

## **The Confidence Cult(ure)**

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## **Abstract**

In this paper we explore how confidence has become a technology of self that invites girls and women to work on themselves. The discussion demonstrates the extensiveness of what we call the 'cult(ure) of confidence' across different areas of social life, and examines the continuities in the way that exponents of the confidence cult(ure) name, diagnose and propose solutions to archetypal feminist questions about labour, value and the body. Our analysis focuses on two broad areas of social life in which the notion of confidence has taken hold powerfully in the last few years: popular discussions about gender and work, and consumer body culture. Examining the incitements to self-confidence in these realms, we show how an emergent technology of confidence, systematically re-signifies feminist accounts, by turning away from structural inequalities and collectivist critiques of male domination into heightened modes of self work and self-regulation, and by repudiating the injuries inflicted by the structures of inequality. We conclude by situating the 'confidence cult(ure)' in relation to wider debates about feminism, postfeminism and neoliberalism.

**Keywords:** Feminism, Postfeminism, Neoliberalism, Work, Subjectivity

## **Introduction: Manufacturing confidence** (*with apologies to Noam Chomsky*)

To be self-confident is the new imperative of our time. Beauty brands hire 'confidence ambassadors', women's magazines promote a 'confidence revolution' (*Cosmo*) or dedicate special issues to the topic (e.g. 'The Confidence Issue: A smart woman's guide to self-belief', *Elle* 2015) and even the Girlguiding organisation, better known for its promotion of practical skills, now offers an achievement badge in 'body confidence'. In 2013 and 2014 topping the bestseller lists two books concerned with gender and work, *Lean In* and *The Confidence Code*, both placed female self-confidence at their argumentative heart.

Exhortations to confidence are everywhere: in education, in public health, in finance, in consumer culture, in a blaze of hashtags promoting female self-esteem, self-belief and positive self-regard (e.g. #ThisGirlCan ; #FreeBeingMe; #SpeakBeautiful; #embraceyourself; #confidentwomen), and in a surge of apps designed to help boost women's self-esteem and self-belief in their daily lives (e.g. Leadership Pour Elles, Confidence Coach, Build Confidence, Happier , Mindfit).<sup>1</sup>

The aim of this paper is to explore this 'cult(ure) of confidence', to look critically at its claims and to examine what it does performatively or ideologically in this neoliberal and postfeminist moment. Our analysis speaks to wider debates about the neoliberalisation and corporatisation of feminism (e.g. Fraser 2009; McRobbie 2009; 2013; Rottenberg 2014), but our focus is more specific: on what confidence as a technology of self (Foucault 1987; 1988) brings into being, makes visible and renders unintelligible. The cult(ure) of confidence is, we contend, properly understood as part of the wider self-help movement, the so-called 'happiness industry' (Davies 2015) and (positive) 'psy[chology] complex' (Rose 1998). It bears a strong resemblance to the 'state of esteem' (Cruikshank 1993), a new form of governance or a new political order that calls on us to 'act upon ourselves' (ibid, 103). However, what makes it distinctive is its gendered address to girls and women, and its apparent embrace of feminist language and goals. What is the confidence cult, and why has it achieved such affective force in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century? What is the relationship of confidence culture to

contemporary feminism? How is a language centred on promoting female self-confidence reconfiguring feminist concerns? What does the 'turn to confidence' do to contemporary theorisations of power?

To address these questions, in this article we take as our focus two broad areas of social life in which the notion of confidence has taken hold powerfully in the last few years in the west: consumer body culture and discussions about gender inequality in the workplace. On the one hand, then, there is the 'Love Your Body' dispositif, with its critiques of the beauty industry's portrayal of women, and its counter-celebration of feeling comfortable and confident in your own skin. On the other there is the growing space in popular culture accorded to debates about the persistence of gender inequalities in the workplace (particularly those pertaining to middle class women): the lack of women in senior positions in business or the academy, the poor representation of women on Boards, and the challenges of combining motherhood with paid employment – all of which, it is claimed, can be resolved through increasing women's self-confidence. These topics are not usually juxtaposed in academic articles or popular discourse, but here we attempt to think them together in order to highlight both the extensiveness of the cult(ure) of confidence across different areas of social life, and to examine the continuities in the way that exponents of the confidence cult(ure) name, diagnose and propose solutions to archetypal feminist questions about labour, value and the body.

The article is structured as follows. In the next section, we outline our understanding of confidence as a technology of selfhood or subjectification, drawing on Foucault, and discuss the extraordinary scope and reach of confidence in domains ranging from international development campaigns to organisations working to prevent violence against women. Following this, the main part of the paper focuses on discussions of self-empowerment and self-esteem relating to two case studies - the body and the workplace - to examine and critique the cult(ure) of confidence. We organise our analysis around three interrelated themes: (1) individualism and the focus upon making over subjectivity; (2) the strategic turning away from structural accounts of inequality and injustice; and (3) the repudiation of injury in favour of upgraded forms of

confident selfhood. We show how these themes run through both contemporary discussions about gender and work, and popular exhortations to 'love your body' or 'feel sexy at any size', indicating the force that the notion of confidence has in the current moment. In our conclusion we situate this in relation to wider debates about feminism, postfeminism and neoliberalism.

### **Confidence as a technology of self**

The new cultural prominence accorded to confidence could be considered in various ways: a turn to confidence, a confidence movement, a new zeitgeist, 'confidence chic' (Garcia-Favaro 2016a). We consider it as a discursive formation, set of knowledges, apparatuses and incitements that together constitute a novel technology of self, that brings into existence new subject(ivities) or ways of being. Foucault (1988) 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. 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' (Foucault 1988, 18).

For us the notion is valuable because 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. As Foucault puts it, technologies of self are 'the way in which the subject constitutes himself [sic] in an active fashion, by the practices of the self, [but] these practices are nevertheless not something that the individual invents by himself [sic]' (1987, 122, our emphasis). They are not

random, then, nor individually or idiosyncratically produced, but are historically and culturally specific –as we will show in relation to the cult(ure) of confidence.

This later work by Foucault opened up a space for theorizing agency (not just domination) as well as for considering ‘the psychic life of power’ (Butler 1997), and there have been numerous productive feminist attempts to use this focus on technologies of selfhood – amongst them the work of Bordo (1993), Butler (1990), de Lauretis (1987) and McRobbie (2009). The development of the idea of ‘technologies of sexiness’ (Radner 1993;1999; Gill 2008; Evans & Riley 2015) is of particular relevance to our formulation of confidence as a technology of self. Hilary Radner developed the term to speak to the ways in which romantic scripts were changing: where once what young women were supposed to bring to the heterosexual marriage market was their sexual innocence and virtue, she argued, today ‘(t)he task of the Single Girl is to embody heterosexuality through the disciplined use of makeup, clothing, exercise, and cosmetic surgery, linking femininity, consumer culture and heterosexuality’ (1999,15). More recently, Laura Harvey and Rosalind Gill (2011, 56) argued that ‘a new mode of femininity organized around sexual entrepreneurialism is emerging. This modern, postfeminist subject[...] is required to be compulsorily sexy and always “up for it” ... [She is] required to be skilled in a variety of sexual behaviours and practices, and the performance of confident sexual agency is central to this technology of self’.

