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## **‘Confidence is the new sexy’: Remaking intimate relationality in contemporary culture**

Rosalind Gill

### **Introduction**

This chapter is concerned with the reshaping of intimate relationality in contemporary culture. Its focus is primarily upon Anglo-American contexts, but its arguments may have a wider transnational significance. The argument is located within sociological debates about the transformation of intimacy (Giddens, 1993), and in particular how constructions, understandings and practices of intimacy are changing in societies marked by neoliberalism, postfeminism and emotional capitalism (Illouz, 1997). The chapter aims to examine how intimate relationality is being ‘made over’ in these contexts through new incitements to ‘love yourself’ or ‘love your body’, directed almost exclusively at women. It seeks to argue that a ‘confidence imperative’ has reached an ascendancy in contemporary popular culture and to examine what potentialities this might open up or close down politically for those interested in equality, diversity and social justice.<sup>1</sup>

The chapter has two foci in its interrogation of the ‘cult(ure) of confidence’ (Gill & Orgad, 2015). First it looks at the proliferation of incitements to ‘love your body’, ‘feel good at any size’, ‘be comfortable in your own skin’, etc. It draws on examples from advertising and magazines addressed to young women to argue that these injunctions are part of a technology of self-seeking to remake female subjects’ intimate relationship to the self. This is framed through a telos of self-love, but not figured in terms of narcissism but rather as a condition of proper neoliberal subjecthood. Secondly it examines how the confidence imperative is reshaping relationship advice such that female self-belief becomes posited as attractive, sexy and essential to ‘good’ heterosexual relationships. Conversely it shows how low self-esteem and ‘insecurity’ are consistently framed as abject personal qualities that are toxic to relationships. The chapter highlights the gendered asymmetry of these shifts and explores their implications.

After a brief introduction, the chapter is divided into four main sections. First it offers an intellectual framing for the project, situating it in contemporary discussions of transformations of intimacy, as well as introducing the key notions of ‘mediated intimacy’ and ‘intimate entrepreneurship’. Second it introduces the ‘cult(ure) of confidence’ showing its intensity and its extensiveness across the social formation in sites as varied as health education, work, finance, and development as well as in body discourse and sex and relationship advice. It sets out the case for understanding the turn to confidence as a technology of self, drawing on Foucault’s later work, and situating the shift in relation to postfeminism and neoliberalism. The third section of the chapter turns to ‘Love your body’ (LYB) discourses and the way in which exhortations to self-love might be thought of as remaking women’s intimate relationship to the self. Contemporary advertising and magazine discourses are critically examined, interrogating the key features of this shift. In turn the fourth part of the chapter explores how confidence is figured in popular sex and relationship advice to women. Whilst recent accounts have (rightly) emphasised the

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<sup>1</sup> The chapter is situated within feminist and queer traditions, but is focussed upon sex and relationship advice targeted at young women seeking heterosexual partnerships.

ways in which intimacy is constructed as gendered labour for women involving 'beauty work' and the acquisition of a set of skills and practices that relate to 'sexual entrepreneurship', here I aim to show that this labour also involves a makeover of subjectivity, a psychic transformation around becoming confident. The paper ends with a concluding discussion that pulls out some of the implications for contemporary understandings of intimacy.

