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Confidence Culture and the Remaking of Feminism

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Abstract

In this paper we explore how confidence works as a technology of self, exhorting women and girls to act upon themselves, and how it is reconfiguring feminist concerns. Our analysis demonstrates how the confidence cult(ure) has materialised in three different sites: discussions about women in the workplace; texts and practices promoting 'confident mothering'; and contemporary sex and relationship advice. We show that confidence acts as a disciplinary technology of self which is addressed almost exclusively to women and is articulated in highly standardized terms which disavow any difference between and among women. It is an individualising technology which demands intense labour, places the emphasis upon women self-regulating and locates the source of the 'problems' and their 'solutions' within a newly upgraded form of confident subjectivity, thus rendering insecurity and lack of confidence abhorrent. We then discuss how the confidence culture is deeply implicated in the new luminosity of feminism, and we argue that it contributes to the remaking of feminism in three central ways: 1) by continuing and promoting elements of postfeminist sensibility, yet through celebration rather than repudiation of feminism; 2) through an inclusive address that expunges difference and the possibility of its critique; and 3) by favouring positive affect and outlawing 'negative' 'political' feelings. We argue that this move, which calls forth a new kind of a 'cool' 'feminist' subject, is simultaneously political, psychological and aesthetic.

Confidence Culture and the Remaking of Feminism

Prologue

A friend who is the Equality and Diversity Director of her firm, recommended that we watch the online TED Talk 'Your body language shapes who you are'. A committed feminist, over the years, she had read, heard and talked about gender equality extensively. But this video was a 'real life-changer', she said. It had affected her deeply and she had incorporated it into the various equality programmes she designs and delivers. Moreover, she wasn't alone: participants in these programmes repeatedly told her that they had been 'completely transformed' by that online talk.

We followed the friend's advice and joined the millions who have already watched the second most popular TED Talk of all time. In this twenty one minute video, Harvard Business School social psychologist, Amy Cuddy, lays out her theory of 'power posing', referring to 'nonverbal expressions of power and dominance'. While she formally addresses both men and women, she explains that women in particular 'feel chronically less powerful than men'. They 'often shrink in public settings', tend to touch their face or neck, and cross their ankles tightly when seated - postures and gestures associated with powerlessness that keep them from expressing who they 'really are', Cuddy explains.[1] Thus, she exhorts women to practise power poses daily:

> Before you go into the next stressful evaluative situation, for two minutes, try doing this, in the elevator, in a bathroom stall, at your desk behind closed doors. That's what you want to do. Configure your brain to cope the best in that situation. Get your testosterone up. Get your cortisol down. Don't leave that situation feeling like 'oh, I didn't show them who I am'. Leave that situation feeling like, 'I really feel like I got to say who I am and show who I am.'

In the video, Cuddy tells of suffering a head injury in an accident sustained at the age of nineteen, being told she would not be able to finish college, but, ultimately, against the medical profession's pessimistic forecast, transforming herself through self-work and self-belief. Cuddy explains how she replicated her own lessons when coaching a female student who felt 'totally defeated' – teaching her to believe in herself by assuming a series of 'power poses', so she could 'fake it' till she could 'become it'. Redolent of Sheryl Sandberg's advice in the bestseller 'feminist' manifesto, *Lean In*, Cuddy impels women to practise power poses 'until you actually become it and internalize' - advice she accompanies with an image

of Wonder Woman in her famous pose with arms akimbo and feet wide apart, staring confidently forward. Cuddy concludes her talk with a simple message: 'Tiny tweaks can lead to big changes'.

As we watched the video, it was hard not to feel critical. Here was yet another powerful example of celebrating individual solutions to structural problems, couched in the psychological language of empowerment, choice, and self-responsibility. Here again is the injunction that by exercising a set of behavioural, instrumental DIY-type changes, women can overcome inequality and transform their selves: 'if you learn to tweak this a little bit, it could significantly change the way your life unfolds', in Cuddy's words. Another individualist, corporate-friendly iteration of feminism that left power relations unexamined and simply called on women to change.

However, at the same time, Cuddy's talk struck a chord. It moved us. It affected us. It resonated with what we 'know' in a profound and embodied way about being women in the world. As Sara Ahmed has recently put it 'when you lose confidence, it can feel like you are losing yourself, like you have gone into hiding from yourself'. [2] Cuddy's talk not only has an affective force which is hard to deny but it offers tangible, concrete and simple solutions, and it demonstrates that they 'work', that they have a real positive effect on people's lives, including, as she shows compellingly, her own.

Introduction

In this paper we seek to locate our complex and ambivalent reactions to this TED talk in a wider argument about the contemporary discursive formation we call the 'confidence cult(ure)'.[3] Cuddy's influential presentation, we will argue, is an example of the new gendered imperative to 'be confident' – an idea that has gained increasing traction across multiple domains, from the workplace to finance, and from international development to body love and parenting. In what follows we seek to understand the rise of the 'confidence cult(ure)' and to engage both with its politics and its affective force. We will argue that the confidence cult(ure) is a gendered 'technology of self'[4] that works productively by calling us to 'act upon ourselves'.[5] Like the positive 'psy complex'[6] or the 'happiness industry'[7] it represents a novel form of governance and self-regulation. But what makes it distinctive is both its gendered address to girls and women, and its embrace of feminist discourse and aspirations. Our aim in this paper is to look critically at both these features. We ask why and how does the confidence culture work as a technology of self? What is its relationship to contemporary feminism? How is it reconfiguring feminist concerns and contributing to the 'Righting' of feminism?