Just as Radner and others (Gill 2008; Harvey & Gill 2011; Evans, Riley & Shankar 2010) argued that a ‘technology of sexiness’ developed in the 1990s and 2000s, we want to suggest that confidence has emerged as a gendered technology of self in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It is organised through a multiplicity of techniques, knowledges and affective apparatuses designed to measure, assess, market, inspire and inculcate self-confidence. A range of experts, programmes, and discourses are invested in establishing women’s lack of confidence as the fundamental obstacle to women’s success, achievement and happiness, and in promoting the acquisition or development of self-confidence as its ultimate solution.

Confidence has no single point of origin, but has rather emerged across multiple sites at the same moment. The scope and reach of confidence as a technology of self is wide – indeed, the confidence imperative can be frequently found where there is talk of girls and women. It suffuses contemporary advertising, particularly that relating to any and all aspects of the female body; it is to be found proliferating across education, employment and financial realms; it saturates spiralling public health and sex education initiatives, and has a particular intensity around young people, where it is hailed as an answer to the problems of what is routinely formulated as girls’ ‘low self-esteem’. The confidence imperative is even found in the women’s sector (in the UK), where a peculiar cocktail of therapeutic culture, devastating funding cuts, and a reluctance to ‘demonize men’ is giving rise to an entirely new lexicon and set of programmes designed to deal with what was formerly known as violence against women: ‘sex offender treatment groups’ have become ‘better relationships groups’ and interventions are now targeted predominantly at women service users to inculcate ‘self-esteem’, ‘confidence’ and ‘empowerment’ to make ‘better choices’ (Long & Woodward 2015). A therapeutic language of healing and recovery, with an implicit deficit model in which women need psychological intervention, may be displacing earlier more explicitly political feminist interventions. But what is striking about the cult(ure) of confidence is the extent to which it is itself depicted as a feminist turn – and it is here that its interest lies, for a technology of self-confidence seems to be reformulating feminism itself.

One area of social life in which the confidence imperative has been critically examined is in relation to what Sarah Banet-Weiser (2015,182) calls ‘girls empowerment organisations’ in which ‘commodified girl power, neoliberal entrepreneurialism and girls’ crisis’ create ‘a market for empowerment’ focussed on the ‘individualizing of social issues and commodifying of social activism through brand culture’. Banet-Weiser looks at the ‘Confidence Coalition’ in the US, which situates confidence as an individual commodity – something you can carry via the Confidence Coalition, ‘Go Confidently’ handbag collection, for example, or a ‘choice’ to which you can make a (deceptively simple) pledge: ‘Today I pledge to be confident’. Such organizations are not limited to the US but

have become a feature of the international development field, which figures girls and young women as both the objects and targets of its campaigns. Examining the United Nation Foundation campaign Girl up, which is aimed at sparking a grassroots movement among American girls in support of girls in developing countries, Ofra Koffman, Shani Orgad and Rosalind Gill (2015) discuss how American girls are hailed as enterprising and self-managing subjects who must compete with others to be selected for various training programmes in which they will 'develop...leadership skills through... trainings in advocacy, fundraising, public speaking and leadership' in such a way as to build their confidence and their CVs whilst also 'empowering' their Southern 'sisters'. Koffman et al indict what they call 'selfie humanitarianism' in which girls are called upon not to develop empathy, recognise and listen to distant others, but to turn a concern with injustice into an individualized opportunity for entrepreneurial personal growth.

In both these examples, it is girls and young women who are hailed by the confidence imperative, linking into a popular understanding of 'girls in crisis' (Hains 2012). However, as we show in this paper, confidence as a technology of self is not limited to the teenage girls who have been the primary focus of research to date, but rather it crosses generations. Teens are hailed by it, to be sure, but so too are women in their thirties, forties and fifties; women who may have been earlier the ideal subjects of 'girl power' - teens in the 1990s but are now in their thirties or forties perhaps. The readers addressed by *Lean In* or *The Confidence Code* are adult women. Likewise the readers hailed by the Huffington Post's 'women and confidence' - tagged articles are already well-established in careers, but being held back by their lack of confidence, it would seem. As a typical column from 2015 put it,

'I remember for so many years, I would complain that I wasn't making enough money or I wasn't far enough in my career. But, the problem was while I was sitting there complaining about it -- someone else was asking for it. No one is going to do it for you. If you want something, you have to ask for it. No exceptions. If you want a raise, don't make a big deal out of it. Write down the reasons, make an appointment with your boss, and then ask for it.'<sup>2</sup>



Financial Times spin-off, Mrs Money Penny, also instils confidence in a distinctly older female readership in her books for women about managing money, and one can only hazard a guess as to the demographic targeted by the Daily Mail's regular features, which bemoan why it takes so long for women to feel happy with themselves (e.g. '52, Age of Confidence, why it takes women more than half a century to be happy and content with their bodies').<sup>3</sup>

What we seek to highlight, then, is both the range of domains touched - or indeed 'made over' - by the contemporary focus on female self-confidence, and the cross-cutting nature of the generations addressed. The cult(ure) of confidence represents a significant shift from a focus on girls and specific domains of social life and practice to a wider-ranging context that is not limited by age or a single domain. Before moving onto our analysis, we want also to emphasize that confidence as a technology of self involves much more than simply 'discourse'. It is well-represented and eminently visible in written and spoken texts but it also materialises across multiple other forms and practices: you can take quizzes or psychological tests to measure your confidence quotient; undertake mind-training exercises to increase your confidence; download confidence-inspiring apps, or receive upbeat aphorisms to your phone every day; take part in events organised around girls or women's self-confidence; participate in educational programmes designed to make you more confident; work on a specific area of confidence such as body confidence or financial confidence, etc etc. Confidence has become a technology of self that invites women to work on themselves - alone and with others - 'their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct and way of being, so as to transform themselves' (Foucault 1988, 18).<sup>4</sup>

### **Lean In and Love Your Body: Examining the confidence cult(ure)**

As we have established, concern over women's (and girls') 'lack of confidence' and 'insecurity' seems to have gained remarkable currency in contemporary culture. In this section we move on to look in detail at two areas of social life in which an emergent technology of confidence is highly visible: in discussions

about women and the workplace and in the new proliferation of meanings around body confidence.

