turkle developed at a young age a sense of *dépaysement*, the feeling of being a stranger in your environment. It does not fully grapple with the paradox that she felt like an outsider at Radcliffe, despite its reputation as one of the most elite (or insider) colleges in the United States. (Radcliffe was known as Harvard’s sister school, and while she was there the school offered joint Harvard-Radcliffe diplomas to undergraduates. Later the two schools were fully merged.) Rather, the focus is on developing the “outsider” theme that threads throughout the book. As an ethnographer of technology, she studied how people think about feeling like an outsider. As a social scientist who wanted to combine thinking and feeling, she was unlike those who cherished data sets and experimental methods. Later, as computers became more firmly entrenched, her critical questioning of some technological tenets continued to position her on the outside of mainstream trends: “So even when I got MIT’s imprimatur [tenure], I never had a sense of belonging” (p. 326). Within this, a complementary thread was how her professors and colleagues helped her access the kinds of tools she needed to develop critical thinking skills and to capture her reverence for topics she cared about passionately.

Part II (1968–1975) introduces the author finding her voice even as she reestablishes that the “outsider” sense she developed as a child remained. Some sense of difference came through loss. For example, her mother’s death revealed that she had hidden her cancer from her daughter for ten years so as to not disrupt her quest to enroll at Radcliffe. Turkle was subsequently forced to drop out of school due to a rift with her stepfather, who refused to fill out the financial forms she needed for her scholarship. This led her to Paris,

courses at the prestigious Sciences Po school and a group of prominent French thinkers who were influential in the May 1968 movement. Congruently, she was moving toward a desire to understand how ideas impact personal identity. It was during this time that Turkle recognized that both psychology and ethnography would help her to analyze the inner history of ideas: the psychology of how people change their minds, in particular. A key insight is used to sum up this period. When she recognized that those at Harvard who studied the psychology of thinking were on a different floor from those who studied the psychology of feeling, she realized that she wanted to do work that put the two together. She also began to realize that she didn’t think like an engineer; rather, her bent was toward tinkering as a form of cognition.

A sojourn in Chicago to study with anthropologist Victor Turner eventually led Turkle to see she wanted to pursue an intimate ethnography of contemporary life. On returning to Harvard, her work with George Homans and David Riesman was influential. Reisman, in particular, informed her work on social media. The other-direction construct led her to postulate that, in social media terms, one might say, “I share, therefore I am.” A major issue that began to become clear to her during these Part II years was that her interest in social change and the inner life—the inner history of ideas—was not moving in the same way as the field of academic sociology, which was becoming more quantitative and focused on measurable outward behavior. Nevertheless, and despite her reservations about quantitative thinking, she was invited to fill a general slot in a program at the School of Humanities and Sciences that Harry Hanham was setting up at MIT. This proved to be a foundational part of her unusual career path. The idea was for her to finish her dissertation and then stay on as an assistant professor.

Landing at MIT in the mid-1970s put Turkle in an environment where computer scientists and artificial intelligence researchers were develop-

ing models that imagined the mind as a computational machine. They saw behavior as programs in which the software was as yet undetermined, a thesis that gave her pause because it omitted human feeling and emotions. Still, her time there gave her the opportunity to see how children reacted to their first experience of the computer and how the early personal computers, which were built by the users, changed. Replaced by plug-and-play options like the Apple II, the newer models came complete with a screen, keyboard, expansion slots for a printer and floppy disks for storing one's work. She also deciphered that the kinds of questions people asked about the mind and machines were changing with technological developments.

Part III (1976–1985) centers on Turkle's time at MIT and her marriage to educationist Seymour Papert. Turkle joined the Technology Studies program (later the Science, Technology, and Society, or STS program) and DSRE (the Division for Study and Research in Education), headed by Benson Snyder, where Papert worked. This section of the book includes vignettes about many people at the forefront of early efforts to study learning, to decipher consciousness and to engineer minds (e.g. Marvin Minsky and Joseph Weizenbaum, as well as Papert). The historical value of these conversations is well worth the price of the book. During this period, Turkle saw the computer as an evocative object that was provoking important conversations, and a mission statement she often used on grant applications conveys a direction that began to take form at this time: "I want to study how computers change not only what we do but who we are" (p. 274). In a larger sense, in terms of empathic reflections, the question of whether brilliant ideas give one the license to overlook common courtesies comes up more than once as Turkle reflects on her complicated relationship with Papert.