The paper is divided into three sections. In the first we examine the rise and scope of the 'confidence culture' across a range of domains, and outline our understanding of it as a technology of selfhood. Next we use three case-studies to show how confidence has become a productive and animating force in contemporary culture. Our examples focus upon three distinct sites: work, motherhood, and sex and relationship advice. We show how a range of experts, programmes and discourses are invested in establishing women's lack of confidence as the fundamental obstacle to their success and happiness across these domains. In doing so we highlight the extensiveness of the confidence culture – its diffusion across social life – and the continuities in the way that its exponents name, diagnose and propose solutions to questions about inequality. We argue that confidence is being 'put to work' in powerful ways in contemporary society, calling forth a new kind of subject demanded by a distinctively neoliberal moment of capitalism. In the third section of the paper we focus specifically upon the relationship of the confidence culture to feminist politics. We are interested in what the turn to confidence brings into being, makes visible and renders unintelligible and how it is situated in relation to feminism.

Confidence as a gendered technology of self

Exhortations to female self-confidence are everywhere in contemporary culture: in education, confidence is hailed as an answer to what is formulated as girls' low self-esteem; in the workplace it will help women to 'lean in' and feel powerful; in consumer culture it is claimed as 'the new sexy' and as 'more important than beauty'. Confidence ostensibly helps women to be financially prudent; it protects their health; it inspires international development initiatives. Women's magazines hail a 'confidence revolution', beauty brands hire 'confidence ambassadors', and one can now even buy a 'confidence mirror' from furniture store IKEA that will pay 'compliments' and offer 'inspirational' confidence messages. Moreover, as a revitalized interest in feminism becomes evident across policy and popular culture, female self-confidence increasingly takes centre stage in diagnoses of the persistence of inequality. Academics and think tanks, politicians and newspaper columnists, call on women to recognise that they are being held back not by patriarchal capitalism or institutionalised sexism, but by their own lack of confidence – a lack that, as we will show, is presented as being entirely an individual and personal matter, unconnected to structural inequalities or cultural forces. The 'power poses' advocated by Amy Cuddy as a key way of addressing this are but one response among many to the alleged 'confidence deficit'. Others include leadership programmes, mentoring, email add-ons such as Google's 'Just Not Sorry' which promote the use of more

confident language, and an ever-growing range of confidence apps designed to boost women's self-esteem and sense of personal efficacy.

The turn to confidence could be considered as what Foucault called *dispositif* - an assemblage of discourses, institutions, and regulatory modes and measures which is systematic and patterned.[8] As we have argued elsewhere,[9] this *dispositif* consists of a discursive formation, set of knowledges, apparatuses and incitements that together constitute a novel technology of self, that brings into existence new subject(ivitie)s or ways of being. Foucault developed the notion of a technology of self in his later work as a way to overcome what he saw as the limitations of his own theorising of power and to move beyond the notion of individuals as docile, passive and disciplined subjects. [10] Technologies of self became, for Foucault, a key term for fashioning an understanding of the link between wider discourses and regimes of truth, and the creativity and agency of individual subjects:

> Technologies of self […] permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection or immortality.[11]

For us the notion is valuable for two reasons. First, it offers a way to think about the relation between culture and subjectivity in a way that is not reductive, deterministic or conspiratorial, but nevertheless insists on holding together work on the self with a wider appreciation of power. Second, the notion helps us to think about confidence culture as something active and productive, and thus refuses a view that would regard it as mere 'false consciousness'. Whilst we wish to engage critically with the confidence culture, our critique is not based on a dismissal of Amy Cuddy, nor the millions of women who have viewed her video and its resonance and impact for them. Rather, our critique is situated in recognizing that the confidence culture works productively and 'sensitizes' those to whom its exhortations are addressed.[12] It works and has taken hold so powerfully, we suggest, because of its affective force and its ability to connect meaningfully with many women's lived experiences– troubled relationships to their bodies, difficult experiences in the workplace, etc. Moreover, in offering concrete psychological and therapeutic models of action, couched in feminist terms of 'empowerment', the confidence culture seeks to make itself – to paraphrase Stuart Hall's insightful analysis of the popular take-up of Thatcherism – not just part of 'them' but 'one of us'.[13]. The complexity and ambivalence comes in recognizing that 'confidence' as an idea has taken hold and connects in profound and significant ways – in ways that feel 'authentic', and that may move us to tears or to action. As a recent spoof on body confidence 'femvertising' has astutely put it: 'if they're crying, they're buying'. And many

women engaging with confidence messages across cultural life are if not crying then at least feeling profoundly moved and affected.

There is a notable coherence between and across the sites and contexts in which confidence emerges, as a technology within and through which women and girls across age, race, sexuality and class are exhorted to think about, judge, and act on themselves. The confidence culture materializes in discourse and across multiple forms and practices: psychological tests to measure confidence quotient, mind-training exercises to increase confidence, confidence-inspiring apps, events and educational programmes designed to boost confidence, etc. etc. Confidence has become a technology that invites women to work on the self - alone and with others – 'their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct and way of being, so as to transform themselves'.[14]

'Only you can help you': Confidence culture and the remaking of the self

In this section we look at three distinct areas of social life where the 'confidence cult (ure)' has materialised: in discussions, policies, self-help manuals and programmes designed to promote women in the workplace; in a plethora of texts and practices promoting 'confident mothering' and/for raising 'confident girls'; and in contemporary sex and relationship advice which has expanded from a focus upon intimate and sexual 'entrepreneurship' to a key concern with 'confidence as the new sexy'.