One of the contexts where the cult(ure) of confidence is pronounced is discussion about women in the workplace. This can be seen in discussions about the postfeminist issue de jour 'Women on Boards', in women's magazines 'women and work' sections in which mentors or 'fairy jobmothers' (*Marie-Claire*) incite self-belief as the number one characteristic needed to thrive, and even in discussions about the stark under-representation of women in academia where confidence and its tougher sister 'resilience' (see Gill & Donaghue 2015) figure prominently. Indeed, whilst we were writing this, the UK's higher education weekly, *The Times Higher*, featured an article on gender inequality in academia, which articulated precisely the nexus of ideas about confidence that we are exploring. Two Business School academics, Amanda Goodall and Margit Osterloh (May 14, 2015), argued that 'demand side' explanations such as 'discrimination against women' have been over-emphasised in accounts of gender inequality and need to be complemented with more contemporary 'supply side studies' which highlight women's 'aversion to competition, risk aversion, feedback aversion and low self-confidence'. These factors, the authors argued, 'help to explain the gender gap in visibility, promotions and salaries' (ibid, 38).

The technology of confidence is most well-illustrated in this sphere, however, by two recently published, highly publicised bestsellers: Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg's *Lean In* (2013) and the *New York Times* Bestseller *The Confidence Code* (2014) authored by BBC World News America's Katty Kay and ABC News reporter Claire Shipman. These books are not merely popular 'reads'; they produce a 'truth effect' that underpins and is exploited to justify entire strategies, programmes and approaches geared towards 'gender diversity' in the workplace, and gender equality more generally.<sup>5</sup> For example, a 2015 report by global firm KPMG identifies 'building [women's] confidence in the workplace' (12) as top priority for businesses, through 'confidence-building', leadership and performance reward programmes, networking opportunities and encouragement from role models in the workplace.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, The U.S. 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.'<sup>7</sup> *Lean In* and *The Confidence Code* have been widely adopted also by individuals and groups outside the workplace, evidenced, for example, by the formation of *Lean In* circles and similar women's groups and women's personal accounts of the transformative effect of these confidence-inducing books, not only on their professional lives but also on their lives and identities more generally.<sup>8</sup>

*Lean In* adopts a business manual format, calling 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' (Sandberg 2013, 172), 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.

Confidence in discussions of women and the workplace is proposed as a reflexive response, even corrective, to 'the tyranny of perfect' and 'perfectionism' (McRobbie 2015). 'Perfectionism' is the 'confidence killer' (Kay and Shipman, 2014: 12), perfection 'the enemy of the good [and] the enemy of confidence' (176). Significantly, women's perfectionism in this realm is understood predominantly as an 'innate' self-inflicted 'wound' (Kay and Shipman 2014) that paralyses their ambitions, and diminishes their confidence (since women inevitably will fail to be perfect).

The second – and contrasting – area in which the cult(ure) of confidence can be seen clearly is the rise of 'body love' discourses that have proliferated across

advertising, magazines, social media and the beauty industrial complex more broadly. Via corporate-charitable campaigns such as Unilever's Campaign for Real Beauty and Dove's Self Esteem Project -which is 'on a mission to help more than 15 million girls overcome beauty-related pressures, raise their self-esteem, and in doing so, realise their full potential'<sup>9</sup> - these messages have spread beyond media and into self-help genres, schools health interventions, and training programmes designed to help girls and women establish self-belief and confidence. These messages urging girls and women to 'love your body' are affirmative, seemingly feminist exhortations to believe in ourselves, feel confident and attractive 'at any size', to 'remember' that we are 'incredible'. They instruct young women that 'the power is in your hands' (all quotes come from recent Love Your Body campaigns – see Gill & Elias, 2014).

Love Your Body (LYB) discourses have multiple determinants, and must be seen, at least in part, as an attempt to respond to earlier feminist critiques of the media and the beauty industry for 'unrealistic' and 'harmful' body image ideals. Their proliferation at a moment when 'body image' and 'sexualisation' became key foci of concerns about young women is not incidental, and, more broadly, they should be situated in a longer term shift towards 'commodity feminism' (Goldman 1992) 'emotional capitalism' (Illouz 2007) and 'cool capitalism' (McGuigan, 2012).

As with the multiplication of books, programmes, policies and apps to enhance women's confidence in the workplace, LYB discourses offer a warm, positive, encouraging intervention into women's relationship to their own embodied selves. They are particularly powerful because of the way they seem to interrupt the almost entirely normalised hostile judgment and surveillance of women's bodies in contemporary culture. However, what we seek to examine in the remainder of this paper is how this apparently feminist technology of confidence is systematically reconfiguring feminism, making it safe for a corporate and neoliberal culture. By confidence we mean a set of internally focussed discursive formations and individualised strategies of psychic labour geared towards the production of self-belief in girls and women. The coalescing of these discourses and strategies systematically re-signifies feminist accounts, by turning away

from structural inequalities and collectivist critiques of male domination into heightened modes of self-regulation, and by repudiating the injuries inflicted by the structures of inequality.

### **1. Internalising the revolution, internalising blame, and self-work**

*Lean In* and *The Confidence Code* both seek to cajole women into turning inwards to solve external problems. *The Confidence Code* does mention societal and institutional factors in passing but is dismissive of their significance. Early on in this book, the authors state that while there is some truth behind concerns about sexism and institutional barriers aligned against women, the 'more profound' issue is women's 'lack of self-belief' (p. xv). The focus on confidence is partly predicated on the supposedly 'pragmatic' view that masculine domination and gender inequality are virtually impossible to challenge at the structural level ('the reality looks foreboding', p. xix) and, thus, the only way to challenge them effectively is for women to internalise both the responsibility for the problem and the programme required to resolve it. Indeed, while the book is cast as an empathetic project by women to help other women, it simultaneously stresses, through casual, but rather harsh observations that infantilise and belittle women, that women have only themselves to blame: e.g. 'part of the problem is we [women] can't make sense of the rules' (p. xviii); 'all too often, women don't see, can't even envision, what's possible' (p. xvii), 'our own obsession with our physical appearance drains our confidence' (p. 100), and 'a woman's brain is not her friend when it comes to confidence' (p. 144).

Both *Lean In* and *The Confidence Code* rely heavily on psychological studies, favouring 'positive psychology' and cheerful anecdotes, and stressing the ability (and obligation) of the individual to work on herself to overcome her problems. As such they derive authority from the 'psy complex' which has brought into being the contemporary (neoliberal) self through regimes of measuring, classifying, calculating, inscribing and making intelligible traits, desires, anxieties and differences (Rose 1998). The word 'self' is repeatedly hyphenated, to diagnose both the *symptoms* of women's lack of confidence, e.g. 'self-doubt', 'self-rumination', 'self-recrimination', 'self-deprecation', 'self-censoring', and their

*solutions*, e.g. 'self-assurance', 'self-belief', 'self-worth', 'self-efficacy', 'self-compassion' and 'self-fulfilment'. There is little mention of any structural, institutional, cultural and societal explanations of the 'problem', its reasons, and/or solutions.