### **Transformations of intimacy?**

For the last two decades the topic of 'intimacy' has been a central concern within sociology. For many, the notion is appealing for its promise to 'liberate' intimate relationships from their 'domestication' within the heterosexual nuclear family, and for its openness to broader constituencies, different kinds of affective ties, and more diverse forms of sexual practice. Feminist research, LGBT and queer activism and scholarship, and sociological writing about late capitalism/ late modernity have coalesced around an interest in the ways in which intimate relationships might be said to be changing – with new household forms such as 'living apart together', a new embrace of civil partnerships and gay marriage, and the rise of notions such as 'friends as the new family'. Some sociological writing has been concerned with charting the new and 'the emergent' of intimate lives, with an emphasis upon dynamism and transformation, as if a bright, shiny (and implicitly egalitarian) new form of 'Intimacy 3.0' were already in play or just around the corner. Anthony Giddens is but the most prominent in advancing such an argument, suggesting that couple relationships have become 'democratised', severed from ascribed positions and social laws and more likely to be the outcome of individual and personal understandings, negotiations and trust (Giddens, 1993; see also Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995). He develops the idea of the 'pure relationship', arguing that in contemporary reflexive modernity we have 'a democracy of the emotions in everyday life' (2003). Writing about the rise of 'porno chic', Brian McNair (2002) extends this idea to sexuality, claiming that the contemporary 'sexualization' of culture is leading to a 'democratization of desire'. Like other feminist writers (Jamieson, 1997; Smart, 2007) I would urge caution in relation to this preoccupation with positive change, premised, as it sometimes seems to be, upon a corresponding inattention to things that stubbornly persist – 'old' (yet enduring) problems like violence against women and a visual culture marked by intense misogyny. However, it is important for the way that it has opened up space for a diversity of intimate forms to be taken seriously, and certainly contributed to an ongoing interest in intimacy in public life. Another key notion for the argument advanced here is that of 'mediated intimacy'. Writing in 1995, Ken Plummer argued that 'sexual stories have become part of the "mediation" of society'. Narratives of intimacy, he contended, have been 'engulfed', as much else, 'in the permeation of symbolic forms through media technologies' (1995:23). Somewhat surprisingly – particularly given the importance of Plummer's book – this claim has provoked relatively little interest or discussion, especially when compared to the outpouring of writing on 'transformations of intimacy'. Yet 20 years on, the time to develop an understanding of mediated intimacy has never seemed more urgent.

There are a number of reasons for this. First, representations of intimacies clearly seem to dominate mass media – from stories about politicians' affairs, celebrity pregnancies and experiences of heartbreak, to reality TV shows that are preoccupied with 'making over' intimate life. Secondly, and perhaps more significantly, an

intimate gaze, closely linked to the confessional and personalising tendencies of the media, has come to constitute a kind of grammar of mediation, such that all mediated life becomes refracted through a lens of intimacy. This has been theorised in terms of 'first person media' (Dovey, 2000), 'personalization' (Fairclough, 1995) and is part of a shift in which even distant Others may be represented through technologies of intimacy (Orgad, 2012). As I write, for example, British news media are getting 'up close and personal' with migrants in 'The Jungle' in Calais, who are nightly risking their lives attempting to make the perilous journey to the UK through the Channel tunnel, clinging onto trains. The stories told by newscasters are intense, confessional and intimate- framed repeatedly in terms of personal tragedy and the struggle for a better life rather than structural geopolitical inequality or the outcome of war. Close ups dominate and journalists favour 'raw' expression of emotion – voices that crack, bodies that shake, eyes that cry. Indeed, one of Liesbet van Zoonen's newsroom interviewees commented that a news broadcast without tears was hardly a newscast.

Thirdly, the technologies of 'new media', particularly Web 2.0 and peer to peer social media have come to the fore as a means of building and sustaining intimate relationships. In affluent societies many people now increasingly live out their relationships through technologies of mediation. As we have argued elsewhere (Tyler & Gill, 2013) whilst social media such as Facebook and Twitter facilitate state and corporate forms of surveillance, by for example, encouraging people to reveal their personal and political values, beliefs and interests, and expose their friendship networks, they also enable forms of sousveillance as people amass online to discuss and interrogate repressive state and corporate governance from below (Joichi Ito et al 2004).

Finally – and perhaps most importantly in relation to my argument here – 'mediated intimacy' as a concept offers a recognition of the sheer power and pervasiveness of media in constructing our understandings of intimate relationality; it is, quite simply, no exaggeration to say that for most people living in developed societies in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, media texts (from romantic comedies to pornography to magazine problem pages) constitute our primary source of information about what intimacy looks and feels like. Eva Illouz (2014) articulates a similar perspective when she seeks to understand the extraordinary popularity and apparent resonance of a text like "Fifty Shades of Grey", claiming it 'encodes the aporias of heterosexual relationships, offers a fantasy for overcoming these aporias, and functions as a self-help manual' (2014: 30, my emphasis).

