

The Inner History of Devices

edited and with an introductory
essay by Sherry Turkle

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Acknowledgments

In my teaching, I am often asked what stands behind an ethnography alert to the inner life of its subjects. When students press me for guidance, perhaps a list of questions, I tell them that intimate ethnography is not advanced by a particular agenda, but through creating a space to listen. The questions we ask in an intimate ethnography of devices—how do people feel about the objects in their lives? how do relationships form around them?—are common to many ethnographic traditions. Intimate ethnography explores the many ways that the first answers to these questions are not the last answers. It attends to untold stories. People have a received wisdom about themselves, a kind of “company line” about their lives. To get beyond these, it is helpful to infuse ethnography with other disciplines of self reflection—specifically, the sensibilities of the clinician and the memoirist. This book grew out of my efforts to answer my students’ questions about methodology. I thank them for both inspiring and contributing to it.

My conversations with students about technology and the inner life have most recently taken place in the workshops, seminars, and classes of the MIT Initiative on Technology and Self. There, the close study of objects gives memoir and psychodynamic thinking a role in the training of social scientists. I founded the Initiative in 2001, and I thank the Mitchell Kapor Foundation for making it a reality, and the Kurzweil Foundation, the Spencer Foundation, the National Science Foundation, and the Intel Corporation for making it possible for it to continue its work.

This book is the third in a series that has grown out of work at the Initiative. I thank all who have participated in its programs, with a special debt to my students in the Initiative courses “Things and Thinking” and “Science, Technology, and Memoir.” This volume draws on the research program funded by the Spencer Foundation on “Adolescence, Technology, and Identity” and that of the Intel Corporation on “Nurturant Technology” as well as on the hard work of several Initiative working groups, including Psychoanalysis and Digital Culture; Body Technology; and Information Societies, Technologies and Self. My academic department at MIT, the program in Science, Technology, and Society, has made a good home for all of these endeavors.

In addition, I thank those research associates at the Initiative who worked to shape this book: Olivia Dasté, Anita Say Chan, Robert Briscoe, and Will Taggart. Kelly Gray, as in other publication projects at the Initiative, was decisive in helping this book reach for better ideas as well as greater elegance and clarity. During the writing of this book, I craved the time and the tranquility that can only come from a smooth-running professional life. Here I thank Claire Baldwin, Grace Costa, Michele Crews, Trude Irons, and Judith Spitzer. Ms. Spitzer’s eye for detail was a great friend to this book. At the MIT Press, special thanks to Deborah Cantor-Adams, Erin Hasley, Colleen Lanick, Alyssa Larose, and Robert Prior.

My daughter Rebecca has grown into young womanhood as this collection matured. Readers will be much helped by the consistency of her remarks as I worked at the kitchen table. Every time Rebecca said, “No one will know what that means,” her academic mother looked long and hard at a particular phrase of well-loved jargon. Additionally, it must be said that Rebecca’s proofreading skills are the stuff of legend. Thank you, Rebecca, for this and everything else.

My mother was about feelings and communication; my aunt was about ideas and taking commitments through to the end. Trying to bring their messages together inspires my personal and professional life every day. This book is dedicated to their memory.

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