*The Confidence Code* uses the metaphor of women's 'internal shortage' of confidence, to suggest that, just like any other consumer commodity that one can be short of, it can simply be purchased. 'It may be unevenly and unfairly distributed, but it's straightforward to acquire', the authors write (Kay and Shipman, *Guardian*, 30 April 2014).<sup>10</sup> The interest is not in why this 'commodity' is unequally and unjustly distributed, let alone what can be done to redress its distribution. Rather, the goal is 'quick fixes' that will enable its 'straightforward' acquisition: e.g. practising 'power positions' (p. 164) such as sitting up straight, getting a good night's sleep, exercising, meditating and being grateful. This type of solution is also promoted by apps such as 'Simply Being' and 'Build Confidence', which promise their user to 'be lulled to sleep with happy, self-confident thoughts filling your head'.<sup>11</sup>

*Lean In* clearly pays more attention to societal and cultural factors than *The Confidence Code*, however, it too emphasises that the fundamental onus is on women to change themselves (see also Rottenberg 2014). The first chapter boldly lays out the project of 'Internalizing the Revolution' (the chapter's title), which, in effect, means internalising the political project of challenging gender inequality in the workplace by treating both the problem and its solutions as personal, individualised and psychologically-based. In this way it seems to turn on its head the feminist notion that the personal is political.

Following the articulation in Chapter 1 of *Lean In* of 'some of the complex challenges women face' (p. 9), Chapter 2 centres on how women can increase their self-confidence. In this chapter, Sandberg (p. 33) reflects on the lessons she has learnt from her own life experiences:

'I learned over time that while it was hard to shake feelings of self-doubt, I could understand that there was a distortion. I would never possess my brother's effortless confidence, but I could challenge the notion that I was

constantly headed for failure...I learned to undistort the distortion'.<sup>12</sup>

Sandberg accepts her brother's (and other men's) 'effortless confidence' as given. And, while elsewhere in the book she admits men's confidence might be unjust(ified), she does not suggest ways in which it can or should be 'undistorted'. Rather, it is her and her 'sisters' 'distorted' view of themselves and their internal insecurities and 'obstacles' that are the object to be tackled. Women are positioned as fundamentally responsible for both the distorting – self-damaging by doubting of their ability and their lack of confidence – and its 'undistorting'. This involves looking inwards and working on the self through self-monitoring, constant calculation and the inculcation of an entrepreneurial spirit. Thus, for example, women are invited to take a 'confidence assessment' in the form of a quiz on of *The Confidence Code's* official website. Evaluating themselves by taking the quiz promises 'not only learn how you stack up, and what you can do about it, but you'll also be contributing to a cutting edge research project. That knowledge alone should give you a confidence boost.'<sup>13</sup> The paradox is that for women to gain confidence they need continuously to work on manufacturing it through self-governance and self-improvement. Thus, their confidence is always contingent on conscious and intense labour as opposed to the 'natural' 'effortless' (Sandberg 2013, 33) 'honest' (Kay and Shipman 2014, 19) confidence of their male counterparts. This is redolent of the 'belaboured self' critiqued by Mickie McGee (2005). Even women in positions of power, e.g. the IMF's Managing Director Christine Lagarde, whom Kay and Shipman interview, or indeed Katty Kay, Claire Shipman and Sheryl Sandberg themselves, women who have 'successfully purchased' confidence, must carry on self-managing and governing themselves, or risk 'running out' of its supply.

The same emphasis upon individual, psychological self-work is also evident in the constellation of discourses around body love. In its earlier iterations LYB was closely tied to a (feminist) critique of the beauty industry - even when it emanated from that same industry, and could thus be seen as an example of 'the rebel sell' (Heath and Potter 2004) or the commodification of critique (Goldman

1992). An early forerunner of LYB advertising from Nike, a key player in promulgating the cult(ure) of female confidence, featured the following text:

'Where is it written that unless you have a body like a beauty queen you're not perfect?

You are beautiful just the way you are.

Sure, improve yourself.

But not in the pursuit of an impossible goal.

A synthetic illusion painted by the retoucher's brush.

Get real.

Make your body the best it can be for one person.

Yourself.

Just do it.'

This advert set the tone for many that were to follow. It included the suggestion that Nike shared feminist anger about the ways in which women are set up to follow 'impossible goals', which are in any case not 'real', but 'synthetic illusions' created by photographic retouching. It 'kicked off' (Williamson 1978) against ideals of bodily perfection and featured the (now obligatory) reassurance that 'you're beautiful just the way you are'. The feminist solidarity and celebration of 'everywoman' expressed in the advert was somewhat undercut by the image that accompanied it of six perfectly slim and conventionally attractive young women, wearing nothing but loin cloths, but nevertheless the text stood out amongst other adverts of the 1990s. Similarly a film advert titled 'Onslaught', produced in 2008 as only the third for the Dove Self Esteem Fund, shows a little girl walking to school before she is 'hit' with an onslaught of ever more disturbing images from the beauty industry- ranging from make up to skin firming to dieting and cosmetic surgery. This advert ends with the same small child and a written text that enjoins: 'talk to your daughter before the beauty industry does'.

In more recent examples of the LYB oeuvre, however, this angry or shocking critique of something out there – e.g. a beauty industry with impossible



standards that would hurt you or your daughters, that is setting impossible goals – has given way to something much more individually and internally focussed. In its 2014 film 'Selfie' the focus is not on the beauty industrial complex but on the way in which mobile phone technology has put the power back in women's own hands. 'You have the power to change and redefine what beauty is' says Dove's educator in the film. 'The power is in your hands because now more than ever it is right at our fingertips: we can take selfies!' Dermablend in turn suggests a 'camo confession'. Operation Beautiful takes a similar but more low-tech line: 'all you need is a pen and a piece of paper'. All are practices of what we have called 'selfie esteem' (Elias, Donaghue & Gill, in press), which turn the gaze inwards towards a project of self-work. This self-work takes remarkably similar forms to those promoted by *Lean In* and *The Confidence Code*: an array of cognitive and behavioural strategies that range from memory work (e.g. 'remembering' how incredible you are, or thinking about a time when you felt really happy with yourself); being your own friend (e.g. saying nice things about yourself; writing down things you like about your body); practising meditation and mindfulness; taking exercise (for the 'feel good' hormones it will release); and expressing/practising gratitude.

## **2. Turning away from culture and structural inequalities**

These internally focussed and individualised strategies of psychic labour go hand in hand with a turning away from any account of structural inequalities or of the way in which contemporary culture may impact upon women's sense of self. Again this can be seen in the cult(ure) of confidence relating to both the body and the workplace.

It would be unfair to argue that Sandberg (2013) is totally uninterested in structural change. *Lean In* is partly a call for workplaces also to lean in, and has inspired some self-reflection within corporate firms and the sector more generally, animating the design and implementation of organisational changes aimed at enhancing gender 'diversity' (the term generally favoured over 'equality') in the workplace – the impact of which is still to be seen. Yet, notwithstanding her (limited) attention to structural issues, the solutions

Sandberg offers are focused primarily on changing women's psyches and behaviour. As Catherine Rottenberg (2014, 424) notes, *Lean In* represents a shift 'from an attempt to alter social pressures towards interiorized affective spaces that require constant self-monitoring'. Sandberg concludes on an upbeat note that 'it's up to us to end the self-fulfilling belief that "women can't do this, women's can't do that"' (Sandberg 2013, 171). Nothing at all is said about material issues like the absence of paid maternity leave for women in the US, or the need for employer-based childcare (McRobbie 2013). Nor does *Lean In* tackle the extremely long hours demanded in order to 'scrambl[e] along that jungle gym' (Sandberg 2013, 172), and corporate culture more broadly, which is deeply incompatible with the political project of gender equality.