In this complicated context in which intimacy may simultaneously mark out a domain of relationships, or a topic of media culture, or may also constitute a lens or grammar through which the world is refracted, the final key term I wish to introduce is that of 'intimate entrepreneurship'. The notion speaks to a key feature of neoliberal societies – namely the way in which selfhood is being reconstituted as an individual project requiring ongoing work, maintenance and upgrade. Analysts have pointed to a number of aspects of this. At one level, we might highlight the simple but crucial point that intimate relations are increasingly framed through a language of work. This goes beyond the banal truism that 'successful relationships require work' to signal a more profound change: the way that an emphasis on a 'work ethic' (Rogers, 2005) in intimate life now sits alongside other discursive constructions which locate intimacy in romantic love or sexual desire. Moreover, the work required is of a distinctive type. It is, as Melissa Tyler (2004) has argued, the work of

(self)management, and is increasingly supported by a new strata of experts. Tyler contends that relationship experts engage in managerial discourses to incite intimate subjectivity that requires constant skills acquisition, appraisal, evaluation and development. As we have argued elsewhere (Harvey & Gill, 2011) such 'sexpertise' increasingly involves celebrity columnists and presenters who do not have formal training or experience, but rather have an interest in promoting their own books or products (Boynton, 2009). This exemplifies the growing marketisation of sex and relationship advice, and highlights a threefold focus on entrepreneurialism within it. First, the enterprising self-promotion of a proliferation of 'relationship gurus' and 'lifestyle coaches'. Second, the way that advice and guidance is increasingly tied up with the purchase of commodities (e.g. self-help books or apps, branded specialist condoms, sex toys, etc). Thirdly – my primary interest here – the framing of intimate relationships through discourses of entrepreneurship, with an emphasis upon strategy, planning and work. I will return to this issue later to develop my argument that this work is increasingly framed as psychic labour organised around the (self) production of confidence and esteem.

### **The confidence cult(ure)**

The title of this paper comes from a current advert for the make up brand owned by beauty entrepreneur Bobbi Brown. Adverts run showing a beautiful, well made up woman, accompanied by the byline 'confidence is the new sexy'. However such a sentiment is not an isolated or idiosyncratic one; exhortations to female self-confidence are everywhere: in advertising, in women's magazines such as Cosmo or Elle (which launched a 'confidence issue' in 2015) and across media culture. To be self-confident is the new imperative of our time. Analyses and programs to end workplace inequality highlight the significance of inculcating confidence; health education, sexual health and anti-violence initiatives invoke the transformative power of female self-confidence; and even the Girlguiding Association, better known for its emphasis upon the acquisition of practical skills, now offers an achievement badge in 'body confidence'.

The turn to confidence can be seen clearly in bestselling books such as *Lean In* (Sandberg, 2013) and *The Confidence Code* (Kay & Shipman, 2014), in a proliferation 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*), and in a multiplication of hashtags that declare #ThisGirlCan; #FreeBeingMe; #SpeakBeautiful; #embraceyourself; #confidentwomen, etc. Whatever the problem, confidence seems to be the answer. The culture of confidence is part of the wider self-help movement, the 'happiness industry' (Davies, 2015) and the positive 'psy complex'. It bears a strong resemblance to the 'state of esteem' (Cruikshank, 1993), a new form of governance that calls on subjects to 'act upon ourselves' (103). However, what makes it distinctive is its gendered address to women and its apparent embrace of feminist language and goals.

The new cultural prominence accorded to confidence could be considered in various ways: a turn to confidence, a confidence movement, confidence 'chic' (Garcia Favaro 2016). Here I 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 Foucault (1988) '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, my emphasis), but are culturally and historically specific.

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.

This technology of self is intimately entangled with the growing hold of neoliberal ideas. In recent years writers in cultural studies, sociology and psychosocial studies have been keen to elaborate an understanding of what we might call 'neoliberalism in everyday life' – moving beyond the well-established 'macro' accounts which understand it as a political and economic rationality characterized by privatization, deregulation and a rolling back and withdrawal of the state. These accounts stress the ways that neoliberalism is 'reconfiguring relationships between governing and governed, power and knowledge, sovereignty and territoriality' (Ong, 2006:3). Its reach as a mode of governmentality is extending ever wider and deeper, calling into being actors who are rational, calculating and self-motivating and who are exhorted to make sense of their lives in terms of discourses of freedom, autonomy and choice – no matter how constrained their lives may actually be (Rose, 1999). A new interest in 'the psychic life of power' (Butler, 1997) inflects some contemporary writing, opening up to scrutiny the way in which the market ethic of neoliberalism also necessarily relies upon the remaking of subjectivity (see Gill, Kurz & Donaghue 2014; Scharff, 2015\*; Gill, 2016).

