

Lisa Baer-Tsarfaty – 3MT® Presentation

If you are a young, ambitious woman of colour, the chances are high that most of the people you will encounter in your professional life will think that you are entitled, incompetent, socially inept, or just generally unlikeable. Ambition is one of those qualities that we have been taught to cultivate; however, being ambitious is only acceptable for those who already occupy a position of privilege within society. In the underprivileged or the marginalized, ambition is a threat to the status quo and to the structures and hierarchies that maintain the privileged in their positions of power and prestige.

This is evident in the way that ambition is discussed: while older, white men are praised for the ambition that makes them leaders, ambitious women are called pejoratives and racialized folks are described as “uppity” if they are a little too open about their ambition. The question, of course, is where do these attitudes stem from? My doctoral research suggests that the

vilification of ambition as we know and still practice it today originated in the discourses of early-modern Europe.

At its core, ambition is a desire for more—more wealth, more power, higher social status—but in a society built on inequitable hierarchies, one person's desire for more was a threat to the stability of everyone else. If one person gained more wealth, for example, then wouldn't everyone else have less? And how unfair was it that one person could just selfishly pursue their own advancement without considering the welfare of their neighbours?

In condemning ambition, early-modern Europeans invoked a form of what we might understand today as consent culture. At its most fundamental, the idea was that a person should only be allowed to pursue advancement (i.e., be ambitious) if it was enthusiastically consented to by the rest of the community. If it wasn't, then that person should just keep their head down and accept their lot in life like everyone else. The only people this

rhetoric benefits, however, are the people who already occupy a position of privilege or power.

Consent is important when it protects the bodily autonomy, individual agency, and collective rights of individuals against the state or other corporate institutions. However, individuals do not need the consent of other individuals (or of their communities) to pursue opportunities that will enable them to advance their educations, careers, or status in society, providing they are doing so without actively harming others. Weaponizing the discourse around ambition has been society's way of using consent culture to control and marginalize certain groups of people for centuries. My research has brought these processes to light, and my hope is that it will change the way that we think about consent, ambition, and control.