Confidence at work

The culture of confidence can be seen at work in discussions about women and leadership, in organizations' equality and diversity programmes and policies, and across multiple sites which promote the idea that the fundamental characteristic women need in order to thrive is confidence –and, conversely, that, the biggest barrier holding them back is 'low self-confidence'. As we have discussed elsewhere,[15] the technology of confidence is most well-illustrated in this sphere by two bestsellers: Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg's *Lean In* and the *New York Times* Bestseller *The Confidence Code* authored by BBC World News America's Katty Kay and ABC News reporter Claire Shipman.[16]

Lean In calls on women in the workplace to assert their positions and make themselves noticeable, to 'forge a path through the obstacles, and achieve their full potential',[17] this being cast almost exclusively in terms of achieving leadership positions combined with motherhood. *The Confidence Code* situates itself more explicitly within the self-help/advice genre, addressing women directly and exclusively. Its premise is that there is a 'crisis' peculiar to women,

namely self-doubt, which is holding them back in public life – the latter understood to be primarily the corporate workplace. Both *Lean In* and *The Confidence Code* present the development of self-confidence as the key to women's personal career-related success and, more broadly, to realising the project of gender equality at work and in public life.

Lean In especially has been widely adopted by corporations (e.g. KPMG, McKinsey, PwC) to justify entire strategies, programmes and approaches geared towards 'gender diversity' in the workplace.[18] Illustrating the 'post-racial' tenor of this discursive formation, the US Black Career Women's Network, which is 'dedicated to the professional growth of African-American women' defines the 'black career woman' as 'a black woman who is confident and tenacious', who notwithstanding the challenges she encounters 'continues to uphold a positive attitude and image, build a network, pursue professional development, education and mentoring to accomplish her goals.'[19] Individuals and groups outside the workplace have also appropriated Sandberg's feminist manifesto, as evidenced, for example, by the formation of 'Lean In' circles and similar women's groups across the world, and by women's personal accounts of the transformative effect of these confidence-inducing books on their lives.[20]

A similar set of ideas can be seen also in the book of American foreign policy expert Anne-Marie Slaughter *Unfinished Business*.[21] While Slaughter insists that it is not enough to tell women they need ambition and confidence, she at the same time calls women to take advice from the theme song of the children Disney movie *Frozen* "Let It Go" (!) – the notion indexing both a general problematic of female repression that needs to be overcome, as well as the suggestion that women need to loosen their grip at home in order to flourish in the workplace – another iteration of the 'balanced woman' discussed by Catherine Rottenberg and Maria Adamson.[22] African-American businesswoman and former director of The White House Project, a launch team member of Lean In, Tifanny Dufu, makes an almost identical call in her 2017 "memoir and manifesto" *Drop the Ball: Expect Less From Yourself, Get More from Him, and Flourish at Work & Life*. Accompanied by a DIY toolkit and a series of videos, events and social media appearances, Drop the Ball urges women to "cultivate the single skill they really need in order to thrive: the ability to let go." The implication of Slaughter's, Dufu's and similar texts seems to be that heterosexual men are clamouring to take on more domestic and caring responsibilities but are being prevented from doing so by recalcitrant women who cannot bear to secede responsibility. Slaughter's article for *Time* magazine is tellingly titled 'Women are sexist too' – acknowledging gender inequality but locating the requirement for transformation in women ('let go'!), not wider relations of domination.[23]

However, these ideas about individual self-transformation and confidence have spread out far beyond such 'feminist bestsellers', achieving the status of

common-sense in a plethora of advice forums for women in the workplace. *Marie-Claire* magazine is one of a number of magazines that has given prominence to 'confidence', with a particular emphasis upon women's careers in their @work section. In this, mentors known as 'fairy jobmothers' distil their insights for females aspiring to make it in a variety of fields – mostly corporate but with a growing emphasis upon post-recessionary creative and entrepreneurial professions, often built around transforming a hobby into a lucrative business.[24] May 2016's @Work section captures the flavour with its article on 'Shift your mindset, switch your career' which offers advice such as 'never let fear keep you where you are', 'act as if you can do something even if you can't' and exhorts women to 'be grateful', 'find motivation' and 'smile more'. Interestingly the same article tells readers to 'have a voice' but not to be strident: 'keep it clear and don't overstep the mark', it advises. Adopting key phrases such as 'in my opinion' and 'I think' is apparently the way forward for the confident but not too confident woman[25].

Disney's 2016 box office record-breaker *Zootropolis* (entitled *Zootopia* in the US), praised for its 'feminist credentials',[26] demonstrates the further expansion of the injunction to women to be self-confident in the workplace – now also addressed to young girls. The lead character, Judy Hopps, 'is the hero [sic.] your daughter has been waiting for', one review declares.[27] Hopp is an ambitious female rabbit who becomes the first of her species to graduate from the police academy. However, she soon encounters a macho and sexist work culture, where she is sidelined and belittled by her male superiors and colleagues. But Judy is a 'Leaner In' *par excellence*: she overcomes both self-doubt and her doubters (including her parents, farmers who encourage her to curb her ambition) and, adhering to Sandberg's advice, she 'sits at the table': she literally climbs up the table to get herself noticed (the police academy's furniture is designed for much taller and bigger male employees) and, with confidence and determination, asserts herself to work on resolving a major case of 14 missing mammals. Judy's ambition and confidence lead her to not only solving this major crime but also achieving respect for diversity and 'multi-culturalism' in the city of Zootropolis. Thus, confidence is cast both as the key to self-achievement and, crucially, as facilitating achievement of the greater 'revolutionary' goal of social equality and diversity. Like *Lean In*, so too the message of Zootropolis is that radical social transformation involves equality *within* existing business culture, not a thoroughgoing change of this culture.