Similarly, in focusing so heavily on the internal defect of women's 'confidence gap', *The Confidence Code* ignores the fact that 'culture that gives women no reason to feel self-assured' (Valenti, 23 April 2014), and pays no attention to the structural and institutional barriers to gender equality, misattributing the latter to women's inherent lack of confidence.<sup>14</sup> This is exemplified strikingly by the authors' decision to open the book by relating the stories of American suffragette Susan B. Anthony, and Malala Yousazafi who defied the Taliban in Pakistan and demanded that girls be allowed to receive an education. Extraordinarily, Anthony's and Yousazafi's stories are not treated as examples of women's radical challenge to oppressive patriarchal and violent domination. Rather, Kay and Shipman cast them as individual heroines, who share one thing in common: confidence. Thus, the confidence cult(ure) 'recuperates' feminism by recasting it in its own post-feminist and neoliberal terms: as an individualistic, entrepreneurial project that can be inculcated by the self.

*The Confidence Code* derives considerable inspiration and borrowed rhetorical authority from cognitive science. The authors explore the impact of genetics, brain structure and other biological factors, on the disparity of confidence between men and women. They are careful to qualify the information they garner from observing experiments with monkeys and rats, and interviews conducted with neuroscientists and biologists - all of whom happen to be male (!) - in order not to reduce the confidence gap to biological traits. At the same

time, they devote a substantial part of the book precisely to establishing 'natural differences' to explain why women lack confidence. What is more, at the end of the book, they reveal how they subjected themselves to a profiling of their own psychological make up - demonstrating and reinforcing the urge to women to self-monitor, to turn away from any serious critique of structural inequalities, to which the authors occasionally refer using terms such as 'environment' or 'realities' - implying that these are unchanging and obscuring their fundamental unequal constructed conditions.

Blaming external obstacles is 'easy but misguided' (p. 101), Kay and Shipman argue. Instead, and since the 'realities' and the 'environment' cannot be changed, women are called on to turn inwards to recognise 'the things we do to ourselves' (ibid.) and focus on becoming their own 'mittens':<sup>15</sup> just as 'little babies need mittens to stop scratching themselves' (p. 101) women have to become their own mittens, that is, they have to stop criticising themselves. This infantilising metaphor throws into relief how the injunction to women is to exercise self-restraint, which may actually stop them from challenging palpable gender inequalities, especially in the workplace (McRobbie 2015, 8). Being their own 'mittens' is a mode of self-regulation that gives women the illusion of control, preventing them from directing any anger and critique against the structures that encourage them continuously to 'scratch' themselves- let alone those that may be tearing them to pieces! A remarkable example of the endorsement of this mode of self-regulation is the French government's launch in 2014 of the 'Leadership Pour Elles' smartphone app, which aims to address the national gender wage gap by boosting women's self-confidence (!) Championed by the French women's rights minister Najat Vallaud-Belkacem, the app invites women to take a range of tests, on the basis of whose answers it directs women to the appropriate modules, simulators, and recommendations.

Interestingly, the 'mittens' motif finds a direct parallel in LYB discourse in a film made in 2013 to market the breakfast cereal Special K which called on women to 'shut down fat talk'. The film opens with shots of tweets in which women have said things such as 'My face is so fat. Gross' or 'I just wish I was skinnier' - each accompanied by a derogatory hashtag. The narrator's voice comes in over these

images: '93% of women fat talk. We believe it is a barrier to managing their weight. It happens everywhere. Especially when shopping for clothes. To show how damaging words can be we created a store with actual fat talk'. The film then cuts to an upscale clothes store called SHHH in which 'fat talk' is reproduced on labels and posters on prominent display: 'I'm feeling so disgusted about my figure at the moment', says one, 'cellulite is in my DNA' asserts another. The (apparently unwitting) female customers respond with horror: 'what?!' 'That's awful!' 'What is this?' and then dawning recognition, 'I've said these things about myself', 'it's like you're bullying yourself'. Suddenly the voices stop and the music changes as the following sentences are flashed up on screen as if in a movie from the silent era: 'You wouldn't talk this way to anyone else.' Fresh screen: 'So why do it to yourself'. We cut back to the store and the women are now laughing and hugging each other: 'I can't talk about myself that way any more', 'we need to shut it down', they say, each mouthing 'sshhh'. 'LET'S SHHHHUT DOWN FALT TALK. Join us at [fightfattalk.com](http://fightfattalk.com)' says the final screen'.

This advert highlights several key features of the LYB motif and its entanglement with the confidence cult(ure). Firstly it is striking as an exemplar of the trend in which many of the companies at the forefront of promoting female body confidence are precisely those who have been invested in maintaining women's body dissatisfaction in order to sell products. Special K is a diet cereal brand, whose advertising has been notorious for its byline 'stay special' which has often implied that Bad Things will happen to women who do not attend vigilantly to their weight (e.g. their partners will no longer love them). Even today, after watching its rousing critique of the harms of fat talk, one might be forgiven for being surprised that their website features diet, slimming and exercise plans and a BMI counter, alongside its updated slogan: 'Discover a more confident you'.

Secondly the film neatly sidesteps questions of corporate responsibility with its clear attempt to blame women for their own misery and lack of confidence. As the film articulates both in testimonials of female shoppers and in its powerful conclusion: 'you do it to yourself'. Lest anyone might still feel that it would be possible to point a finger at the company itself – deeply implicated in decades of 'fat talk' we would argue – the film underscores that it is women themselves who

are responsible, with its powerful use of the metaphor of bullying: 'it's like bullying yourself'. Bullying may be bad behaviour but bullies are individuals not structures or cultural movements. This is not a corporate conspiracy or a wider social or cultural problem – it is about women scratching at themselves, being their own worst enemies, needing those mittens, needing to 'shhhh'. The diagnosis is resolutely located in women themselves and the gaze is turned away from a wider injurious culture.

Notwithstanding this, a striking feature of this example and much of the technology of self circulating around body confidence more generally is that in inciting women to 'love your body' they rely upon repeatedly making visible what we have called 'hate your body' talk (Gill & Elias 2014). LYB discourses rely upon and reinforce the cultural intelligibility of the female body as 'difficult to love' (Lynch 2011; Murphy 2013). In doing so they 're-cite' (Butler 1997) hateful discourses about the female body that depends upon its normalised cultural pathologisation (McRobbie 2009), relocating them as patterned (by gender) yet somehow simultaneously as merely individually produced ideas.