The interest here in confidence exemplifies these contemporary concerns about the 'psychic life of neoliberalism'. There is already a strong body of research arguing that there is a profound connection between neoliberalism and a postfeminist sensibility – organised as both are around notions of choice, agency, self-empowerment, personal freedom and entrepreneurialism (McRobbie, 2009; Gill & Scharff, 2011; Tasker & Negra, 2007). But confidence, it would seem, marks out a new and distinctive point of articulation and suture between the two. It is first and foremost a gendered technology of self, directed almost exclusively to women. It is also an individualising technology inculcating a self-regulating spirit directed at locating the source of problems within women's own psyches and the solutions as lying within women themselves. 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. The confidence cult 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. In the remainder of this paper I turn to two examples to show how a neoliberal confidence culture is 'making over' women's intimate relationship to themselves and others.

### **The confidence culture and 'body love'**

One 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. Love your body discourses are positive, affirmative, seemingly feminist-inflected media messages, targeted exclusively at girls and women, that exhort women to believe they are beautiful, to 'remember' that they are 'incredible' and that tell girls and women that they have 'the power' to 'redefine' the 'rules of beauty'.

LYB discourses have emerged over the last decade as a result of multiple factors, including the growth of social media, and attempts by more established media to respond to feminist critiques of what have been characterised as both 'unrealistic' and 'harmful' body image ideals. They are part of moves towards what has been understood as 'emotional capitalism' (Illouz, 2007) and 'cool capitalism' (McGuigan, 2012). LYB discourses are important and powerful because of the way they appear to interrupt the almost entirely normalised hostile judgment and surveillance of women's bodies in contemporary media culture.

They have rapidly become a mainstream feature of advertising addressed to women. At their heart is the production of affect – usually a positive 'feel good' vibe. An early example or forerunner of LYB came in a series of Nike adverts placed in women's magazines in the 1990s which suggested 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'. Some years later Dove's famous advertising campaign announced that 'beauty comes in many shapes and ages and sizes' and used putatively 'ordinary' women in its poster and magazine campaigns. As one slogan put it: 'firming the thighs of a size 8 model wouldn't be much of a challenge'. Other ads in the series invited us to choose between various preferred and dispreferred check-box options, for example 'fat' or 'fit', and 'wrinkled' or 'wonderful'. Accompanying text exhorted viewers to join the 'campaign for real beauty' set up by Dove. Today the company/campaign has produced a steady stream of virally circulated messages and promotional videos, uploaded to YouTube, which target 'unhealthy' body image messages and call on women to believe in their own beauty. The international audience for these adverts averages around 50 million views per film.

Incitements to body love are not limited to advertising, however, but are ubiquitous across media addressing women. As Laura Garcia-Favaro (2016) has documented from her extensive research within the industry, magazines have self-consciously shifted the way they interpellate women with sections such as 'love your body', 'love your self' and 'love your man'. Such a focus can also be seen in some fashion makeover TV shows, in which the transformation is less about 'improving' appearance than about moving from body insecurity to body confidence. The same

