Book review:

Neff (Gina), Nefus (Dawn), Self-Tracking
Cambridge (MA), The MIT Press, 2016

Jen Schradie, Institute for Advanced Study in Toulouse (IAST), Toulouse, France

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Over a century ago, the concept of *public health* became more systematized to eradicate communicable diseases and fight epidemics. Early state efforts to combat infectious diseases ranged from quarantines and vaccinations to developing sanitation and water systems. But at the end of the last century, American and European public health measures began to shift toward marketing campaigns targeting individual health behaviors. People were told to stop smoking, eat healthier and exercise more. Personal habit and choice became the operative word, not collective programs.

It is in this context of a general societal transformation from institutions to

individuation that Neff and Nafus' situate their book, *Self-Tracking*. This shift from public to private responsibility of health was the perfect launching pad for the advent of personal health gadgets. Emerging at the beginning of this century, self-monitoring digital devices became ubiquitous. These have ranged from Fitbits counting your steps to Apple Watches monitoring your heart rate.

In this MIT Press book, the authors trace what is at stake with this new social practice of quantifying one's self. Neff and Nafus are quick to emphasize, though, that measuring individual health behavior was not invented in Silicon Valley. From the Roman era to the French Revolutionary period, people have measured their habits and bodies. "We have always been quantified." (p. 15). Yet what they argue is novel about digital self-tracking is two-fold. First the technology itself has radically changed the efficiency and ability to quantify continuously one's behaviors. Second, and perhaps more telling, is that a cultural shift has occurred with the acceleration of digital self-tracking: an increase in consumer electronics use *and* biomedicalization practices have together created a "groove in our collective imagination that makes close measurement of the body both conceivable and desirable." (p. 19). At the same time, the authors point out, self-tracking has generated the growth of body shaming from so-called unhealthy behaviors.

Yet the most critical argument Neff and Nafus make is that we are in neither a utopian or dystopian extreme. The individual does not completely control one's health (nor necessarily improve it) through self-tracking, but nor do tech companies completely control people's health data and private information. Instead, Neff and Nafus suggest that the relationship between the individual and the corporation is tenuous, at times tense, and often a tug-of-war. Overall, their book aims to present an overview of what is at stake with self-tracking and how consumers and scholars can make sense of the phenomenon.

The authors weave *Self-Tracking* together with a mix of existing research and case studies, as well the authors' own expertise. Gina Neff is a sociologist at Oxford University and has written extensively about digital labor, most well-known for her book, *Venture Labor – Work and the Burden of Risk in Innovative Industries.* Dawn Nafus is an anthropologist at Intel, which provides a lens into the everyday practices that corporations are targeting. In many ways, then, the book brings together two academic paths that offer insight into the convergence of personal habits and corporate technologies.

Throughout the book, Neff and Nafus trace many of the pressing issues of our time with regards to self-tracking. After laying out their goals and objectives in the book's introduction, the next chapter describes, "What is at Stake: The Personal is Political." While privacy is paramount to what is at stake with self-tracking, they trouble this concept by showing that privacy is contextual or what they call a moving target. This is particularly critical for any cross-country comparisons of the ideas described in *Self-Tracking*, as privacy norms are dramatically different between the U.S. (weak) *versus* Europe (strong). But they go beyond this more obvious concern. Just as complex, they argue, is the commodification of the data generated by self-tracking. They argue that what has evolved is shared ownership –between corporations and consumers, often causing disputes. The analogy they use is like co-parenting battles after a divorce. But the most novel concept that Neff and Nafus raise in this chapter is how the digitally quantified self poses questions about what is "normal." Self-evaluation, self-criticism and often self-shaming can arise when more and more people have the ability to track non-stop every movement to see if they have reached a goal of 10,000 steps, for example. The problem is that while people are, indeed, monitoring their own individual measurements, the goals are not individualized based on different contexts.

Chapter 3 tackles what people are actually doing with self-tracking devices, rather than simply what the corporations that sell them expect you to do. Certainly, people are monitoring and evaluating their health behavior. But Neff and Nafus suggest that people also use gadgets to enhance emotions or sensation, as well as for creative endeavors. Most interestingly is how they discuss that consumers are not simply robots blindly following the commands that the mini-robots on their wrists whisper in their ear. People are active users, often hacking systems and sometimes challenging the corporate ownership and control of the data.