Dove's 2014 film 'Patches' represents an interesting and powerful intervention, an incitement to female self-confidence, which underscores it as an individualising technology of self. It follows an apparent 'research study' in which a psychology professor from Columbia University sets up an experiment to test the effectiveness of a new 'revolutionary product': the beauty patch. Women are recruited and asked to wear the patch (which resembles a plaster, hormone or nicotine patch) for 12 hours every day for two weeks and to make a video diary each day to report on how they are feeling about themselves. Edited clips from the vlogs are duly shown, intercut with interviews with the women, reporting on the extraordinary transformations they have undergone since donning the patches: transformations in self and other-perceived attractiveness, but above all in confidence. It has been, according to one participant, a truly 'life altering experience'. The 'big reveal' in the film comes when the women meet once again with the psychologist who recruited them. Has the patch changed their life, they are asked? (Yes) Would they buy it? (Yes) Do they have any interest in knowing what is in it, the psychologist asks? (Yes). They are then

handed a brand new patch and asked to turn it over. There, on the reverse, is one word: 'NOTHING'. The beauty patch has nothing in it. Whilst this will come as no surprise to anyone with even a passing acquaintanceship with Psychology, much less to anyone with any understanding of the power of placebos, it is of course alternately a terrible shock/ an epiphany to those taking part, who explain to us how the discovery made them feel: 'the key is me', says one woman, giving us the preferred take home message of the film, 'I already have everything I need' (to feel good). 'I'm beautiful, I'm strong, I'm independent', says another (I don't need a patch). A third woman, by contrast, looks extremely disappointed and becomes visibly upset at this revelation – whether because of the deliberate humiliation enacted upon her or because she believed the patch had worked and was some kind of answer for her, we do not know - but does quickly reach the desired teaching moment. Together the reactions underscore the message that a lack of (body) confidence is all in our heads. The brutal effectivity of patriarchal culture with its normalised hate speech against women is instantly erased, and female body insecurity is resolutely cast as an individual phenomenon, a silly piece of self-sabotage with no foundation in reality – and what's more, women are clearly easily suggestible (rather than strong-minded) if a patch containing nothing can so dramatically change the way they feel about themselves.

### **3. Repudiating injury**

In this final section, we want to examine the way in which the confidence cult(ure) relies upon both an expression and a repudiation of injury. Confidence as a technology of self is designed to overcome and even disavow insecurity or vulnerability, rendering them problematic, indeed toxic, states – at least in women (see Gill, in press; Garcia-Favaro, 2016b)

In *Lean In*, Sandberg (2013) recounts the origins of her own insecurity, tracing it back to high school, followed by examples from her university days, to show how she was always 'overly insecure' (p. 33). She recounts several occasions when she and her brother experienced the same things (e.g. cancelled dates, evaluation of their performance following an exam), saying that he 'has always been more

confident' (p. 32). On the one hand, in confessing her insecurity, Sandberg, rather courageously exposes her vulnerability - no mean feat in the corporate culture which she is part of, where any type of insecurity is outlawed. At the same time, the way Sandberg performs this confession, and the urgent impulse to quickly resolve this 'over insecurity', undermines her acknowledgment of her vulnerability, and instead promotes its repudiation.

First, the single point of reference against which Sandberg 'measures' her levels of security and self-confidence is her brother (or men, more generally). Thus, her own and other women's injuries, however painful, are validated only in relation to men's uninjured performance - in a familiar iteration of 'male as norm'. While Sandberg reiterates the need for women to overcome the fear of disapproval and urge for validation, she simultaneously recognises her own most intimate feelings of insecurity and doubt only comparatively, in relation to her brother's, not on her own terms.

Second, such momentary exposures of injury are geared toward a single goal: plastering over them and accommodating them within the existing corporate culture (and thus masculine domination). She writes: 'These experiences [of self-doubt and insecurity] taught me that I needed to make both an intellectual and an emotional adjustment.' (p. 33). In the spirit of neoliberal feminism, the 'internalised revolution' means 'finding better ways of adjusting to [...] business culture, not to try to change it' (McRobbie 2013, 134). One such adjustment is faking confidence - a tactic recommended by Both *Lean In* and *The Confidence Code*. 'Feeling confident - or pretending that you feel confident - is necessary to reach for opportunities' (Sandberg 2013, 34). Women are thus coaxed to replace the 'real thing', that is, feeling confident - claimed to be 'naturally' possessed almost exclusively by men - by the fake version of pretending to feel confident. Women, it is implied, are not likely to be able to 'effortlessly' possess the 'real thing', and so they are reassured that the 'fake' version will ultimately transform into the real one (based on the theory of self-fulfilling prophecy and other psychological models). Interestingly, this resonates with a study by Laura Thompson and Ngaire Donaghue (2014) which found that young women spoke

about confidence as a feeling – particularly feeling good about oneself or one's body – rather than about personal efficacy, empowerment or autonomy.

Third, the context in which insecurity is experienced and 'resolved' is fast capitalism. 'Given how fast the world moves today', Sandberg (2013, 35) explains, 'grabbing opportunities is more important than ever'. Thus, there is no time to dwell on properly diagnosing the underlying conditions of the injury called 'women's lack of confidence', let alone letting them heal. A cynic might note that this demand for a woman's ultra-speedy recovery from her wounds is starkly contrasted by the insistence in corporate and political discourse that when it comes to gender diversity in the workplace, change is slow, and that 'patience' has to be exercised: gender diversity (let alone equality) takes time.<sup>16</sup>

Kay and Shipman devote a great deal of their book to discussing what they call women's 'self-inflicted confidence wounds' (p. 101). These are 'unhelpful traits' and 'habits' that women 'tend to bring into the workforce' (p. 101) (implying that they should leave them in their private sphere) that 'kill confidence', for example, women's need to please and be liked, their 'horror of being criticized' (p. 103), excessive rumination and self-recrimination. Rather than misguidedly 'shrug[ging] our shoulders' and blaming 'our genetics, our schooling, our upbringing, our society, our looks' (ibid.), the authors imply that women should blame themselves, because 'we are getting in our own way, too. There are things we do to ourselves, as adults' (ibid.). The authors (somewhat reluctantly) admit that these 'things' were 'perhaps inculcated' (ibid), yet insist that it is within women's capacity, and theirs alone, to 'control, and therefore *diminish*' them (p. 108, italics added). Thus, injury has to be 'diminished'; anxieties have to be 'sloughed off' (p. xvi), 'nagging feelings' have to be 'erased' (p. xvii). The injunction is to erase and deny injury; it is a personal, private matter that can and should be overcome through self-control, self-adjustment and self-improvement.

Towards the end of *The Confidence Code*, Kay and Shipman (2014, 95), in a seemingly contradictory manner, recognise the value of expressing vulnerability – that which is the 'enemy' of confidence. Yet that value is purely instrumental;



'displaying vulnerability and questioning our decisions' (ibid.), they suggest, can be women's special 'breed' (or brand) of confidence. Moreover, they are quick to remind their women readers, that were they to choose this more 'radical' branch of confidence which includes the expression of vulnerability, they must not forget that they will be judged by men: 'We need to be clear here because more than a few people, notably our husbands, said *hey* – how can it suddenly make sense to show a weakness?' (p. 196).