themes are in music videos such as “I’m Enough”, and also materialise in products such as IKEA’s ‘motivational mirror’ Moreover, via corporate-charitable campaigns such as Dove’s Self Esteem Project these messages have been disseminated into self-help genres, schooling, health interventions, and training programmes designed to help girls and women establish self-belief and confidence (see Banet-Weiser, 2015). For some, these discourses represent a step forward in media depictions of women, and a sign of the significant influence of feminism on a beauty or body culture that was formerly toxic to women. Others have criticised LYB for the ‘fakeness’ of its apparently natural, unfiltered visual regime (Murphy & Jackson, 2011; Murray, 2012); its pseudo diversity (Rodrigues, 2014); and also for the role played in LYB by precisely those corporate actors invested in maintaining female body dissatisfaction (see Gill & Elias, 2014 for a longer discussion). Here, however, I am less interested in weighing in ‘for’ or ‘against’ body love discourses in an straightforward way than in reading LYB as a discursive shift that is a central motif of the confidence cult(ure), and examining what it does performatively or ideologically. I will argue that this discourse is premised upon the idea of women having a broken relationship to their own selves, and seeking to makeover this relationship. It enacts this by blaming women for their own lack of confidence and exculpating wider cultural forces. It reinforces the cultural intelligibility of women’s bodies as ‘difficult to love’, whilst suggesting that ‘body confidence’ is a simple, unproblematic project. Finally, it does not deliver on the promised ‘feel good’ – the fantasy of feeling comfortable in one’s skin – but rather it represents an intensification of the pressures on women in relation to their bodies, and their extensification from body work to psychic labour. A common theme in LYB communications is of a relationship to the self that has gone bad or been broken. Another early advert by Nike showed a cute white toddler with a pink ribbon in her hair. The slogan asked: ‘when was the last time you felt comfortable with your body?’ The implied answer is that it was sometime between your first and second birthday- after which being a female embodied subject became difficult and painful. Such motifs are prevalent in LYB discourses, harking ‘back’ to a time of unproblematic comfort in your skin and forward to a time – contingent upon buying the products advertised or following the advice of the app or magazine – in which this sense of ease and self-confidence could be regained. Feminist scholars have of course written extensively about this same issue – with major bodies of scholarship critiquing the beauty industry, and interrogating the common experience of women’s embodied unhappiness – so extensive, some have argued, that ‘body dysmorphia’ should not be regarded as an individual psychological problem, but a cultural phenomenon, a direct result of patriarchal capitalism (Jeffreys), a ‘postfeminist disorder’ (McRobbie, 2009).

How, then, does LYB discourse engage with the causes of this lack of confidence, this putatively broken relationship to the self? Looking across the range of LYB discourses circulating in contemporary culture it is possible to find three answers to the question of who or what is responsible: we can give them the shorthand ‘mothers, media and me’. In Dove’s 2013 film “Selfie”, girls’ negative feelings about their bodies are attributed to their mothers, whilst the film stops just short of all-out mother-blaming by showing that mothers too are suffering from similar afflictions. Other communications indict vague targets such as ‘TV’ or ‘magazines’ in a general, almost tokenistic swipe at ‘media’. By far the most significant culprits, however, are women themselves. Women are repeatedly cast as ‘their own worst enemies’, as solely responsible for their own low self-confidence. An example can be found in a

film made in 2013 to market the diet 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.

What is striking in this – and in so many other iterations of body love discourse – is the clear attempt to blame women for their own unhappiness and lack of self-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’ it could be argued – 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. The diagnosis of the problem is resolutely located in women themselves and the gaze is turned away from a wider injurious culture, letting it off the hook.

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. This is – naturally – alternately a terrible shock/ an epiphany to those taking part, who explain 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). The reactions underscore the message that a lack of (body) confidence is all in women's 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.

What's more, the film seems to imply, women are clearly easily suggestible (rather than strong-minded) if a patch containing nothing can so dramatically change the way they feel about themselves. This links to another feature of LYB discourse, namely its assertion that negative feelings about ones body or self are relatively easy to expunge, and to be replaced by the desired self-confidence. 'You are more beautiful than you think' says the concluding message of Dove's Beauty Sketches, 'the power is in your hands' asserts another. All that is needed is an 'honest selfie', (Dove 'Selfie') 'a pen and a piece of paper' (Operation Beautiful) or a 'camo confession' (Dermablend). Self-love in this process becomes entirely dislocated from relationality, and becomes a project that women can – and should – practice alone, employing cognitive behavioural strategies such as focussing on what they like about themselves, and practising gratitude. If all else fails, women can 'fake it 'til they make it'.

### **Confidence is the new sexy: examining sex and relationships advice**

So far I have discussed how LYB discourses centred on feeling body confident are remaking women's relationship to their selves. In this section I want to build on this by looking at another arena concerned instead with women's intimate relationships with men. As noted above in the discussion of mediated intimacy, media are the pre-eminent site of information about sex and relationships. Self-help has expanded hugely in recent years (see Barker et al in press) and there is a 'ubiquitous sex advice industry' (Wood, 2016) telling us how to have and maintain good sex and relationships. Self-help books, magazines, reality TV shows, online blogs, pornography, romantic novels and films all contribute to how people make everyday sense of sex and relationships, offering scripts about what love or desire 'should' be. Here, as above, our focus is upon media targeted at women – particularly in the self-help genre. A central theme of contemporary sex and relationship advice – as noted above – is the notion of intimate entrepreneurship. In my analysis of sex and relationship articles in the UK's bestselling Glamour magazine this was a key repertoire. Relationships were cast as work, using analogies from finance, management, science, management and even military campaigns. Whilst an assumption of 'one true love' underpinned many articles, and emphasis on being proactive and entrepreneurial in finding 'Mr Right' was key. As one article put it:

