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SOCIAL SCIENTIST SHERRY TURKLE | MEETING THE MINDS

**The Boston Globe**

## She studies our affection for objects

**By Billy Baker, Globe Correspondent | November 17, 2008**

In 1976, when Sherry Turkle arrived at MIT to teach the sociology of science, she quickly noticed how the still-new computer was becoming part of the fabric and language of daily life. When she probed deeper, she found "there was a real passionate attachment to the computer, a possibility to project yourself into the machine."

Within that, Turkle, a psychologist as well as a professor, saw bigger questions about how that might change our very sense of self-identity. And, as often happens to pioneers, people thought she was crazy.

"They'd say, 'It's just a tool, it's just a tool,' " she remembered with a smile. It's an argument she hasn't heard in a long time.

Turkle spent six years interviewing programmers, students, and children, and in 1984 published "The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit." It argued that the computer was more than a tool, but was a part of our social and psychological lives.

That is what Turkle does: She sees an object, and by studying how people relate to that object, she defines new questions of self.

That same year, 1984, also marked the arrival of a new computer tool - the Apple Macintosh, whose mouse and graphical user interface meant that you no longer needed to know how to program to use a computer. Add to that the first inkling of the Internet, and computers' new role as communication vehicles, and there was a new question for Turkle: What would be the impact of "virtual life" on real life? She explored this, in 1995, in "Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet."

Looking back on these ideas now, in the age of the iPhone and Facebook, it seems nostalgic that anyone would question her questions. But back then, it was hard to imagine now.

"I remember when she first started, people looked at her blankly," says veteran technology forecaster Paul Saffo. "But in many ways the most important part of her work is that, very often, she was the first person to ask an important question about how we use technology and how it changes our lives."

Today, Turkle is recognized as a trailblazer in bringing a social scientist's view into computers and technology. As the founder and director of the MIT Initiative on Technology and Self, Turkle has continued to probe the social side of the digital revolution. She's currently working on a book about what happens "when our technology is always on and always on us?" (One example: the iPhone in her purse.)

Recently, she's also turned her object detective work away from the computer. In the past year, she's edited three books - what she calls "the object trilogy" - that deal with how everyday objects can impact our lives. Each book contains a collection of essays written by intellectuals, artists, scientists, and academics who address how an object influenced their reality.

"Evocative Objects" is about how emotion and feeling are inseparable from how we view even the simplest of objects. "The Inner History of Devices" reveals how what we make is woven into our ways of seeing ourselves. And "Falling for Science" features the accounts of scientists - including 25 years of her own students - on how objects encountered in childhood became part of their scientific selves. (There are seven different essays on Legos.)

Turkle said her own fascination with the power of objects to bring together thinking and feeling began in her

childhood. She read Nancy Drew books - "She always solved mysteries with objects" - and spent hours combing through family keepsakes in a closet in her grandmother's house in Brooklyn looking for clues about her own history. Her biological father left the picture when she was 2, and the subject was taboo, so she created her own mythology through the artifacts she found.

"I've always been fascinated by the power of objects to bring together thinking and feeling," she said. "We think with the objects we love and we love the objects we think with."

When asked if she has her own object that would meet that criteria, she doesn't even have to think.

"Microsoft Word," she said with a smile and shrug. "I have it internalized. When I want to think at my best, I need Word in front of me. It's become a part of how I think."

**Hometown:** Brooklyn; lives in the Back Bay.

**Education:** At Harvard, she received a bachelor's in social studies in 1970 and a doctorate in sociology and personality psychology in 1976.

**Family:** Daughter, Rebecca Willard, 17, is a senior at the Winsor School.

**Hobbies:** Swimming, going to the opera and the theater, interior design, and going away with her daughter every Mother's Day weekend to take a cooking class. ■

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Sherry Turkle has edited three books that explore how technology "intrudes on our lives." (Pat Greenhouse/Globe Staff)