Thus, it is men, not women to whom confidence has ultimately to 'make sense', and by whom it has to be approved. Women have to carefully craft and display confidence that subscribes to 'highly normative and ultimately pleasing femininity where any aggression is entirely inner-directed' (McRobbie 2015, 17). In this context, although many have welcomed men's enlistment in the confidence movement for women – e.g. in the recent *Lean In Together* campaign with the U.S. National Basketball Association that encourages men to stand alongside women to promote gender equality ([leanin.org/together](http://leanin.org/together)), or in the UN's HeFor She 'solidarity movement for gender equality' ([www.heforshe.org](http://www.heforshe.org)) – such campaigns may function to restrain potential anger and diffuse female complaint, without the demand of men to change. Tellingly, one of the 'quick fixes' Kay and Shipman list for increasing women's self-assurance is being grateful: 'new research shows that gratitude is one of the keys to happiness and an optimistic mind-set [...] Believe and be grateful for the kind words said about you' (p. 163). Materialising this, the app Happier exhorts women to do precisely that by keeping a 'gratitude journal' to 'review your lowest ebb and remind you of all the good, albeit small, moments of your daily life'.<sup>17</sup> Thus, filling the 'shortage of confidence' means erasing not just self-doubt, self-criticism and self-questioning, but erasing doubt, critique and anger altogether. Injury is repudiated, and the terms of submission to masculine domination are accepted and re-secured.

Paradoxically, in the 'cult of heroes' (Chaumont 2000), a culture where people increasingly are claiming for injury, competing over the status of an injured 'survivor' as a badge of courage, a vehicle for social mobility, recognition, and compensation (Chaumont 2000; Orgad 2006; Garcia-Favaro & Gill, in press),

women are told to survive the 'jungle gym' (Sandberg's metaphor) by silently and speedily treating their own injuries, being their own 'mittens', and playing the role of the 'imaginary healed' which, crucially involves refraining from challenging any of the institutional, societal and political structures that inflict those injuries on them.

Body confidence, too, it would seem, relies upon making visible and intelligible some of the pain associated with feeling fat or ugly or otherwise full of self-hatred, only to minimise this and displace or replace it with the Panglossian contention that 'you are more beautiful than you think'. LYB discourses are affectively powerful precisely because they offer some recognition of the cultural injuries inflicted on women in a patriarchal society, but – just as in *Lean In* and *The Confidence Code* – this must be only momentarily acknowledged before it is overcome, triumphed over. Because LYB discourses circulate (amongst other ways) in videos featuring 'ordinary women' these glimpses of suffering are impossible to conceal. Indeed, part of the power is in revealing the pain, the shame, the insecurity – before it can be decisively 'dealt with' by confidence technologies. This is vividly illustrated in Dove's 'Real Beauty Sketches' in which a forensic artist draws two pictures of the same woman –one based on her self-description, the other (consistently more attractive) based upon what another woman says of her. As viewers we see the images juxtaposed and hear the tearful catches in the throats of the women as they attempt to describe their reactions to the dual portraits - 'this one looks... happier, more open...' – and in doing so momentarily make available to us as viewers a glimpse of the pain they have endured as a result of not identifying themselves as this more appealing subject, of living with a more diminished sense of themselves.

But in allowing itself to be witnessed this injury must rapidly be displaced or overcome, with the certainty or conviction that comes from knowing that 'the power is in your hands' or 'beauty is a state of mind'. For acknowledgments of injury or insecurity are signs of weakness and profoundly unappealing in women. If 'confidence is the new sexy', as beauty entrepreneur Bobbi Brown puts it, then insecurity is the new ugly; it is toxic, it is that which must be repudiated. This injunction is repeated across a multiplicity of sites of LYB discourse: in self-help,

in sex and relationships advice, in advertising: the expression of insecurity is corrosive and unattractive. Even 'fake' confidence (as in the gender and workplace realm) is better than no confidence and across the corpus of body love discourses a strong 'fake it till you make it' discourse is in evidence, encapsulating the way in which women are called upon to brand themselves (as confident) within the vocabulary of the market and by employing the strategies of (self) marketing (Banet-Weiser, 2014).

## **Conclusion**

In the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century confidence as an idea – indeed an imperative – has become extremely 'contagious' (Sperber, 1996) and 'sticky' (Ahmed, 2004) in western culture. It has 'caught on' across multiple domains and practices, materialising in quite different realms – e.g. finance, health and sex advice – yet inflected by remarkably similar themes. Whilst identifying it as a distinctive expression of neoliberal and postfeminist culture, our objective has been to examine what confidence does – what work it performs ideologically – in order to contribute to understanding the nature of power in neoliberal society. Starting from two specific (and contrasting) loci of the confidence cult(ure) – popular discussions about gender and work, and consumer body culture – we have looked in detail at incitements to confidence – their nature and affective texture, their elisions and aporias, and what they do performatively in contemporary culture.

Confidence, we have argued, is a new technology of self, and one that is profoundly gendered. Exhortations to self-confidence are directed almost exclusively towards women. But confidence cult(ure) is not only gendered; it is also putatively feminist – and this makes it a particularly significant object of analysis. Outside a few critical spaces of feminist academia, the promotion of female self-confidence has taken on the status of an obvious 'good' – for who could be against attempts to help girls feel better about their bodies or self-help strategies that support women to feel confident in the workplace? Confidence is what discourse analysts colloquially call a 'cheer word' – like 'community' or 'support' it comes 'ready-evaluated', laden with positive associations, linked into

a chain of warm, fuzzy meanings which make critique difficult. Yet it is important to think critically about the cult(ure) of confidence and we have attempted to begin this work – to examine the way that the current intense focus upon it systematically turns away from the culture that produces self-doubt, lack of confidence, shame and insecurity.

Drawing together the threads of our argument, we would like to highlight some critical points about the cult(ure) of confidence, which we see as integral to this technology of self, yet as also having a broader significance in the larger process described by Nancy Fraser (2009) as the re-signification of feminist ideals. First we want to point to the individualising thrust of confidence as a technology of self. As we have shown in our two case studies this is a technology of self which works by locating the blame for gender inequality in women's psyches and bodies ('you do it to yourself'; 'our own obsession with our physical appearance drains our confidence'; 'we are our own worst enemies').

Secondly, we are deeply disturbed by the way in which the cult(ure) of confidence exculpates social, political, economic, cultural and corporate institutions for their role in maintaining and reproducing inequality and injustice; in fact, it lets patriarchal culture entirely off the hook – apportioning blame to women. In relation to body confidence campaigns, for example, women's sense of themselves as in some way hurt(ing), in pain or damaged by a culture that relentlessly surveills, judges and attacks women for bodily misdemeanours as trivial as a pimple or an undepilated hair, is made to seem all in their heads, a product of distorted perception, not an authentic felt response to a real injustice. Similarly, in gender and workplace discussions, for example, men's participation in and reinforcement of a punitive work culture towards women is absent. As Angela McRobbie (2015, 17) notes, any angry and outright critique of male domination is taboo. Rather, the sources and solution for gender inequality in the workplace are to be found in women themselves, and almost always in them alone.