'face it: the man of your dreams is not about to appear in your living room brandishing a Tiffany box while you're watching Eastenders. 'You've got to go out and find him first – and that requires a plan'. Other articles speak of 'tactical dating', with one woman describing how she used the same skills in her job-hunting and her Internet dating, drawing up detailed candidate shortlists, treating every date like a job interview, researching the man extensively online before meeting him. Discourses of finance and consumerism are also evident, with talk of 'investments' and of 'snapping up' a man (as if he were an item for sale). The repertoire additionally builds on the idea of scientific management: women are advised to build detailed checklists of what they want in a partner, taking in every aspect from physical appearance, to occupation, to emotional characteristics. In this way a relationship becomes something to be minutely broken down into quantifiable features, whose presence or absence can be 'ticked off' in encounters with potential partners, producing what Eva Illouz (2007) has called 'cold intimacies'.

Notions of fate or chance are treated with derision. Women are constructed as active, autonomous subjects taking control of their intimate lives. This extends to sex. An article entitled 'All day foreplay for your sexiest night ever' captures the tone of many others. It starts: 'forget spontaneity – if it's passion you're after, you need to plan for it. Here, we tell you what to eat, the exercises to boost your libido, and the tricks that will guarantee sex worth waiting for'. The day of planning starts at 7 AM and proceeds with advice on taking a morning bath ('much sexier than a shower'), 'dressing to tease' ('wear something secretly sexy to work, like stockings or silk knickers – it will be a daylong reminder of what's to come'), what to have for breakfast ('eat eggs because they contain steroids substances that enhance the libido'), tidying and preparing the house or flat ('setting the scene' for later), writing your partner a 'sex letter' ('you can keep it as simple as "you've no idea what I'm going to do to you later" or be more imaginative and write down a full fantasy'). 'Then give him a long, hard kiss goodbye ...'

As I commented in an earlier discussion of this, yes, it is still only 8:30 AM and you haven't even left home yet. However the advice continues in a similar vein throughout the day, culminating in exhortation is to make sure 'you' vary your sexual positions. It suggests 'a rule': '30 thrusts in each position, then add another and another'.

Building on a growing literature about 'technologies of sexiness' – as well as emerging work about 'recreational sex/iness' (Attwood, see Kaplan this volume) Laura Harvey and I have written about how women are increasingly 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' (Harvey & Gill, 2011:56).

In the remainder of this chapter, however, I want to argue that the sex and relationship entrepreneurship clearly visible in advice targeted at women also requires women to makeover their subjectivity, to engage in psychological labour that will transform them into confident, non-repressed and adventurous subjects. These themes were evident in my study of *Glamour* magazine but have intensified since that time (2009). 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'. What unites these themes is a concern with transforming the self and making over one's interior life, in order

to become lovable. Whilst in the previous section I discussed these exhortation is as a path to self-love, a way to repair a broken relationship to the self, here they are figured as essential to a heterosexual partnership. Confidence is important 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. In an article cited by Laura Garcia-Favaro (2016) women are told that if they want to attract love 'what really works is looking at the inner you and doing the inner work necessary'. To become lovable one needs a 'mental makeover', Cosmo tells us.

Building on the arguments made already in relation to body love/self-love, I want to make three critical points about the current proliferation of discourses suggesting that working on the inner self and making over one's psychic life is essential to finding and sustaining an intimate heterosexual relationship. The first point to note is that these new – psychologized, therapeutic – injunctions to work on and transform once in a life sits alongside, rather than displacing, other key sex and relationship discourses (Gill 2009). These include the requirements to engage in intimate entrepreneurship – setting goals, planning, assessing, calculating and evaluating dating strategies; sex as 'work ethic' (Rogers, 2005) – involving skills development, purchasing sexy commodities and 'ringing the changes' to avoid the dreaded 'sexual rut'; practising 'men-ology' (Gill, 2009) – that is, studying men, responding to or even anticipating their needs and desires, and taking responsibility for the emotional management of the relationship; and engaging in multiple practices of body and beauty work to render one's appearance, touch and scent appealing.