Confident mothers

A second central domain in which exhortations to become self-confident seem to proliferate is parenting. Women are addressed as subjects who can and should

transform themselves from anxious, insecure or simply confused mothers, into confident mothers who raise confident children. This process of self-transformation requires self-work, self-measurement, and self-evaluation – intense labour, which paradoxically is associated with embracing feminist language and goals. For example, a conference held in the UK in January 2016, was dedicated to revealing 'the secrets to being The Confident Mother', and to 'celebrating and loving life as a woman and as a mother'. Featuring a range of female authors, life coaches, therapists, fitness experts, educators, social entrepreneurs, solicitors and body image specialists, the conference sought to equip women with strategies for 'boosting their confidence' in parenting, work and in relation to their bodies.[28] Indicatively, the 2016 International Women's Day was replete with events and messages around empowering mothers (and women more generally) by helping them build their confidence. For example, BBC producer Tammi Walker and Evening Standard columnist Rosamund Urwin explored in a joint programme 'what gives mothers confidence'. [29] Similar messages can be found in a plethora of self-help books including bestselling author of childcare books Gina Ford's *The Contented Mother's Guide*, *The Confident Mother*, *The Confident Mom* and *MomSense: A Common-Sense Guide to Confident Mothering* , and a spate of 'mummy bloggers' advocating maternal self-esteem and self-belief.

The trope of confident mothering is, of course, not entirely new. In their influential book, *The Mommy Myth,* Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels observe McCall's magazine popular monthly column in the early 1990s entitled 'The Confident Parent'. The authors argue that the column, written by therapist Ron Taffel, was an exceptional 'breath of fresh air'[30] in its attack on media messages that guilt-tripped working mothers and in restoring mothers' faith in their intuition. However, today there is a new proliferation of meanings around confident mothering, which seems more complex than those Douglas and Michaels describe in relation to the 1990s.

In similar fashion to how confidence is articulated in domains such as 'love your body' discourses or women in the workplace, confident mothering is proposed as a reflexive and corrective response to 'the tyranny of perfect'[31] and the oppressive idealization of motherhood. Becoming a confident mother is constructed as (supposedly) refusing the diktat of 'perfect mothering' and perfect femininity. The Confident Mother website, for instance, states on its opening page: 'You don't need to be the perfect mother. Simply focus on what's most important to you.'[32] Yet in order to be able to identify what it is that is 'most important to you', the site lists multiple activities, experts and self-help tools with which women are urged to consult and engage. Similarly, in numerous blogs and on numerous social media sites, women are cajoled 'to become a sorry-not-sorry mom'[33] or to refuse 'messages dictating how we should raise our children—and how we're expected to feel about it' and become an 'authentic

mom'.[34]Paradoxically, however, this 'refusal' to 'surrender' to such oppressive messages involves constant self-work and self-governance by following a series of instrumental DIY advice on how to change your body, talk, behaviour, thinking and feeling, often requiring the purchase of certain 'aid tools' such as books and apps, and registration on mailing lists, plus attendance of groups and conferences.

Crucially, women are demanded to not only be confident themselves, but also to instil in their children, especially daughters,[35] confidence and resilience. In a guest post on the popular UK mothers' website, Mumsnet, former UK Women and Equalities Minister and co-founder of the Campaign for Body Confidence, Jo Swinson, observes how 'astonishing' it is 'how quickly confidence can evaporate on maternity leave' because of body image. The solution she proffers is to 'celebrate positive body image and challenge the negative attitudes and actions that lead to poor self-esteem.' This can be achieved by following 'tailored guidance and activities' designed by the government, the link to which is provided on Swinson's post. 'It is absolutely vital that we support our children to develop resilience in the face of this pressure, to help them to avoid a lifetime of low body confidence and stop this cycle before it begins', the post concludes. Thus, it is the mother's responsibility, Swinson implies, like so many current messages, to both overcome her own confidence crisis and also to nurture resilient and confident children. It is her failure, and hers alone, if confidence is not properly cultivated in the next generation.

Confidence is the new sexy

A third site in which confidence has achieved prominence is in sex and relationship advice directed to women.[36] An established literature in this field shows how women are enjoined to become 'sexual entrepreneurs': compulsorily sexy and always 'up for it', 'interpellated through discourses in which sex is work that requires constant labour and reskilling (as well as a budget capable of stretching to a wardrobe full of sexy outfits and drawers stuffed with sex toys').[37] In recent years, however, this work has extended to include the psychic labour of 'confidence'. Amongst the central concerns of contemporary sex and relationship advice are the imperatives to 'love your body', 'be confident', 'transform your feelings about sex' and 'become a sexual adventurer'.[38] What unites these themes is a concern with transforming the self and making over one's interior life, in order to become lovable.[39]

Whilst in the previous examples we discussed exhortations to confidence as a path to achievement and success in the workplace and as parents, here they are figured as essential to a romantic partnership. In advice targeted at heterosexual women, confidence is important partly because it is sexy and attractive to men:

'Most men agree that a confident, secure, optimistic and happy woman is easier to fall in love with than a needy, neurotic one' advises Glamour magazine. Indeed, 'men are drawn to confidence' and it is more important than a woman's weight, or size or appearance. It is all about 'making the most of your assets' and 'bigging yourself up', having the right 'positive mental attitude' and 'zapping' negative thinking.

