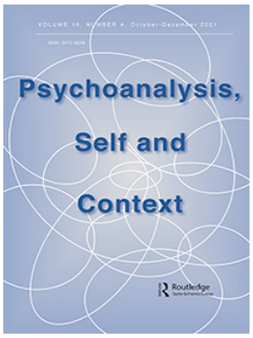

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Review: The Empathy Diaries by Sherry Turkle Breakdowns of Empathy

Lou Agosta, New York, Penguin Press, 2021, 357 pp., $28 (hardcover), ISBN 9780525560098

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BOOK REVIEW

Review: The Empathy Diaries by Sherry Turkle Breakdowns of Empathy, Lou Agosta, New York, Penguin Press, 2021, 357 pp., $28 (hardcover), ISBN 9780525560098

As Tolstoy famously noted, all happy families are alike. What Tolstoy did not note was that many happy families are also unhappy ones. That painful paradox is not easy to parse, but this memoir is Sherry's answer to Tolstoy, in which she tells us her own story.

Empathy often emerges in clarifying a breakdown of empathy. Sherry Turkle's work might have been entitled, less elegantly, "The Breakdown of Empathy Diaries." I found the book to be compellingly written, even a page-turner at times. The short review: the title, *The Empathy Diaries: A Memoir* (Sherry Turkle New York: Penguin Press, 2021, 357 pp.) reveals that empathy lives, comes forth, in empathy's breakdowns and failings.

For those concerned about empathy and the dynamics of the self in the digital age, Turkle's body of work, culminating in this memoire, is especially engaging. Turkle makes an initial splash as a promising and innovative thinker by writing a dissertation at MIT on psychoanalytic politics in France, chock full of good gossip about the May 1968 Paris revolution, engaging with Lacan personally without becoming an adherent or compromising her integrity.

Now a named professor in MIT's initiative on technology and the self, Turkle goes on to elaborate a critique of technology that smart phones, screens, and digital everything have negatively impacted our ability to conduct person-to-person conversations, including psychoanalytic ones (Turkle, Essig, & Russell, 2017), and left us with acquired attention deficit, hindering our ability to be fully present with one another in our authentic humanity. Here "being fully present" with another person is a synonym for empathy (Turkle, 1976, 2015). Turkle's appreciation that empathy is more than a mere psychological mechanisms intersects powerfully with this reviewer's own argument that empathy is the foundation of human intersubjectivity and community (Agosta 2015; Agosta, 2018).

Turkle's mom (Harriet), Aunt Mildred, grandparents, and the extended Jewish family, growing up between Brooklyn and Rockaway, NY, were empathic enough. As Turkle makes clear, in her engaging narrative, her folks were generous in their genteel poverty. They gloried in flirting with communism and emphasizing, in the USA, it was a federal offense to open anyone else's mail. Privacy is one of the foundations of empathy—and democracy. Turkle's family talked back to the black and white TV, and struggled economically in the lower middle class, getting dressed up for the Sabbath on High Holidays and shaking hands with the neighbors on the steps of the synagogue as if the family could afford the pricey seats, which they could not, then discretely disappearing. The latter not exactly a lie as such, but perhaps an exaggerated commitment to "looking good"? This commitment turns out to have a significant cost and impact—on the young Turkle, Sherry.

Families have secrets, and one was imposed on the young Turkle. Perhaps the closest thing to unconditional love is a mother's love. Yet even that has its limits when mothers (and families) are struggling for financial and emotional survival. Some aspect of the love becomes conditional and transactional, and the requirement is for the child to conform. Key term: conform.

The Turkles reenact the empathy lesson of Alice Miller's *The Drama of the Gifted Child* (1979/1981), namely, that so-called "parental love" turns out to have more conditions and qualifications attached than the parent initially claimed to be the case. For example, if the parents value education, the case here, and the child is cognitively adept, it can be a set up for success. But if the child has other needs, say for empathy and emotional responsiveness, that conflict with community standards endorsed by the family (or, in this case, the Mom), then the child is headed for conflict—and trouble.

In young Turkle's case, less optimally, the child was required to conform to a falsehood, a *seemingly* innocent, yet no less harmless, white lie. The cost and the impact on the self are initially hidden, but eventually emerge in damaging ways.

Sherry's mother married Charles Zimmerman, which was Sherry's last name as Charles was her biological father. Within a noticeably short time, however, mom discovered a compelling reason to end the marriage, divorcing Charles. The revelation of Charles' "experiments" on the young Sherry forms a suspenseful core to the narrative.

Mom gets rid of Charles—there is really no other way to describe it—and within about another year marries Milton Turkle. "Turkle" becomes Sherry's name at home and the name preferred by her Mom for purposes of forming a family. There are some concerning features about Milton's personality, too, but they do not emerge until later. Father figures are not the strong suit in young Turkle's life, but Milton fills an important role, especially for Mom (Harriet), and a young brother and sister are born.