Overall, *The Empathy Diaries* gives a sense of how and where Turkle began to perceive that the view of people as rational animals was being

revised to denote people as emotional machines. Because the book gives very little attention to her work after she received tenure in 1985, this reader felt that a key part of the story was missing: We are not given information that covers how her thinking/feeling conversation with human/machine relationships stretched into simulation and virtual reality. Perhaps a second book is in the works that will cover 1985 to the present? This book seems to close on the note that her tenure case had revolved around rule-based thinking that reduced her to an object so as to avoid considering her as a person. Yet we hardly get to see the person whom she became.

These years are covered in a short final chapter, which covers 1985 to 2020. It briefly notes that with the entry of the personal computer, she moved from mechanism to simulation and began to study how the computer offered the illusion of companionship without the demands of friendship. She also notes that she remarried soon after her divorce from Papert and had a child. A few paragraphs explain that once she became the mother of a preschool child (her daughter was born in 1991) she gained another perspective on computers. Of course, as inventions like Facebook became a part of the societal picture, Turkle's voice has been an important one as the social-media business model entered our consciousness and began to sell our privacy "in ways that fracture both our intimacy and our democracy" (p. 337). I wish she had said more about this period (and perhaps less about her early childhood).

In the epilogue Turkle sums up the book: Her sense of being a stranger allowed her to grow into a brave woman. Finding comfort in a life lived largely as a visitor taught her that solitude allows one to discover one's own company. As her academic work at MIT made her feel like a killjoy in the American love affair with technology, she found her own voice. She also found that writing the book was another kind of displacement, and one that allowed her to appreciate, among other things, her mother's complexity.

As noted above, I hope that this memoir is merely intended as Part I and Turkle will release a second book to cover the years after 1985 in more detail. As rich as the writing is, it offers only a rather narrow slice of her life. It is because her later work is more broadly connected with society at large that key elements of who she is remain opaque to the reader. I also kept debating whether her trials within the ivory tower of the Ivy League showed that our humanness is complicated in all situations or if this narrow framing somewhat mitigated the broader experience of humans within the larger society unconnected to the ivory tower. Because her later work is done in a broader environment, it seems more expansive as it looks at how technology is changing us culturally and as individuals. More succinctly, her writings focus on her interactions with people she was meeting online and in classrooms. Given this, it would be fascinating to see how she continued to refine her inner self in light of these experiences once she had established a place for herself academically.

As excellent as this book is, I do have minor quibbles with its presentation. Maybe the reason there is no index is because this book is presented as a memoir? Considering that she knew so many people at the forefront of the computer revolution, her academic trajectory has an added value, and these reflections will no doubt become a classic as interest in this early period grows. One hopes the publishers will add an index to the second edition. (While they're at it, they can fix the notes, which do not currently point to the correct pages. At some point they become about two pages off, perhaps due to last-minute edits?)

Finally, *The Empathy Diaries*, although presented as a memoir, includes a wealth of critical insights. What is particularly thought provoking about this reflection is how well it captures the complications of pursuing an interdisciplinary life, and that reconciling ideas that are not easily interwoven takes passion and grit. The empathy component arises

as Turkle attempts to emotionally understand what other people feel. Her deftness in capturing her persona leads me to close by saying that I've always liked Turkle's work to some degree but, as a process person, I have also struggled with her devotion to objects. She frequently expresses herself in terms of human subjects and objects, with particular objects holding a special place because she characterizes an evocative object as something that holds significant meaning to the person and not necessarily anyone else. It holds personal emotions, feelings or memories for that individual. She defines it by saying: "We think with the objects we love; we love the objects we think with" [2]. To be sure, while I'm still more inclined to the process by which we make objects we love, this book did succeed in giving me a fuller appreciation of her views and a deeper sense of how they arise.

References

- 1 S. Turkle, *The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984); S. Turkle, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995); S. Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2012).
- 2 S. Turkle, *Evocative Objects: Things We Think With* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007) p. 5.