As with the two other domains we have examined, a lack of confidence is figured as unappealing, if not downright toxic, to relationships. Moreover it is constructed as entirely women's own responsibility. 'The problem is you', sex and relationship advice literature tells women.[40] 'Only you can help you' says another magazine article quoted by Garcia-Favaro, 'You have to stop blaming others for your low self-esteem and accept some responsibility'. Women are repeatedly told that if they want to attract love 'what really works is looking at the inner you and doing the inner work necessary'.[41] To become lovable one needs a 'mental makeover', Cosmo tells women. Confidence appears to be increasingly promoted as the 'wonderstuff' of intimate relationships built around the idea that self-love is a pre-requisite to being loved.

The incitement to confidence in intimate relationships is largely seen in sex and relationship advice targeted to heterosexual women, but increasingly it seems to be part of a more general strategy linking attractiveness and desirability to self-belief.[42] *Diva* magazine, targeted at lesbian and bisexual women, has Ella International Lesbian Festival as its current media partner. The April 2016 issue celebrates their iconic confidence culture message to 'Feel the Ella spirit and do it for yourself'. Whilst the exhortations to be 'fearless', 'courageous' and 'present' may have a different meaning in relation to queer visibility and pride, the words and phrases are strikingly similar to those that have become mainstreamed through 'love your body' discourses in campaigns from Dove, Nike and others.[43] The same edition highlights (lack of) confidence as an issue on their problem page, as editor Jane Czyzselska responds to 'S' who asks 'how can I help my partner to feel more sexually confident?' Notably, however, the response is framed in terms of mutual pleasure and in encouraging the unconfident partner to more fully know and embrace her own sexual desires. In this sense it reads somewhat differently from the 'disciplinary' tone of heterosexual advice which frequently frames lack of confidence as troubling because it is a 'turn off'.

The work of confidence is to be undertaken in addition to, rather than instead of, the vast labour already expected of women in heterosexual relationships. Thus rather than representing a 'loosening' of the grip of other imperatives (e.g. to work on the body) it represents a tightening. These circulating discourses of self-love and self-confidence constitute a new 'cultural scaffolding'[44] for the regulation of women, a move deeper into women's psyches so that women must work not just on developing a 'a beautiful body' but also 'a beautiful mind' – an

'upgraded' form of selfhood in which there is no space for vulnerability or ambivalence, but only for compulsory body love and self-confidence.

Confidence exhortations appear to be not only 'post-queer' but also 'post-racial'. Ana Sofia Elias shows how body love campaigns such as Dove's 2015 Love Your Curls campaign are targeted at black and mixed-heritage women, appropriating very similar terms to those we have described.[45] Similarly, the WikiHow 'How to Be a Confident Beautiful Black Girl' offers a fascinating example of how black girls and young women are constructed as suffering from feelings of inferiority and lack of self-worth – a problem they are cajoled to 'fix' through following a series of simple 'steps', almost identical to those offered in numerous other confidence-building outlets.[46] While some of the 'problems' are tailored to 'cater' to black girls' perceived concerns –complexion, hair types – the solutions are indistinguishable from those circulating in the many outlets of the confidence culture: recite in front of a mirror 'I am enough', make a list of your positive traits, embrace your unique style and personality, etc. etc.

Confidence: Spot no difference

Drawing together the themes of the confidence injunctions across these three disparate domains, it is impossible not to note striking consistencies. First, confidence emerges as a *gendered technology* of self, directed almost exclusively to women and requiring asymmetrical labour. Second, it is an *individualising technology inculcating a self-regulating spirit* directed at locating both the source of problems and their solutions within women's own psyches and bodies. The confidence culture exculpates social, economic and political forces for their role in producing and maintaining inequality and instead places the emphasis upon women self-regulating and finding the 'solutions' to their problems within a newly upgraded form of confident subjectivity.[47] Consequently, it turns on its head the notion that the personal is political, and turns away from political critique and any questioning of the culture that might produce self-doubt or lack of confidence in women. Despite its apparently warm and affirmative address to women to believe in themselves, 'lean in', 'love their bodies', 'focus on what's most important to them' and 'be confident' across all spheres of life, it works by locating the blame and responsibility for all difficulties and challenges in women themselves. The brutal effects of patriarchal capitalism are dismissed as trivial compared to women's own toxic baggage – which, bizarrely, is treated as self-generated and entirely unconnected to a culture of normalised pathologization, blame and hate speech directed at women.

Third, confidence is offered as a *one-size-fits-all* solution, disavowing any difference between and among women and contexts. The *problem* of low self-esteem is described in strikingly similar terms, whether it refers to a senior

professional woman in the corporate workplace, an unemployed single-mother, or a young woman in a romantic relationship. The *mission,* whether related to a woman's body image or a woman wanting to ask for a pay rise, is constructed in terms of overcoming the inner obstacles and 'self-inflicted' wounds that stand in the way of becoming confident, empowered and successful. The *trajectory* is always linear: from low to high self-esteem, from poor to high levels of confidence and resilience. Moreover, the *solutions* to the problem are highly standardized: they are constructed as instrumental 'steps', involving extraordinarily similar behavioural changes required to enable the building and boosting of confidence in women across a wide range of identities, ages, backgrounds and contexts: 'be mindful', 'strike a pose', 'fake it till you make it', 'stop trying to be liked', 'don't sweat it', 'breathe' and 'go for a park run.'