Mom has her own emotional and sexual needs, and she is also trying to find a father for her obviously gifted daughter. However, both Mom and her husband, Milton, like so many parents, are struggling to figure out how to be parents. Their empathy is intermittently in breakdown with this precocious, though not particularly troublesome child. Young Turkle keeps her troubles to herself, though her aunt provides a crucial listening ("empathy") at times of crisis. The good news is that if it "takes a village," one is available in the extended family, which includes the grandparents.

In our own age of blended families, trial marriages, and all-too-common divorce, many readers wonder, "What's the issue?" The issue is that in the late 1950s and early 1960s, even as the sexual revolution and first feminist wave were exploding on the scene, in many communities, divorce was stigmatizing. Key term: stigma. Don't talk about it. It is your deep, dark secret. This was also the case in the aspiringly upwardly mobile Jewish community of lower middle class Jewish families on lower Long Island, NY.

The rule for Turkle of tender age was "you are really a *Turkle* at home and at the local deli; but at school you are a *Zimmerman*." Once again, while that may be a concern, what's the big deal? The issue is that the parental authority stipulates: "Sherry, you are not allowed to talk about it." It is a secret. The silence, however, is not empty, nor can it remain so. The silence creates a clearing for emotional and psychodynamic mischief in the heart and mind of young Turkle. Magical thinking thrives. To young Turkle's mind, she is wondering if this name inconsistency comes out, becomes known, then will she perhaps no longer be a part of the family—abandoned, expelled, exiled? If the secret name comes out, will she be disowned? Not a realistic fantasy—unless you are a preschool child of tender age. It becomes like water to the fish. If you ask the fish how she likes the water, the fish does not know what you are talking about, "Water—what is water?"

The reader may be skeptical, but this is no exaggeration. Even Turkle's siblings do not learn about her other last name—about the other father and "the name of the father" (an allusion to a distinction by the famous French psychoanalyst Jacque Lacan, with whom Sherry will engage)—until adulthood. A well-kept secret indeed! Thus, the requirement to conform to the white lie—which after all is a lie, plain and simple: "Your books from school, Sherry, which have 'Zimmerman' written in them, must be kept in a special, locked cupboard."

Such grown up values and personal politics—and craziness—could get a kid of tender age off her game. They do. This could get one confused or even a tad neurotic or suspicious, or, more particularly, overly trusting in one area and with a blind spot in another area. The details of these dynamics make for a page-turner.

Fast forward. As in many aspiring immigrant families, educating the children is a priority. That means Sherry. Here the empathy works. Notwithstanding the confusion and emotional conflict about the two names, here the messaging is consistent and the support reliable. Get an education!

Sherry finds a way to escape from this craziness through education. Sherry is smart. Very smart. Her traditionally inclined elders tell her, "Read!" Mom and the grandparents, who are participating significantly in raising her, won't let her do chores. You can't make up this stuff. No

housework for you, girl: "Read!" Reading is a practice that expands one's empathy. This being the early 1960s, her folks make sure she does *not* learn how to type. I repeat: the interdiction is to *prohibit* her from learning to type. No way Turkle is going to the typing pool to become some professor's typist. She is going to be *the* professor! This, too, is a kind of empathy on the part of her family unit, who recognized who this young person was as a possibility, even amidst the impingements and perpetrations. The family recognizes her talents, abilities, and ambitions and support them.

Yet even with the recognition of her talent and significant cognitive ability, the entire environment is training her in living with a lie: your name is really "Turkle," but at school and for "play dates" and kids' parties you are "Zimmerman." This conformity with deception will have consequences, and not good ones.

The path is winding and labyrinthine. Sherry gets a scholarship to Radcliffe (women were not yet allowed to register at Harvard). She meets and is mentored by celebrity sociologist David Riesman (*The Lonely Crowd*) and other less celebrated but equally inspiring teachers. She is in her element, surrounded by young persons who are at least as socially awkward as she is. She fits right in. She flourishes.

Turkle gets a grant (the time period, the early 1970s) to undertake a social psychological inquiry into the community of French psychoanalysis, an ethnographic study, not of an indigenous tribe in Borneo, but a kind of tribe nonetheless in the vicinity of Paris, France.

Concurrently, psychoanalysis is enjoying a final flicker of innovative flourishing as an interdisciplinary method of great promise in investigating the structure and dynamics of the self. Turkle finds a good, Boston-based psychoanalyst to get her power back over her occasionally shaky self-confidence (surrounded as she is by privileged, east coast peers and powerful academic mandarins) as well as getting up to speed on this method of research, enjoying controversial credibility across the social sciences.

The notorious "bad boy" Jacque Lacan is disrupting all matters psychoanalytic. His innovations consist in fomenting rebellion in psychoanalytic thinking and in the community. French psychoanalysis is more riven with fragmentation than the self in traumatic breakdown. "The name of the father" (Lacan's idea about Oedipus) resonates with Turkle personally.