Rachel Wood (2016) notes that 'almost every list of sex tips will predictably address the interrelated issues of "feeling sexy", "body confidence" and "looking good"'. Even if a woman were to successfully achieve a 'confidence makeover', she would not be exempt from other labours particularly in relation to looking good. As Wood notes, advice points to the need to 'get ready' ahead of sex undertaking arduous regimes of grooming, to carefully choose flattering clothing/underwear to wear during sex, to prepare the environment for sex (soft lighting, aromatherapy, etc) and she also notes the way that sex itself may be readily re-presented as a form of beauty work (orgasms give that desirable flush, etc). After reading Cosmo's 'Body confidence = Great sex' one might be forgiven for thinking that the inner glow of self esteem and positive mental attitude is enough, but the article warns against complacency: 'the day of your big date is not the time to realise your legs resemble the Amazon jungle', it notes. Being confident should not be an excuse to slack – keep up the self maintenance: make sure 'you're waxed', 'dress for sex-cess', 'don't killer heels' an 'ego boost bra', full make up, and be ready to perform striptease. The labour of confidence, then, does not in any way lessen or mitigate the other work required of women, but is overlaid on top of it- a new stratum of psychic labour.

Confidence labour is impelled, it seems, because a lack of confidence in women has become repellent to men. The examples are everywhere in advice directed at women:

'Girls moaning about their bodies is the biggest libido-drainer' (Glamour)  
 'Don't EVER ask us if your bum looks big in anything because you'll sound needy and desperate, which is one of the biggest turn-offs for any man'

(Glamour)

If confidence is the new sexy, then insecurity (in women) is undoubtedly the new ugly (Gill & Orgad, 2015). 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 (O'Neill, in press; see also Thompson & Donaghue, 2014). This is discussed in detail elsewhere (Gill, 2016 a & b; Garcia-Favaro, 2016 b); here the central point is to point to the 'other' of confidence culture- showing not only what it celebrates but also what it abjects.

Finally, then, the confidence culture is problematic because despite its apparently warm and affirmative address to women to believe in themselves and love their bodies, it works by locating the blame and responsibility for all the difficulties and challenges of female subjectivity and heterosexual relationships 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 and hate speech directed at women. 'The problem is you', advice literature tells women (Adamson & Sulemmiena, 2016). 'Only you can help you' says another magazine article quoted by Garcia-Favaro (2016a). 'You have to stop blaming others for your low self-esteem and accept some responsibility'. Women are 'their own worst enemies' and must work on the self in order to develop a desirable new subjectivity – a confident self, with none of those pesky needs, insecurities or vulnerabilities that are so – apparently – grotesque to men.

This work 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' (Gavey, 2005) 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 self-hood in which there is no space for vulnerability or ambivalence but only for compulsory body love and self-confidence. Women's entitlement to be 'proper' neoliberal subjects, persons of value to themselves and others, depends upon working on the self to makeover their psychic lives

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have situated the turn to confidence and self-love within a growing literature concerned with transformations of intimacy, mediated intimacy and intimate and sexual entrepreneurship. I have argued that in the last few years a confidence imperative has developed as a technology of self in which a set of internally focussed discursive formations and individualised strategies of psychic labour are geared towards the production of self-belief in women. This has transformed the way we think about work, health, finance, violence and development, but it has been most evident in the two domains I have explored here – discourses about the body, and advice targeted at women in or seeking heterosexual relationships. The argument presented has demonstrated how the confidence cult(ure) is systematically refiguring women's intimate relations to their own self, and their intimate relations with heterosexual male partners. 'Confidence' is what discourse analysts call a 'cheer word' – laden as it is with positive connotations – for who could be against the promotion of female self-

confidence?! It's like being against 'community' or 'good sense'. However, here I hope to have shown just how fraught and problematic this seemingly benign and self-evident project is, how freighted with meanings that blame women for their own subordination, and with requirements to intensify the 'work' of intimacy so that it now involves a makeover of the very self. Confidence culture is involved in nothing less than the remaking of women's intimate relations to the self and to others – and it needs urgently to be critically interrogated.

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