Fourth, the coherence of confidence across the different domains *renders insecurity and lack of confidence as abject and abhorrent*. If confidence is the new sexy, then insecurity (in women) is undoubtedly the new ugly.[48] If confidence is deemed the desirable 'healthy' state – at work, as a parent, and in heterosexual relationships, then lack of confidence is unhealthy and can even become lethal. Self-doubt and lack of confidence are presented as toxic states, whilst the notion of 'low self-esteem' has become rendered in some circles as a term of abuse.[49] This is deeply classed and points to the 'other' of confidence culture- showing not only what it celebrates but also what it abjects[1]

Confidence culture: Remaking feminism

The confidence culture, then, involves a remaking of the self, and is put to work as a gendered technology to produce a new type of subject: a self-responsible woman who turns inward and through self-work and self-governing, improves and strengthens her confidence and ambition. In this final section we want to consider how this culture may also be participating in remaking feminism.

Unlike the psy complex, the state of esteem or the 'happiness industry'[50] what is distinctive about the culture of confidence is how it is articulated as a feminist intervention. This represents a significant rupture in accounts of the current moment as postfeminist. Whilst accounts of postfeminism have differed, a strong degree of congruence has developed around regarding it as a critical analytical term to capture a discursive regime that is involved in the undoing and disarticulation of feminism.[51]

[1] A point we discuss at greater length in Orgad,S. & Gill, R (forthcoming) The Confidence Cult, Durham: Duke University Press

Against this background in which feminism has been routinely repudiated, mocked or located in terms of 'pastness',[52] the prominence accorded to feminism in the confidence culture is striking and may be understood as part of a wider shift. Over the past few years feminism has achieved a new luminosity in popular culture.[53] Feminist books top the bestseller lists, glossy magazines launch 'feminism issues', musicians, politicians and other celebrities proudly proclaim their feminist identities, and stories about unequal pay or sexual harassment that would, a few years ago, have been dismissed, have become the stuff of newspaper headlines and primetime news broadcasts. Feminism is becoming 'popular'[54], 'cool'[55], and achieving a 'new visibility'.[56]

The confidence cul(ure) is playing a key part in this new visibility and celebration of feminism. In texts and practices of confidence culture feminism is embraced rather than disavowed, is championed and held up as an obvious 'good', rather than repudiated. For many feminist social and cultural analysts, including ourselves, the sudden luminosity of feminism raises perplexing questions. After years of being sneered at and attacked, feminism is clearly 'having a moment', basking in a warm – if selective - glow of appreciation. Yet as Jessica Valenti has asked, 'when everyone is feminist, is anyone?'[57] As wealthy celebrities line up to extol their feminist credentials and the leaders of major corporations pen feminist self-help guides, has feminism simply become a style identity, shorn of any commitment to radical social transformation? What does this new mediated visibility of feminism mean?

These questions are too numerous and too complicated to answer in full here, but we want to begin a response by drawing out how the confidence culture – which we regard as deeply implicated in this new feminist luminosity – may be contributing to the remaking of feminism. The first overarching point we would highlight is the extraordinary resemblance between the characteristics of postfeminism and those of the new popular/corporate feminism. A recent summary of the key elements of a contemporary postfeminist sensibility highlighted the emphasis on individualism, choice and agency as dominant modes of accounting;[58] the disappearance – or at least muting – of vocabularies for talking about both structural inequalities and cultural influence;[59] the 'deterritorialisation' of patriarchal power and its 'reterritorialisation'[60] in women's bodies and the beauty-industrial complex;[61] the intensification and extensification of forms of surveillance, monitoring and disciplining of women's bodies;[62] and the influence of a 'makeover paradigm' that extends beyond the body to constitute a remaking of subjectivity – what has been characterised as a central part of the 'psychic life of postfeminism'.[63] All of these elements are present in articulations of the confidence cult(ure), except that rather than serving to disavow and repudiate feminism, they are now taken up and rebranded as 'feminist'.

Is the feminism articulated in confidence culture a new version of postfeminism? As we argued earlier, confidence as a technology of self acknowledges female 'injuries' only to rehabilitate or instrumentalize them, suggesting that their causes and solutions lie in women themselves; not in the form of collective action but in an intensive programme of individually-based cognitive, behavioural, embodied, (neuro)linguistic 'reprogramming' that will bring into being a newly upgraded confident self, a proto-feminist subject who has been 'made over' and 'brought into recovery'. In this sense, confidence culture is continuous with the ongoing therapeutic remaking of feminism since the late 1980s.

