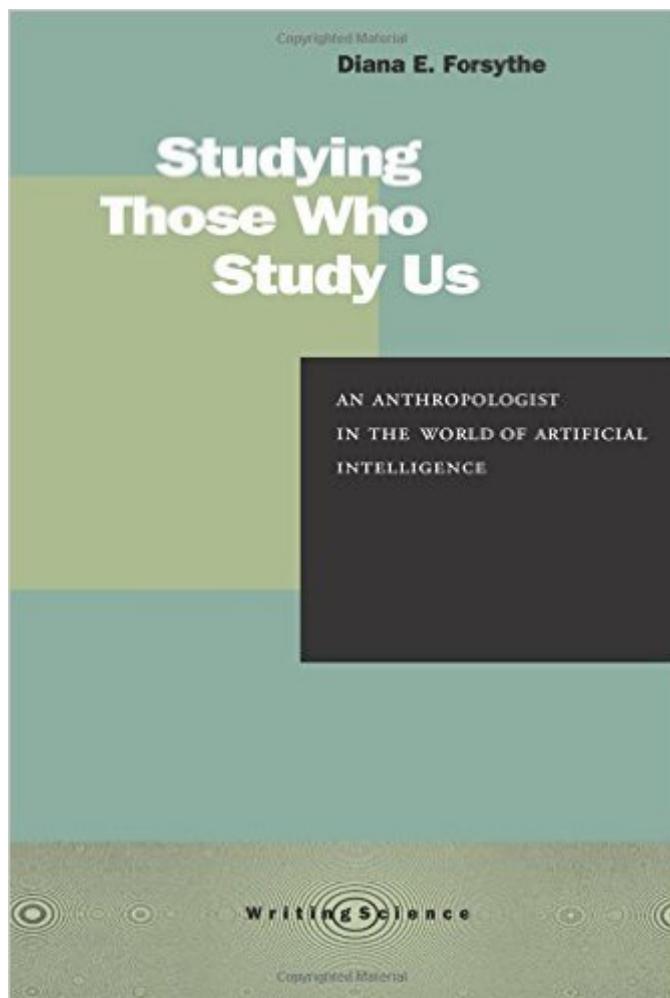


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Studying Those Who Study Us: An Anthropologist In The World Of Artificial Intelligence



Synopsis

Diana E. Forsythe was a leading anthropologist of science, technology, and work, and especially of the field of artificial intelligence. This volume collects her best-known essays, along with other major works that remained unpublished upon her death in 1997. The essays proceed as a series of developing variations on the key questions that still confront science and technology studies today. What assumptions do expert systems designers make about users, and about knowledge more broadly, when they build software? How should humans interact with computers, and how do they, really? Why do computing firms hire anthropologists to study human-computer interaction, and what do anthropologists find once they are hired? And how and why are traditional power asymmetries between men and women produced and maintained in engineering firms and laboratories? The book is not only a significant anthropological study of artificial intelligence and informatics, but is also an exemplar of how reflexive ethnography should be done. Among several pioneering strands of thought, it investigates the roles of gender and power in computer engineering, looking at the cultural mechanisms that support the persistent male domination of engineering, and analyzing the laboratory as a fictive kin group that reproduces gender asymmetries.

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Customer Reviews

Diane Forsythe was trained in both anthropology and artificial intelligence, and her work offers insights to both of these realms. It's a pleasure to have her work collected and published (posthumously) in this volume. Many of the issues which Diana Forsythe confronted implicitly and

explicitly in her work are issues which are of ongoing concern for all anthropologists. Her concerns included the responsibilities, opportunities, and limitations that come with funding sources, and, not unrelated, the numerous challenges associated with 'studying up.' Finally, Forsythe struggled with the difficulty of balancing her participant observation with social action. Forsythe argued that 'studying up' disrupts the 'traditional fieldwork narrative,' and at the same time calls into question all that is familiar ground for anthropologists from an ethical and methodological perspective. Often, said Forsythe, this type of participation requires anthropologists to be experts not only in anthropology, but also to some extent in their area of inquiry. As a result, we may have similar skill sets and jobs to those we study, but we may also be competing against them for funding and/or workplace resources. This twist poses a complex ethical dilemma for which anthropologists do not readily have the answers. In addition, informants can read what is being written about them, which results in a new accountability and criticism as part of the research process. The Medical Anthropology Quarterly article provides one example of the many challenges she encountered in her work. In it, Forsythe argues that computer programs are a product of the culture from which they emerge, and that her intent is to describe how this occurs.

I first met Diana Forsythe at the 1992 annual meeting of the American Medical Informatics Association. She was one of the few people I'd met who shared my interests in Information Technology's potential to empower patients. Diana told me about a recent study she'd done in which the physicians caring for migraine patients had little idea of their patients' chief concerns and thus did a woefully inadequate job of dealing with their information needs. Most of the patients had never even asked their doctors the question that concerned them most during the long painful attacks they sometimes experienced—"could I die of this?" Since the doctors all knew that no one dies of migraines, they considered this a trivial and irrelevant concern and somehow discouraged questions about it. Over the months that followed, Diana and I had several wonderful long conversations about the need to understand and rethink some of the tacit assumptions of current healthcare system as a necessary prelude to attempting to computerize it. And so, like many of her other friends and colleagues who had been impressed by her brilliance and touched by her intellectual generosity, I was heartsick, some years later, when I learned that she had drowned in a raging river while backpacking in Alaska. A group of her concerned colleagues, worried that her remarkable articles and talks might be lost, banded together and convinced Stanford University Press to publish a volume containing her collected works. The book, long in preparation, has just been published. It is entitled: "Studying Those Who Study Us: An Anthropologist in the World of Artificial Intelligence, by

Diana E.

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