Chapter 1
Sherry Turkle

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ABSTRACT

Sherry Turkle, a pioneer in the study of technology and the self, is both a scholar and a public intellectual. Using a unique voice and methodology combining ethnographic and clinical interviews, Turkle traces the rise of the computer revolution and the emergence and adoption of different technologies and their affordances—computers, the Internet, social robots. In this process, her theoretical direction also develops from a focus on the self, identity, and finally, social connections and disconnections. This article describes how Turkle's work chronicles the changing conceptions of human (and machine) possibilities, her recent turn to sociability, and her unique methodologies as major intellectual contributions.

INTRODUCTION

In *Things that Make Us Smart* (1993), Donald Norman recounts a conversation from the early 1970s. Several leading computer scientists were discussing why anyone might want a computer in their home: "'What would the average person do with them?' we asked ourselves. 'Games?' 'Recipes?' 'Income tax?' We laughed and gave up" (p. 190). Norman attributes the failure to predict the computer revolution that was just around the corner to the failure to appreciate how society redefines, shapes and modifies technology. Published in 1984, which was to be the apocryphal year of Orwell's Big Brother, Sherry Turkle's book, *The Second Self,* described the emergence of a technological society more benign than Orwell's; more interesting, and sometimes even romantic, than the one Norman imagined. Turkle's perspective on technology is also more intimate and personal, focusing on how people make sense of their notions of self and relationships with others through meaningful interactions with the social and material world.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-0315-8.ch001

PIONEERING THE STUDY OF TECHNOLOGY AND THE SELF

Sherry Turkle was awarded her Bachelor's and Doctoral degrees in Sociology and Personality Psychology at Harvard University. She joined the faculty of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in 1976, becoming a member of the Program in Science, Technology, and Society. In 2001, she founded and directed the MIT Initiative on Technology and the Self. She is now the Abby Rockefeller Mauzé Professor of the Social Studies of Science and Technology. Her broad education covered a range of fields including the developmental theories of Piaget, sociology, anthropology, and psychoanalysis. After completing her first book, *Psychoanalytic Politics: Freud's French Revolution*, Turkle made an apparently unusual turn to the study of people's relationships to technology, investigating how Americans were adopting computers as an analog to mind in the emerging "computer culture."

Her method in these pioneering studies of technological cultures is ethnographic and clinical, relying on a broad scope of formal and informal observations and interviews to understand people's subjective experiences with technology through their personal narratives as well as depict the broader cultural trends they signify. Another feature of her methodology is its accessibility. Turkle is one of those rare scholars whose scholarly work also contributes to her reputation as widely recognized public intellectual.

Turkle's scholarly contributions can be characterized in terms of three major conceptual themes: the self interacting with the computer as an evocative object; simulation and playful recreations of identity; and social relationships afforded by the increasingly technological world of computers, the Internet, and social robots and media. While this work is well-known and widely reviewed, this brief article focuses on Turkle's work in a broader framework: her chronicling of the changing conceptions of human (and machine) possibilities, her recent turn to sociability, and her unique methodologies.

Reconceiving Human Possibilities

Rather than being defined by language, broad symbolic abilities, or culture alone, our species is unique in the way that it brings these abilities together to reconceive human possibilities. Agriculture, organized war, the printed word, and the industrial revolution are all examples of such reconceptualization of human possibilities, which in hindsight, we tend to refer to as "revolutions." Sherry Turkle's work traces the rise of the computer revolution through the reconceptualizations of mind, identity, and relationships that are its integral components.

Turkle recognized that the computer presaged new views of human possibilities at least as significant as those brought about by early scientific successes in the 16th and 17th centuries. Over more than a century, the work of Copernicus and Descartes, among others, shifted humans from the center of the universe. Humans were no longer enjoying a special status at the center of God's universe; they were displaced, de-centered, exiled to a place on the edges. In addition to this de-centering, there was also a new authority given to the thinking self, an autonomous, experiencing "I": Cogito ergo sum. Drawing on some of the insights of Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic thinking, Turkle recognized a new de-centering, an emerging conception of what it is to be human among the computers. A human machine consists of systems and processes. The "center" shifts from task to task, working just fine without the authoritative "I," of an autonomous self. This came from Turkle's work on *Psychoanalytic Politics* (1978, 1992).

Although the two editions of *Psychoanalytic Politics* are largely the same, the subtitles indicate a shift in understanding. The first (Turkle,