The second aspect in which the confidence culture contributes to the remaking of feminism lies in its apparent inclusive address. In the domains we have examined here and elsewhere, the 'target user' of the confidence culture is the 'every woman', across race, class, age, sexuality and location.[64] While *Lean In* and similar 'feminist' manifestos such as Slaughter's essay *Why women still can't have it all*? have been criticized for addressing exclusively the white middle-class heterosexual professional woman,[65] the wider landscape of confidence injunctions appears more inclusive. In fact, as manifest by some of the examples we discussed, the confidence culture has a distinctly 'post-racial' tenor. Strikingly, however, the highly standardized way in which women of colour are addressed, erases a long history of feminist struggle around difference, especially racial difference. Rather than recognising difference as the basis for responding to women's particular needs and for insisting on the relevance of anti-racist critiques, the confidence culture expunges difference and the possibility of its critique. While it tries to construct a positive identification with what has been abjected – love your curls, love the skin you're in - it does not expand the range of racial representations and the complexity of racial subjectivities. Instead, difference is 'taken into account', only to be shown that attention to it is no longer necessary.

Third, the confidence culture participates in remaking feminism through its affective qualities. As we have shown in relation to popular 'feminist' texts such as Cuddy's TED Talk, *Lean In* and *Zootropolis*, the confidence culture's version of feminism is one that is complicit with rather than critical of capitalism and male domination. Injunctions to confidence are focused on making small 'tweaks' as Amy Cuddy puts it; minor adjustments focused on individual everyday behaviour within, not against, the system. The appeal of such changes is that they are (supposedly) small, quick, easy and, crucially *not disruptive*. 'Leaning in' fundamentally is about how women can 'play the corporate game more deftly' and find 'better ways of adjusting to […] business culture, not [trying] to change it'.[66] Confident mothering does not question the fundamental inequalities of parenting and gendered division of labour, but rather exhorts women to make changes that would fit within and help sustain their role as the 'foundational

parent'.[67] Confidence is sexy because it does not challenge the patriarchal gaze and asymmetric power relations; its value is partly that it is attractive to - and requires no change on the part of -men.

Avoiding disruption and radical politics is closely tied in with a particular affect, which underpins the confidence culture and which it, in turn, promotes. An advice column in the *Guardian's Women in Leadership* section neatly captures the affective orientation of the confidence culture. Entitled 'Don't shake the glass', it reads:

> Confidence is a default trait in humans … What happens over time, however, is that we become distracted by insecure thoughts and take them for real. We then work hard to become more confident, which tends to have the opposite effect.
>
> Think of the mind as a glass of water with sand in it. The mind works best when it's still, and the sand can fall to the bottom and separate. What we tend to do when we are not feeling confident and stressed is that we overwork our minds – we shake up the glass. Subsequently things become less clear and situations become harder to navigate.
>
> So next time you are walking into a room to do a presentation in front of your boss or asking for the pay rise you deserve, try not to work the mind too hard. Let it settle and be calm, and get back to its factory settings.[68]

Women are cajoled to stay 'calm', (supposedly) not to work too hard and to avoid 'shaking the glass' (read: rocking the boat!). The confidence culture calls into being positive affect tied to self-help, happiness, and empowerment. Shelley Budgeon pithily summarises this as 'Keep Calm and Get a Mentor.'[69] Rottenberg notes how Slaughter's entire programme for gender equality is predicated on the quest of the white, middle-class woman to find 'happiness through a balancing act, which itself becomes the sign of women's progress.'[70] Indeed, the confidence culture is closely tied to the fantasy of happiness,[71] proposing a positive version of feminism that goes along with rather than challenges existing structures and rules. As exemplified by the above column, it compels women to 'get back to their factory settings' but avoids questioning where and by whom these 'settings' were engineered and whose interests their preservation serves. Thus, feminism is reformulated in radically different terms – what Rottenberg has called neoliberal feminism.[72] It demands that transformation occurs almost exclusively within women's psyches, while the capitalist structures conditioning these psyches and material realities are left largely unchanged.

The affective qualities of confidence culture are crucial to understanding how and why it has taken hold so powerfully. The focus on 'positive psychology' and 'positive mental attitude' is pivotal to the culture of confidence. In favouring

positive affect and outlawing 'negative' feelings, the confidence culture disavows affect that is considered 'political', specifically anger, indignation and complaint, systematically repudiating such feelings or refiguring them in terms of injunctions to work on the self. This move, we suggest, is simultaneously political, psychological and aesthetic. It links to a wider tendency within some popular feminism – for example that embraced by women's magazines – to figure feminism as an appealing and stylish identity rather than a political movement for change.[73] Its ostensible appeal resides in the construction of a highly aestheticized version of the feminist as someone who is 'beautiful on the inside and the outside'. This aesthetic appeal is in part built around new age/ self-help discourses that promote enduringly feminine ideas of serenity, inner calm, warmth, 'glow', success and positive energy. It rejects what are assumed to be the old aesthetics of feminism, promoting instead a new feminist subject whom Polly Vernon's bestseller terms 'Hot Feminist': 'the shavy-leggy, fashion-fixated, wrinkle-averse, weight-conscious kind of feminist.'[74]

The aesthetics of this new brand of 'hot' confident feminism 'kicks off' against contrasting images of feminists as ugly, hairy legged etc., and against opposing versions of feminism as 'angry' or 'judgemental'. These versions of feminism are crucially not just questioned politically, but also seen to represent 'ugly'- that is, psychologically and aesthetically unappealing -subject positions- the 'feminist killjoy', as Sara Ahmed has compellingly argued.[75] Anger, complaint, resentment or bitterness are to be avoided at all costs. Women may occasionally refer to such feelings or states but must quickly 'move on',[76] reframing their experience in an upbeat and resilient manner.[77] Indeed such positive messages are disseminated through the multiplication of 'inspirational' aphorisms exhorting women (and it does seem to be women rather than men) to 'dance like nobody is watching', 'love like you've never been hurt', 'believe in yourself or nobody else will', etc etc. These endlessly circulating 'feeling rules'[78] offer up powerful messages of hope and possibility, wrapped in an upbeat and vaguely defiant sense of self-belief and entitlement. Their argumentative target is never specified (who or what is it that stops you dancing the way you want to??) but they communicate a popular feminist sentiment of empowerment, that shades into what Amy Dobson has called 'performative shamelessness'.[79] In this way what we might call 'feminist feeling' or sentiment is evoked yet left hanging, as a general atmosphere of assertiveness and positive mental attitude displaces politics or analysis[80]

