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The Art of Personal Science

Jeff Fajans

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The Art of Personal Science

Abstract

Quantified Self isn't really about finding answers or solving problems—it's about asking new questions.

Author/Artist Bio

Jeff Fajans is a third year PhD student at Claremont Graduate University studying Positive Organizational Psychology. He is passionate about researching the cognitive and social mechanisms that facilitate learning, creativity, and innovation in individuals and groups. An avid self-tracker and participant in the Quantified Self movement himself, Jeff's current work focuses on how and in what ways smartphone technologies can be leveraged to promote self-development, creative insight, and prosocial behaviors in the workplace. You can read more about Jeff's thoughts regarding the intersections of personal technology and positive psychology by visiting his website: Jeff.Fajans.com. If you have questions about starting your own self-tracking project, you can reach him directly by emailing him at: Jeffrey.Fajans@cgu.edu.

Keywords

self-tracking, quantified self, data

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The Art of Personal Science

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A few hours before sitting down to write this commentary, I was surrounded by 25 self-trackers at the Los Angeles Quantified Self meetup. At each one of these meetups, which are entirely organized through Meetup.com, certain attendees are asked to give “show-and-tell” presentations about their personal self-tracking projects and self-experimentation efforts.

During this particular meetup, I learned about a smart-desk that will track your productivity and automatically shift its height when it sees that you have been sitting for too long. I learned how one woman was able to predict the occurrence of migraines by tracking her menstrual cycle and diet. I witnessed a demonstration of how one man uses women’s sports bras to strategically hold in place physiological sensors to monitor his heart rate variability and stress. I was even so lucky as to be among the first people in the world to be given visual access to a prototype for a fart-tracker (because tracking the regularity or irregularity of one’s flatulence is obviously the best way to learn about the healthiness of one’s gut microbes).

Many people associate the “quantifiable” and “quantitative” with unambiguity and objectiveness. People are drawn to the Quantified Self by the allure of becoming a personal scientist empowered with the latest advances in personal technology. They are seduced by the notion of being able to definitively solve one’s problems, find rational answers, and uncover the truth.

But the Quantified Self isn’t really about finding answers or solving problems—it’s about asking new questions.

I certainly came away from tonight’s meetup with more questions than answers. *How can I use what I learned here tonight in my own life? What relevant information about myself might I be overlooking? What’s truly important to me, and how might I go about collecting data in efforts to develop myself and optimize my life?*

In fact, most self-trackers never even get around to analyzing their personal data. If you were to ask a random sample of self-trackers how to run a regression, chances are many of them would think you are speaking a foreign language. What academics label as rigorous science is nowhere to even be found in this community of practice (with exceptions of course).

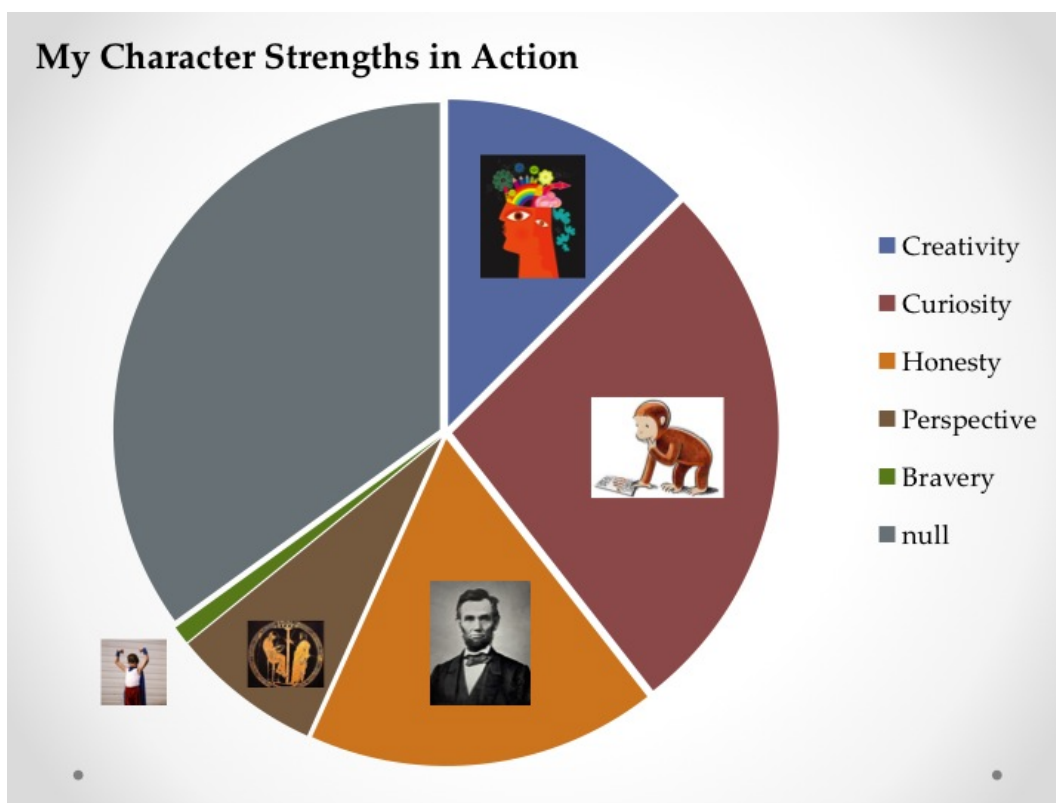
It may indeed be more appropriate to describe the Quantified Self as a form of art.

Just as the artist expresses himself to the world through his artwork, the self-tracker expresses herself to others through numbers. Just as the artist finds meaning through painting, the self-tracker makes meaning through the process of asking questions, collecting data, and extrapolating significance

For many, self-tracking has no end goal. It is a means with no end. It is a series of never-ending, emergent questions. Self-tracking is done simply for the sake of doing it, because the process of discovery and experimentation is intrinsically motivating and personally rewarding.

As I sat through tonight's show-and-tell talks, I couldn't help but be amazed by how energized, inspired, and curious the presenters were as they expressed themselves through their own unique (i.e very weird) self-tracking projects.

Like the cover art of this issue suggests, the Quantified Self may bring with it a new renaissance of artistic expression and personal meaning. And fart-tracking.



After taking a character strengths assessment (the Values in Action, VIA assessment), I wanted to see how often and in what situations I actually was utilizing my top 5 strengths in my

everyday life. I designed a self-tracking project to collect this data using my smartphone. It turned out that I was using my character strengths 65% of the time throughout the week, which I thought was pretty good. I also explored the relationships between my character strength utilization and outcomes such as positive mood, vitality, and engagement. The overall aim for this project was to identify opportunities to deliberately optimize activities in my life to achieve higher levels of effectiveness and well-being. For example, I realized that I was underutilizing my character strength of "bravery," and might benefit from taking more strategic risks in my work and in my leisure activities.