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## Sweet Success

By Helen Croydon · 29th September, 2011



I couldn't help but smile while I was reading Catherine Hakim's *Honey Money: The Power of Erotic Capital*, for everything she says are things you've mused over, but haven't dared acknowledge. I don't know what is more surprising – the cascade of negative media headlines over this long-overdue fresh social commentary or the fact that no one has ever said what Hakim is saying before. Her theory is quite simple: Those that invest in their 'erotic capital' get dividends.

Some of the conundrum, it seems, is in the word 'erotic.' She doesn't just mean sexiness. It isn't like she's saying: "lash on red lipstick and hitch up your skirt and you'll go far." Erotic capital is really a deliciously provocative term for what makes up the sum of facial beauty, social skills, dress sense, physical fitness, liveliness and sex appeal. In short, your *va va voom*.

No doubt all eyes were on Hakim's *va va voom*, when she gave a talk on her theory of Erotic Capital at the South Bank centre this week. It is bold enough to write about the value of these assets, but even more so to face up to a largely disapproving audience - who will no doubt be judging her on her own erotic capital as well as her controversial theories. But she handled it with grace and even put a few discerning feminists and their tedious arguments in their place in the process.

"I'm a social scientist," she calmly told one irate feminist in the audience, who accused her of promoting an elitist society and ignoring issues surrounding disability, ageism and ethnic minorities. "I observe the facts from numerous sociological studies. I'm not putting forward personal opinions. What I have found is that erotic capital is an asset so far overlooked when assessing the different aspects of human capital."

Yes. Don't shoot the messenger. What those facts from numerous studies show is that erotic capital catapults people in the boardroom, the bedroom and in public life. People with high erotic capital earn 10 to 20% more than those without it. They are more popular, are perceived to be more intelligent and others want to help them. "Doors open for attractive people." She writes. This isn't what one wants to hear – especially at the mirror first thing in the morning. Nor is it what we are supposed to say in a diversity-promoting equality-championing modern western world. But it's true. In fact, it's more than true – it's scientifically proven by Hakim with scores of studies, as well as her own personal anecdotes and references to non-western cultures to back up the hypothesis. One study found that even children benefit from erotic capital. "Young children who are good-looking are treated more warmly by the world at large....They have a head start in life because people pay more attention to them."

The trouble is that all this erotic capital isn't being spent. Women are being kept from realising its potential. Hakim argues women are indoctrinated to suppress their erotic capital – to feel guilty about using it. The patriarchy will have us believe that the only sound foundations to getting ahead in life are education and darn hard work. Men, claims Hakim, know that women have higher erotic capital than them, and so they discourage women from using it as a bargaining tool. Women know how powerful it is so men make sure we keep it locked away. A bit like a firearms ban.

What women should be doing, she says, is exploiting it! Charm and smile your way through life. Instead of all this talk that looks don't matter, that flat shoes are just as good as heels, that waxing is being subservient to men's needs, we should celebrate femininity. The French have learned to do it, *pourquoi nous shouldn'tes?!*

This is where 'puritanical Anglo-Saxon radical feminists' - as she puts it - fall short.



Boots?  
Bloomers?



Boots?  
Bloomers?

Feminists are unknowingly devaluing women's greatest asset. Shooting themselves in their flat-shoed feet, so to speak.

Underpinning the whole theory, is the very unfashionable 'male-sex deficit'. Men want and need sex more than women, which gives women huge bargaining power that they are not even aware of. I don't agree per se that men want sex more than women. I'd prefer to rephrase it to women need a more significant reason for sex. But the effect is the same. Men need sex now. Women can, and will, wait.

When women cash in on their erotic capital they are stigmatised. Hakim gives a whole chapter of examples: Islam requires women to veil their erotic capital. Christian values 'have been particularly vicious' when it comes to moral values of sex. Britain has banned women from charging fees for surrogate pregnancies – a particularly genius example of how fertility (one of the things which contributes to erotic capital) is being devalued.

Of course, cashing in on erotic capital doesn't usually mean literally cashing in. The benefit of erotic capital manifests itself subtly throughout a lifetime. But there is an extreme end of exploiting erotic capital and that's selling sexual services. The benefits are more overt (hard cash) but so is the stigma. Hakim says disparaging views of prostitution is another example of patriarchal efforts to repress women's power. In Africa, sex work isn't stigmatised at all – it's logical. "No money, no honey," laugh the women pocketing notes from weak-willed men. In Brazil it's unthinkable for a woman not to invest in her appearance; and unthinkable for a man not to spoil, chase, pamper and provide for his woman. "The puzzle is not why intelligent and attractive women become prostitutes," writes Hakim, "but rather why more women don't choose this occupation given the high potential earnings for short working hours."

I may be biased though. This is a theme which overlaps with my own observations during my three-year phase of dating 'sugar daddies' which I write about in my own memoir *Sugar Daddy Diaries*. I remember my initial sense of guilt when I suddenly found myself in a dating game where I didn't have to pay my way anymore. Guilt was needless though. I wasn't asking for any emotional investment for my foot-loose and fancy-free approach to dating so of course men were prepared to compensate with some sort of material investment. Had I been born Brazilian I wouldn't have thought twice!

It is in men's interest to stigmatise prostitution and to chastise women who don't pay their way. It keeps the value of sexual capital low, which in turn helps men get sex for free. Elementary. It seems that most of the opposition to Hakim's theory isn't that people don't agree, it's that they don't want to agree. One audience member at the South Bank talk, who'd seen better days of erotic capital, raised her hand: "I think what you say is right. But I'm horrified by what you say." This sums up the media frenzy around *Honey Money*. It is denial, rather than disagreement about the existence and importance of erotic capital. Too many commentators think they can change what is wrong simply by pointing out what they don't like; they think they can stop men thinking about sex by banning botox, ridiculing skimpy lingerie and enforcing polo necks. Hakim offers a more sustainable solution: learn to manipulate the way the world works rather than trying to change the biologically unalterable. As the author Bruno Phillips once said, "Even women who might normally want to fire-bomb Ann Summers shops and demonstrate outside Agent Provocateur ought to admit that objectification should sometimes be acknowledged as a celebration of female aesthetic power."

***Honey Money: The Power of Erotic Capital*, by Catherine Hakim; Allen Lane Press; ISBN: 978-1-846-14419-6; £20.00 in hardback from [www.penguin.co.uk](http://www.penguin.co.uk) (ebook: £11.99)**