Boltanski and Chiapello[81] argue that the waning of critique and the absence of genuine resistance to the damage inflicted by neoliberal capitalism are neatly connected to a dominant fatalism: a sense that certain changes are inevitable. The confidence culture supposedly proposes ways to resist patriarchy and oppression – challenging sexist work cultures and unfair treatment of women in the workplace, resisting the pressures of perfect mothering, refusing the dictates

of body image and instead feeling good about one's body. Yet the 'strategies' for individual confidence building and boosting which it promotes are underpinned by and, in turn, reinforce a sense of fatalism about the very possibility to affect any larger, structural change. The confidence culture proposes a 'feminist' programme in which women positively and constructively develop strategies to change themselves within the existing capitalist and corporate realities they face, rather than disrupts and seek to change those very realities. This fatalism is tied to and sustained by 'positive' affects of hope and happiness and aesthetic representations that help support and justify capitalism.

Conclusion

This paper has looked critically at the culture of confidence as a powerful *dispositif* addressed to women in the early 21st century. We have argued that the culture of confidence is both a technology of self that calls forth a new feminine subject(ivity) and a discursive formation involved in the remaking and 'Righting' of feminism. Looking across three different sites in which confidence culture materialises, the paper has pointed to its coherence as a disciplinary gendered technology of self, that is 1) directed almost exclusively to women and demands intense labour; 2) places the emphasis upon women self-regulating and locates the source of the 'problems' and their 'solutions' within a newly upgraded form of confident subjectivity, exonerating social, economic and political forces for their role in producing and maintaining inequality; 3) is articulated in highly standardized terms and forms which disavow any difference between and among women and domains of life; 4) renders insecurity and lack of confidence as abject and abhorrent.

Our discussion supports arguments about the neoliberalisation and individualisation of feminism, showing how confidence culture is implicated in reformulating and promoting a new version of feminism: one based on turning inwards and working on the self through self-monitoring, constant calculation and the inculcation of an entrepreneurial spirit, and turning away from political critique and questioning of the structural conditions that might produce the 'problem' it seeks to fix. In addition, the paper has highlighted three novel points. Firstly, the extent of the resonances and overlap between postfeminist sensibility and some contemporary celebrations of feminism, particularly those associated with corporate culture and the media. The article asks whether in fact some of the 'new feminism' achieving luminosity in popular culture is better thought of as a new iteration of postfeminism. In this iteration radical social transformation and critique of capitalism come to be disavowed not through repudiation of feminism, but – seemingly paradoxically – via a celebration of an individualistic, psychologized, neoliberal version of feminism. This makes confidence culture

and the wider landscape of 'popular feminism' in some ways harder to critique. Recalling our ambivalent reactions to Cuddy's TED Talk, the confidence culture – perhaps unlike postfeminism – seems a more complex object of analysis and critique, precisely because of its embrace of feminism, its positive affective force and (seemingly) inclusive address. Yet it is precisely because of its appeal and seductiveness – who can argue against the revitalisation of feminism and empowerment of women? – that it begs critical enquiry.

Secondly, the paper has sought to highlight the degree to which the confidence culture is a psychological project as well as a political one, deeply implicated in remaking women's (but not men's) subjectivity. In this sense it is located in a long tradition of self-help which individualizes and psychologizes, turning the focus away from cultural or structural constraints and advocating personal solutions rather than social transformation. Whilst there has been considerable interest in the ways in which feminism is being remade as a therapeutic rather than political project,[82] what marks the confidence culture as distinctive is the intensiveness, extensiveness and coherence of its proposed interventions. As we have seen, these move from bland platitudes at the level of 'love your body, love your self' to extraordinarily detailed micro-practices that require moment by moment monitoring of movements, speech, writing and feelings, and their 're-programming' through a multiplicity of techniques of the self that are designed to bring into being a new confident subject: she holds her body and occupies space in a new 'powerful' way, writes assertive ('just not sorry') emails, knows how to raise confident children, makes love like a porn star, and asks for – and gets - the pay rise she deserves.

Thirdly, the paper has drawn attention to the distinctive affective force of this (post) feminist moment, and the confidence culture that forms part of it. We have argued that the relentlessly positive, upbeat and resilient tone of the texts and practices of confidence culture represents a suturing of the psychological, the political and the aesthetic. Confidence culture conjures a happy, calm, uncomplaining feminine subject who is appealing and unthreatening: she is neoliberalism and patriarchy-friendly. It is one example of the way that 'positive thinking has made itself useful as an apology for the crueller aspects of the market economy'.[83] Conversely, other affects are systematically disallowed and viciously policed – particularly insecurity, complaint and anger. The articulation and suturing between the political, the psychological and the aesthetic has not yet been the subject of sustained feminist scholarship, but it is central, we suggest, to understanding the way in which confidence culture is remaking feminism.

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