

[Review] Deborah Lupton (2016) The quantified self: a sociology of self-tracking

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Building on her earlier work around 'medicine as culture' and digital sociology, Deborah Lupton - in her new book *The Quantified Self* - sheds light on the popular phenomenon of the quantification of the self through self-tracking practices. The book approaches self-tracking as a cultural practice and investigates its political, social, and managerial ramifications whilst, at the same time, providing examples of self-tracking practices and technologies. A core theme that runs throughout the book is the quantified self movement from which this book draws inspiration. In reading this book, I particularly enjoyed the breadth of ideas that Lupton generously provides to the reader. These ideas can travel across different contexts to enlighten self-monitoring practices in several domains (including, but not limited to, health). The book is short, clear, and enjoyable to read. It brings together different theoretical perspectives, opens up vital questions, and provides future research directions that will be of use to researchers from a range of disciplines including medical sociology, anthropology, informatics, and political science.

Lupton's work aims to address three important questions. The first question regards peoples' purposes, motivations, expectations, and ways of getting involved in self-tracking. The second question posed by Lupton involves exploring the assumptions underpinning contemporary self-tracking and examines the ways in which concepts, for instance of the self and of the body, become challenged and negotiated in various ways. A third question studies the political side of self-tracking and how power plays out within the quantification of the self. Indeed, important reflections surrounding the production, reproduction, and (re)use of big data generated through self-monitoring emerge in this account.

The book is organised into five main chapters. Chapter one introduces the background of Lupton's study. It situates self-tracking - and the quantified self movement more specifically - in a historical context. She convincingly argues that far from being a modern phenomenon, self-tracking has been exercised for millennia and has been associated with a specific ethos towards the self. This chapter challenges prevalent views, namely, that self-tracking is always mediated by a technological device, is contemporary, and always involves the production of usually quantitative information.

Chapter two presents competently but in brief a range of conceptual approaches that could be applied to understand and problematize self-tracking cultures. In particular, Lupton describes how and in what ways sociomateriality, knowing capitalism, neo-liberal politics, Foucauldian studies with respect to bio-power and bio-politics, big data, and surveillance studies are relevant

to the study of self-tracking. This chapter does not provide however an analysis of any of these perspectives. Somehow disappointingly this chapter offers only guidance and signposting to the readers, who may be interested in further exploring these accounts.

Chapter three examines how and why individuals are interested in self-tracking and what purposes they aim to achieve in doing so. The chapter examines various technologies and devices that are used for enhancing human memory, gaining sense of control over one's self, and becoming more knowledgeable and more responsible individuals whilst also adopting a critical perspective to the engagement with self-tracking. Although descriptive and factual, I found that this chapter accompanied well the previous more abstract chapter and put things in context. In chapter four, Lupton examines how data is being generated, used, reproduced, and processed in and through self-tracking. I found particularly useful Lupton's explanation about how the minuted collection of data about our bodies or lifestyle choices enables the production of tailored knowledge about ourselves and helps understand phenomena that cannot be typically quantified – and, as a result, cannot be known - such as how happy or how stressed we are.

Chapter five discusses issues that pertain to ownership and accessibility of data produced through self-tracking and explores new forms of discipline, colonisation, and discrimination that intentionally or unintentionally are inscribed into these technologies. Questions about who can access big data that self-tracking technologies are generating, and for what purpose, are raised and contextualised. Yet, they are not discussed in more depth. Lupton reflects that self-tracking is not always voluntary and neither is it individual; it may be imposed and pushed, it may lead to some form of exploitation, and it may as well be transformed into a political act that could serve communal values.

Lupton's book makes an important contribution in that it is one of the first works to offer a critical socio-political analysis of self-tracking cultures. The book is very helpful in providing a breadth of perspectives as to how this phenomenon can be approached and what sort of questions future research needs to be addressing. For this reason, it makes an important contribution to studies on self-tracking across different domains. Although proliferate in the theoretical approaches she proposes, Lupton misses to make an explicit reference to the potential contribution critical accounting studies could make to self-tracking cultures especially in relation to the process of quantification. Further, despite the fact that the book proposes what theoretical perspectives could be helpful in comprehending the quantified self-movement, it does not go further to analyse each or even some of these perspectives vis-à-vis self-tracking and quantification. The reader is invited to do so but it would have perhaps been more helpful if Lupton offered more guidance here. In reading the book I had the sense of going through a half-

told story; nevertheless an interesting and thought-provoking one. Despite these few issues, it is my firm belief that this book will be an important reference point for any study that reports on self-tracking practices as well as for research on the quantified self-movement.

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Author's accepted copy