Empathy in Danger: Book Review of Reclaiming Conversation by Sherry Turkle

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What are you doing while reading this book review? Do you have any other windows open on your computer? Are you multitasking? Have you just received a text that you felt compelled to answer immediately? Is someone trying to have a difficult conversation with you, while you are stalling and escaping to work? How many times do you anticipate being interrupted and distracted by the time you finish reading this review? Are you frustrated by all of these demands on your time and desperately wish that you could genuinely connect with your children, partner, friends, colleagues, but no matter how many texts or e-mails you send, how many likes you post on their social media, the deep connection you desire is just not happening? Do you miss being alone with yourself and really hearing your own thoughts? In *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age*, Sherry Turkle (2015) explores all of these questions and more.

With a background in sociology and psychology and decades of research in the area of people's relationship to technology, Turkle is a world-class expert in the digital age, modern communication technologies, robots, and how people relate to them, as well as how they have reshaped our lives. Therefore, there is hardly a more suitable candidate to write a book on this topic, especially because she had examined the growing tendency to be always connected and the robotic moment before in *Alone Together* (2011). *Reclaiming Conversation* continues that discussion, and adds to it, too, by highlighting new phenomena that have emerged since.

As always, Turkle's research methodology is sound, virtually impeccable. Her research is longitudinal and based mostly on interviews with an impressively high number of individuals from various age groups and fields, between 2008-2014, predominantly in New York and New England. She also relies on content analysis of data, observation, and experiments. The wide scope of her research and variety of her methods lead to convincing results and conclusions.

Turkle approaches the issue of reclaiming conversation on different levels, reaching back to the classic, *Walden*, by Henry David Thoreau. She refers back to Thoreau's furniture, as he moved to a cabin in Walden Pond, Massachusetts in the mid-19th century, and how he placed three chairs there, "one for solitude, two for friendship, and three for society" (Turkle 2015:10). Despite what many believe, Turkle emphasizes that Thoreau was not a hermit, striving to get away from conversation, but someone who realized that people needed solitude for self-reflection to be able to join meaningful conversations with friends and engage in social discourse. In *Reclaiming Conversation*, Turkle elucidates that, in a way, technology has pulled those chairs from under us, or at least rearranged them, which has contributed to us chasing after incessant connections and shying away from profound conversations.

As solitude is the first pillar of conversation, Turkle devotes an entire section, two chapters to it, and the topic resurfaces throughout later chapters of the book as well. She highlights how people, especially in younger generations, cannot be alone anymore. They (or we?) seem to get uncomfortable by solitude and always reach for their phone to perpetually be on, to be connected. This can lead to insufficient self-reflection and knowledge of self, even a distorted sense of self. As Turkle describes it, a new way of being is created, "I

share, therefore I am" (p. 47). Unless people post, message, or text, many feel that what they think or feel does not exist, or they themselves do not exist. With this we build a "false self, based on performances we think others will enjoy" (Turkle 2015:62). In Goffmanian terms, I would conclude that this could result in the disappearance of the backstage that we could retreat to and endless performances on the frontstage.

Turkle also explains the formation of an algorithmic self (p. 81) that is a sum of our search histories and output on our computers or phones, and how (sometimes) these algorithms seem to know our interests and desires better than we do. This reminds me of Cooley's looking glass self (society holds a mirror to us, and we get to know ourselves by others' reactions to us). I wonder if this is amplified by a digital, social media self, an algorithmic self. Do our phones and computers function as the looking glass now, especially if face-to-face interactions are declining?

Standing in for two chairs, Turkle scrutinizes families, friendships, and romances. The range of topics is extensive here, and probably all of us would recognize something that we have done ourselves or experienced our partners, children, or friends do. For example, she discusses distracted parents, being on phones while pushing strollers, at the playground or the dinner table, families fighting by text, friends texting instead of talking (or when together and talking, it is about what is on their phones), the urgency of responding to texts no matter what, romances budding online and via texts, as well as ending through texts, too (or, increasingly, through the *absence* of texts even, via silences). This state of modern romance and the impacts of technology on it are explored by Ansari (2016) in *Modern Romance*, and Turkle refers to Ansari's research herself in *Reclaiming Conversation*.

For me, one of the most memorable and telling incidents described in the book is when one of Turkle's interviewees, a college senior shares a story when she had just slept with a man, and while he was in the bathroom, she took out her phone to check out available men on a popular dating app despite admittedly liking the man who had just left her bed and

wanting to date him (p. 38). Turkle adds that she usually gets shrugs from people under thirty when she shares this story, so maybe it is merely due to my age that I even found this example worth mentioning, as an encapsulation of the current norms in technology and romance.

Thoreau's three chairs are embodied by the field of education, work, and the public sphere in *Reclaiming Conversation*. These areas are also fraught with attempts to avoid real conversations, multitasking, and relying on technologies. As Turkle claims to be not anti-technology, but pro-conversation (p. 25), she offers some guideposts to use technology in ways that enhances our lives instead of inhibiting them. Some of these include taking quiet time, slowing down, unitasking, creating sacred spaces for conversations, talking to people you disagree with, choosing the right tool for the job, not refraining from difficult conversations (p. 319-330).

Turkle's eloquent, erudite, incisive, engaging writing style is captivating. However, the most essential feature of her writing, at least in this book, is her compassion. Her primary concern is our empathy and humanity. As she puts it, "face-to-face conversation is the most human – and humanizing – thing we do. . . . It's where we develop our capacity for empathy" (Turkle 2015:3). She cites examples of educators complaining about declines in empathy in today's children. The common practice of breaking up by text or utter silence can also be viewed as a sign of dwindling empathy in human relationships and society.

Toward the end of *Reclaiming Conversation* Turkle wonders about technological developments in the field of robots, predominantly "caring" robots that would tend to our children and elderly, as well as those programmed for psychotherapy. She shares how some of her interviewees would consider robotic pets, friends, and lovers because they offer relationships without risk (p. 351). "Even as we treat machines as if they were almost human, we develop habits that have us treating human beings as almost-machines" (Turkle 2015:345). For me, this is the most disconcerting premise of where we might be heading, and, together with Turkle, I

sincerely hope that we do not stray so far from conversation and empathy that we lose important aspects of our humanity.

Given the sound argument, research, and delivery of *Reclaiming Conversation*, it is not easy to pinpoint weaknesses in the book. However, those who are fervent, relentless advocates of technology at all costs would definitely challenge Turkle on many of her conclusions. I mostly agree with her, but perhaps she could have focused on the strengths of technology a little more, when used in the right way. (She has done that more in prior books, and probably the goal of this one is to call attention to the potential dangers). It would have been intriguing to hear the voice of baby boomers and the silent generation more, as well as offer an international outlook on these issues. Taking the digital divide based on class, age, and global inequalities into account, it would be interesting to consider how all of this might affect gaps between generations, social classes, and high-income versus low-income nations.

Reclaiming Conversation would be an invaluable read for anyone who has ever owned a smartphone or computer, who has ever dated online or via phone apps, who has children, is an educator or employer, or is simply fascinated by technology, and its sociological and psychological impacts. This book could be useful for any scholar in the social sciences, as well as for students in a wide range of classes in philosophy, communication, psychology, and sociology. In sociology, it could be particularly beneficial in courses on social problems, deviance and norms, self and social existence, sociology of families and relationships, technology and society. Both undergraduate and graduate courses could utilize the book, probably as a secondary text in addition to a main textbook. In-class individual or group presentations could be done on each chapter of Turkle's work, or, it could also be used for a research project and paper on a related topic.

References

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Turkle, Sherry. 2011. *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*. New York: Basic Books.