Furthermore, in inculcating a self-regulating spirit, directed at identifying the problems and solutions within her own self and psyche, the confidence cult(ure)

excoriates dependence, mutual trust and commitment. Drawing on Richard Sennett's (1998) insightful (though gender-blind) account of the consequences of work in the new capitalism, we argue that exhortations to confidence, self-belief and empowerment of the kind we have discussed, repudiate dependence as shameful. This apparently feminist technology of confidence, which incites women to constantly regulate and work on their bodies and selves in (the cruelly optimistic)<sup>18</sup> pursuit of happiness and success, promotes shame about dependence, failure and vulnerability -- the lifeblood of neoliberalism.

Thirdly, confidence culture works by disavowing or repudiating women's suffering – or by acknowledging it momentarily only to show how it has been or could and should be 'overcome' with the right techniques or self-regulation practices or a suitably 'adjusted' (mind)set. (DO adjust your set!). This is an act of symbolic violence which systematically denies and discredits women's experiences. It works by calling on women to be silent – SHHHH – apparently not even noticing the irony of this for a feminist campaign or intervention.

Interestingly, the address of confidence messages and confidence techniques crosses not only generations and domains of social life, but also classes and racialised identities. While scholars have highlighted the focus in current culture on the bodies of middle-class white girls as being in need of therapeutic and aesthetic interventions (e.g. Banet-Weiser 2015) and rightly critiqued the exclusive address of *Lean In* to white upper middle-class women (Rottenberg 2014), our analysis suggests that the 'target users' of the confidence culture – in both LYB discourses and discussions of women in the workplace – are not exclusively white middle/upper class girls and women. This point is further elaborated by Ana Sofia Elias's (2015) brilliant analysis of body love campaigns targeted at black and mixed-heritage women, such as Dove's 2015 Love Your Curls campaign.

Finally, confidence as a technology of the self is a response to and a product of earlier feminist critiques of neoliberal culture, specifically the beauty industry and the realm of 'the perfect' (McRobbie 2015). It recuperates critiques directed against the injurious culture of body perfection and women's perfectionism, to

legitimate an emergent new form of neoliberal feminism, endowing it with a higher moral legitimacy. It is (ostensibly) about self-love, not self-hate, self-assurance not insecurity, building the self, not self-harm, positive image not self-criticism etc. Thus, the confidence cult(ure) enables capitalism to remake itself in a new 'spirit' (Boltanski and Chiapello 2007) that overcomes the faults of its former (highly critiqued) version. This new spirit, embodied by the confidence cult(ure), incites women to makeover their psychic lives, and in doing so makes over feminism itself -- into a neoliberal feminism that is complicit with rather than critical of patriarchal capitalism.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Except Leadership Pour Elle, the other apps are not explicitly designed exclusively for women's use, however their marketing is clearly gendered, as demonstrated, for example, by their review in the online international women's magazine *Business Feminin*, see: <http://businessofeminin.com/en/5-apps-to-boost-self-esteem/>

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- <sup>2</sup> Source: [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/tamsenfadal/starting-over-and-radiati\\_b\\_6090814.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/tamsenfadal/starting-over-and-radiati_b_6090814.html))
- <sup>3</sup> Source: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-2079104/Life-begins-40-confidence-peaks-52-years-months-British-women.html>
- <sup>4</sup> The sociability of self-improvement is worth noting; the extent to which this self-work is figured- as Foucault put it – not just alone but also with others. Thanks to Rachel O’Neill for this point.
- <sup>5</sup> See, e.g. the variety of activities and educational programmes promoted by Lean In: [www.leanin.org](http://www.leanin.org)
- <sup>6</sup> See: <http://womensleadership.kpmg.us/content/dam/kpmg-womens-leadership-golf/womensleadershippressrelease/FINAL%20Womens%20Leadership%20v19.pdf>
- <sup>7</sup> See: <https://bcwnetwork.com/>
- <sup>8</sup> The online sphere contains numerous accounts from women of the influence these books have had on their lives. See e.g., ‘The book that changed my life: Lean In’, <http://mackenziecharlotte.blogspot.co.uk/2013/04/the-book-that-changed-my-life-lean-in.html>; ‘There’s a Time to Lean in, and a Time to Lean Out’, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/susan-rosenzweig/theres-a-time-to-lean-in-and-a-time-to-lean-out\\_b\\_4932013.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/susan-rosenzweig/theres-a-time-to-lean-in-and-a-time-to-lean-out_b_4932013.html); The Confidence Code Testimonials, <http://theconfidencecode.com/testimonials/>; ‘5 Reasons You Need to Read “The Confidence Code” by Katty Kay and Claire Shipman’, [www.kbkwealthconnection.com/book-reviews-money/5-reasons-read-confidence-code-katty-kay-claire-shipman/#sthash.yCr3lVLw.dpuf](http://www.kbkwealthconnection.com/book-reviews-money/5-reasons-read-confidence-code-katty-kay-claire-shipman/#sthash.yCr3lVLw.dpuf)
- <sup>9</sup> <http://selfesteem.dove.co.uk>
- <sup>10</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/apr/30/gender-discrimination-self-confidence-gap#img-1>
- <sup>11</sup> <http://businessofeminin.com/en/5-apps-to-boost-self-esteem/>
- <sup>12</sup> The language comes from Cognitive Behavioural Therapy and Neurolinguistic Programming – the ‘quick’, ‘efficient’ and ‘cost-effective’ psychological interventions of our time
- <sup>13</sup> <http://theconfidencecode.com/confidence-quiz/>
- <sup>14</sup> Unlike *Lean In*, which was overwhelmingly well received, *The Confidence Code* was criticised by several reviewers in the press for overlooking structural inequality, e.g. Valenti (23 April 2014) in the *Guardian*, and Duberman in the *Huffington Post* [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/amanda-duberman/the-confidence-gap\\_b\\_5160190.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/amanda-duberman/the-confidence-gap_b_5160190.html)
- <sup>15</sup> The authors borrow the metaphor from Brown University Professor Barbara Tannenbaum, whom they interviewed.
- <sup>16</sup> For example, Chairman and CEO of a medical equipment company cited in a McKinsey’s report on female leadership in the workplace: ‘it takes time and commitment to get it right’ (Women Matter 2); Lord Sumption’s comment on the issue of judicial diversity: ‘We are simply deluding ourselves if we try to pretend that selection from that pool on merit alone will produce a fully diverse, or even a reasonably diverse judiciary quickly ... In this area, as in life generally, we just cannot have everything that we want. We have to make choices and to accept impure compromises. We may even have to learn patience’ (*Guardian*, 20 November, 2012).
- <sup>17</sup> <http://businessofeminin.com/en/5-apps-to-boost-self-esteem/>
- <sup>18</sup> Berlant, 2011