Lacan speaks truth to psychoanalytic power, resulting in one schism after another in the structure of French psychoanalytic institutes and societies. Turkle intellectually dances in the chaos and around the hypocrisy, hidden in plain view, but ultimately calls it out: challenging authority is encouraged as long as the challenge is not directed at the charismatic leader, Lacan, himself. This is happening shortly after the students and automobile manufacturing workers form an alliance and foment a general strike in Paris May 1968, disrupting the values and authority of traditional bourgeois society. A Rashomon story indeed, in which multiple perspectives on truth overlay Sherry's own personal struggle with who really is this shadowy father figure from her past, whose name on her school books had to be kept in a locked cabinet, not to mention rumors of strange experiments. Turkle's working knowledge of the French language makes rapid advances, as does her personal relationship with Lacan and many of Lacan's students and colleagues.

As noted, Turkle's own psychoanalysis is performed by a more conventional American analyst in the vicinity of Boston (see the book for further details). Turkle's relationship with Lacan is a defining one for her. Lacan's approach to the self, mirroring, and narcissism are indeed different than Heinz Kohut's, and yet they often end at similar end points, jettisoning the imperative to adapt and conform of the prevailing ego psychology establishment in favor of transformations of the narcissistic self to overcome deficits, expand wisdom and empathy. The half truths that one tells to other people are nothing in comparison to the lies that one tells oneself. Freud's imperative to engage the truth in a struggle for self-understanding provides the common ground.

Turkle's long and deep history of having to live with the "Zimmerman/Turkle" deception and the name of the father lie, resonating like a Gestalt ambiguous image, hidden in plain view, leaves Turkle vulnerable in matters of the heart. The cost and impact of living with a lie erupt. Turkle meets and is

swept off her feet by Seymour Papert, named-chair professor at MIT, an innovator in computing technology and child psychology, the collaborator with Marvin Minsky in coauthoring *Perceptrons* (1969), and sole author of *Mindstorms: Children, Computers and Powerful Ideas*.

In spite of Turkle's charitable narrative towards Seymour, he ends up being easy to hate. This is in spite of his authentic personal charm, near manic enthusiasm, and cognitive pyrotechnics. Warning signs include the surprising ways Sherry has to find out about his adult daughter and second wife, who is actually the first one. Seymour "forgot" to mention the second one. Blind-sided again. Seymour is intermittently but predictably adept at not showing up for dinner at all, even though expected, and blowing off commitments.

After growing up learning to live with the lie of the two names, Turkle is vulnerable—extremely vulnerable—to being lied to. It is just "normal" not to know and normal not to ask too many questions or make too many inquiries into inconsistent narratives. But, of course, this is *not* normal. Serial breakdowns in empathy culminate in "the final straw." Seymour cannot seem to honor his word and his philandering is seemingly unrepentant. Turkle may be vulnerable, but one thing she is not is a masochist. She ends the marriage.

Sherry's academic career features penetrating and innovative inquiries into how smart phones, networked devices, and screens—especially screens—affect our attention and conversations. Her research methods are powerful: she talks to people, notes what they say, and tries to understand their relationships with one another and with evocative objects, the latter not exactly D.W. Winnicott's transitional objects, but perhaps close enough for purposes of a short review.

The reader can imagine her technology mesmerized colleagues at MIT *not* being thrilled by her critique of the less than humanizing aspects of these buzzing, beeping, and chirping devices, causing interruptions, eruptions, and corruptions of our attention and ability to be fully present with other human beings. The conclusion? We are all struggling with a kind of acquired attention deficit. The recommendations? Create device free zones such as the dinner table, certain classrooms, the psychoanalytic couch, and psychotherapy—and hit the "off" switch early and often, the latter often being easier said than one. (This is just the tip of the iceberg—a deep conversation about technology and its use and limitation is also required, which is Turkle's ongoing contribution.)

After a struggle and finding a diplomatic way of speaking truth to power, Turkle gets her tenured professorship, reversing an initial denial (something that rarely happens). The denouement is complete. The finalé is at hand.

Turkle hires a private detective and reestablishes contact with her biological father, Charles. Both Professor Turkle and the reader are wondering—what happened? What were the "experiments" that are rumored to have occasioned so much mischief? Without needing to include a "spoiler alert," the reader knows immediately that Mom made the right decision when Charles offered to put her name on the paper he was writing about the experiments being performed on Sherry—a curious and chilling demonstration of lack of empathy on his part.

It is essential to that development of empathy that it expands and grows in effectiveness in a multistep process of transitory empathy breakdowns, followed by being restored to an enhanced empathic integrity in a therapeutic conversation between people present to their shared humanity. That is the trajectory of Turkle's memoire. Empathy breaks down repeatedly and then is reworked and rebuilt in the empathic struggle of relatedness in her life.

On a personal note, what compelled me to write this review was my own experience, parallel to Turkle's but different in all the details. Education played a key role in my escaping from a problematic family, even meeting some of the same professors in the very same classrooms that Turkle encountered in the 1970s during her interlude at the University of Chicago. We may not always know what is the cost and impact of early empathy deficits or traumas. However, one thing we do know for sure is that empathy is no rumor in the contribution of Sherry Turkle. Empathy *lives* in her contribution.

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