The next chapter, entitled "Self-Tracking and the Technology Industry," delves even deeper into the corporate system that promotes these gadgets. But Neff and Nafus step back and ask why there has been such broad and deep investment into these self-tracking technologies in the first place. They provide a number of answers, but the one that is the most compelling is less about the profit from the number of Apple watches sold, for instance, but the "new oil" that is digital health data. It is a commodity in its own right, and venture capitalists and tech companies were quick to try to capitalize on it –before there were any kind of laws or norms regulating it. Yet a key point that the book discloses is that not only does the use of these self-tracking gadgets often decline soon after purchase, but that the market has even deepened the existing digital divide, as many of these products are part of a luxury line, unaffordable for many.

Chapter 5 delves directly into the relationship between health and self-tracking. Following up on the luxury gap, the authors point out a particularly American phenomena –the massive disparity in access to health services, and these gadgets only exacerbate this divide. They point out, "The young, female and wealthy, are most likely to self-track." (p. 162). In other words, self-tracking devices are not reaching the poor and elderly, those whom need better health care the most. At the same time, though Neff and Nafus suggest that empowering people with their own health data can (potentially) improve their lives. It can also challenge traditional views of "compliance," such that citizen scientists, rather than physicians or health-related businesses, are more involved in health treatment decisions. In general, though, the authors suggest that the health benefits of self-tracking are mediocre at best. The hype has not lived up to the reality.

The last chapter suggests that self-tracking is constantly evolving, not only in terms of the gadgets, but also the meaning, as well as laws that regulate them. What has not changed, however, is what Neff and Nafus point to as the increasing *datafication* of society that is the engine for this growth industry and cultural practice: "Societies privilege data, and data driven outcomes over other kinds of knowing." (p. 186). Overall, the strength of the book *Self-Tracking* is in how Neff and Nafus navigate the terrain between the institution and individual.

As they point out, the "Increasing reliance on self-serve technologies effectively shifts labor costs to patients." (p. 56). In other words, while they do go beyond common tropes, such as the consumer as passive and the corporation as active, they also take care to explain how the transition from a public or collective model of health to an individualized one has high costs for the consumer. Even though consumers are willingly participating in creative uses of self-tracking gadgets, they are still being exploited for their digital labor. Yet, these labor costs are, in effect, donated by consumers to the gadget corporations.

However, individualized health monitoring does not address health disparities, particularly in countries like the U.S. without a universal health care system. The authors explain, "In most apps, only individual solutions are allowed. 'Social' features are not about having a dialogue about public infrastructures and civic conditions that support individual health. They are instead about

individuals competing against one another to take more steps." (p. 42).

So rather than looking outward toward society's public health challenges, these gadgets contribute to the individualized and inward-looking gaze. Indeed, the authors incorporated a critical nod toward what Foucault had argued about bio-power. Rather than (only) structural power from above or outside of individuals, digital self-tracking promotes self-surveillance. This internal "disciplinary" power is embodied in self-judgement over health behaviors and other every-day practices. Rather than blaming a corrupt health care system in the U.S., one blames oneself for not exercising enough.

Another advantage of this book is that it is accessible to a wide variety of people. Complex ideas are written in accessible language for a wide variety of people. In addition to scholars, journalists, technology workers, the general public could also benefit from reading *Self-Tracking*, especially since it is an increasingly prevalent phenomenon that affects people whether they are wearing an Apple watch or not.

At the same time, it would have been helpful to incorporate even more sociological theory in the book, as the important concepts the authors addressed touched on a number of theoretical areas, ranging from stratification to even grander theories of society, such as Marx's or Bourdieu's arguments over social class divisions and the exploitation of labor. In the same vein, going deeper into Foucault would have given the reader even deeper insight into bio-power, biomedicalization and bio-technology. As a result, I would have liked to have heard even more of the authors' voices and arguments come through. While the authors deftly accomplished their goal of demonstrating the complexities of the digital self-tracking landscape, tying together more tightly their expertise, existing theories, and current research would have contributed even more to a sociological understanding of self-tracking.

Nonetheless, this is a must read for anyone who is either new to the ideas of a quantified self or for those who have delved into the topic and want a well-researched and expertly written overview.

Jen Schradie

Institute for Advanced Study in Toulouse
Université de Toulouse