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The cult of confidence: Gender, psychology and contemporary capitalism

To be self-confident is the imperative of our time for women. Beauty brands hire ‘confidence ambassadors’, women’s magazines promote a ‘confidence revolution’ (Cosmo) and dedicate special issues to the topic (Elle), the fashion industry tells women ‘confidence is the best thing you can wear’, and even the Girlguiding organization, better known for its promotion of practical skills, now offers an achievement badge in ‘body confidence’.

Whatever a woman’s or a girl’s problems, the solution in contemporary culture seems to be promoting self-confidence: inequality in the workplace? - women need to ‘lean in’ and become more confident (check); eating disorders and poor body image? - girls’ confidence programs are the solution (check); parenting problems? – let’s make mums feel more confident so they can raise confident kids (check); sex life in a rut? – well, confidence is ‘the new sexy!’ (check).

Psychological expertise about gender and self-esteem underpins this trend. But in this presentation I argue that confidence has become a ‘cheer word’ that has taken on the status of an unchallenged social good – placed beyond debate. Yet, as I will show, the rise and rise of the ‘cult of confidence’ is intimately connected to neoliberalism, and its attempts to reconfigure subjectivity along punitive and individualistic lines. Taking examples from my current research on “love your body” discourses and workplace equality and diversity, I look critically at contemporary celebrations of self-confidence, linking them to a resurgence of interest in ‘character’ and a proliferation of neoliberal ‘feeling rules’ in which insecurity, vulnerability and anger become taboo.

Biography

Rosalind Gill is Professor of Social and Cultural Analysis at City, University of London. She did her first degree in Psychology and Sociology at Exeter University, and was awarded her Ph.D. in Social Psychology in 1991, under the supervision of Professor Michael Billig. Prior to joining City, she worked at Goldsmiths, Kings College London, and spent 10 years at the LSE's Gender Institute. An outstanding scholar, Rosalind is also an enthusiastic teacher and communicator, and a passionate supporter of early career academics. She has supervised or examined more than 100 PhD students.

Rosalind’s work is animated by questions about power, ideology and subjectivity, and focuses on the persistence of inequalities, and the dynamics of discrimination. It has spanned a range of topics, with major contributions to understandings of the experiences of employment in the cultural and creative industries, the changing nature of gender in a postfeminist context, and transformations of intimacy. Projects have included masculinity and body image, the ‘sexualization’ of culture, and young people’s use of mobile technologies.

Professor Gill is author or editor of nine books and numerous other publications. Her work has been translated into Chinese, Portuguese, Spanish and several other languages. Her book *Gender and the Media* won the IGALA book prize in 2010, and she is the recipient of many other awards and honours. Her most recent books are *Mediated Intimacy: Sex Advice in Media Culture* (with Meg-John Barker and Laura Harvey) and *Aesthetic Labour: Beauty Politics in Neoliberalism* (edited with Ana Elias and Christina Scharff) – both published this year.