REPAIRING AT THE APP CLINIC: A CASE STUDY OF AN ONLINE WELLNESS APPLICATION

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Presented is a brief account of a six-month ethnographic case study of an Internet-communications technology startup. This company has designed an online application for the purpose of increasing wellness of individuals in the workplace. By way of curated prompts of self- and group-reflection and self-tracking, the company seeks to transport workers through an architected experience that leads to greater production through holistic awareness. The methods used for this study include in-depth, unstructured interviews, participant-observation of the employees, and platform study. The company, which has a core group of four employees, includes a CEO, a product manager, a developer, and a designer. Following, is a summary of my observations in which I attempt to describe how the employees of this startup imagine the body in need of care. I then conclude with a description of how I see the discussion expanding to include their online platform and how it can be framed as a clinic for care.

Where are we working?

The site of care is not necessarily one of a traditional medical clinic. As Fitzegerald, Legge, and Frank (2013) have argued the 'clinic' is a manifestation of institutions and practices, of patients and workers, and of discourse. Therefore, the clinic can exist in a network of relationships a concept that Livingston (2012) calls 'the intersubjective phenomenology of care' (p. 112). One such contemporary site of care is situated within the momentum of the quantified-self movement in which care is directed to the individual by means of technologies supporting self-care practices. These technologies, which range from online or mobile apps such as the one investigated in this case study, to wearable devices (e.g. Fitbit) track a range of human activities, attitudes, and affect.

Viseu and Suchmann (2010) have situated the quantified self movement in the "cultural imaginary dominated by the trope of 'information'" (p. 162). They argue that commercial interests such as those of pharmaceutical companies construct a figure of the body that continually 'emits signals inaccessible without technological mediation' (p. 163). Lupton (2013) argues that the goal of such technologies is to amend perceived shortfalls of the human body whether in function or appearance. The appearance of the body in datafied

form is seen in visualizations of data from graphs to medical imaging creating an ontology of the body-- one that is of the desired and mechanically pristine self.

As the name suggests, the quantified-self movement is primarily engaged with quantifications of human behavior and affect, which take the form of mathematical representations of the body. The platform being investigated here does so only sometimes. A large part of the process also entails collecting qualitative data through the form of personal diary-ing, which is used to integrate reflection with action. So, while I believe this platform is situated within the broader conversation of the quantified-self movement and datafied care, the platform that this startup has designed is not bounded by an analytical nature.

A body that needs some care

For the employees of this startup, the method for identifying a need for care derived from struggles experienced with their relationship to work. For example, one employee found herself investing ten years at a job that she described as emotionally abusive. She recounted feeling increasingly void, depleted, and depressed during her tenure. Another employee shared feeling fragmented at her job of four years having the sensation that she was being pulled apart because the tasks delegated to her were unmanageable due to a lack of resources and support. While the examples of struggle vary all of their accounts of workplace hardship culminate into a sensation of the body in crises--a point in which the body becomes imbalanced and unsustainable. It is at this point that a need for care is recognized.

The body in need of care is imagined in two ways. First, it is experienced as a self that is divided—a body of multiple parts, but the parts are of an unharmonious distribution. Further, for the CEO, when the body is in a state of division it leads to an absence of 'living in my body.' She believes this can be mended with a 'somatic-glue' that will attach the body to intentions, actions, and the world. She described this glue as manifested in the content of the reflection prompts shown to users of their platform. In this regard a body in parts is a broken body, a body that needs to be glued back together, which can be facilitated via their online technology.

Second, the body is experienced as full of lacunas. Much like a rusted hole in the metal of a car, the human body can come to be full of loss. And much like the work done at a repair shop, the body can be patched, filled, and resurfaced to elevate the self. For the product manager loss was experienced by time devoted to work, which required time taken from other activities. For the self to be elevated one needed to repair the loss of time by being intentional of their actions and aware of the amount that they are giving and receiving. While awareness leads to an elevated self, to gain awareness one must do 'vulnerability work', a term she used to describe the actions that the platform is facilitating. She pictures the platform as creating a scaffold, a safe support structure for the body to do vulnerability work—the process of speaking about emotional states to avoid crises. Much like the CEO's concept of somatic glue, the product manager conceptualizes a repairing of the body with the aid of the platform, which acts as an assistant to the user conducting the vulnerability work required to patch loss.

Work at the app clinic

Shilling (1993) postulates that people go about creating and taking part in body projects to aid in defining their identities. What the platform offered this group was an opportunity to explore their identity with the past by coming together around a common theme. In other words, designing a wellness platform allowed them the opportunity to scale their body project to persons outside of themselves. However, to scale such a project required the creation of a methodology for recognizing and managing care for a needing body. The work that the employees are doing falls somewhere between that of a group-therapist to one of mechanic. The platform is also working by creating a space that allows for the mending and repairing of the body.

References

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