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Embracing Erotic Capital

Intelligence is no more of an achievement than beauty. Why is this so hard to accept?

Catherine Hakim | Sociologist, author, Honey Money.

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Why is it that in the West beauty and good looks are so often labelled as dangerous, ephemeral, degrading and linked to “animal impulses” – meaning sexuality? Other cultures have no hang-ups or anxieties about the value of attractiveness – for men and women, children and adults alike. Why is there this squeamishness about human beauty in Puritan countries? It contrasts with the fairly universal willingness to value beauty in music, art, architecture, dance and the other arts.

The argument about erotic capital as the hidden factor in success, for men as well as women, is attracting wide interest, since the publication of my book *Honey Money* in 2011. The book is not a polemic but a report on a new social trend in the 21st century. It shows that people who are physically and socially attractive earn more and are more successful in public life (including the workplace) as well as in private life. Curiously, women seem least willing to accept the message that good looks matter more today than they did in the past. Men accept the research evidence and conclusions more readily – unless they think they are positively ugly. As one American woman put it, the book made her see the world with new eyes. But English women display some discomfort in accepting this new

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see the world with new eyes. But English women display some discomfort in accepting this new perspective. Why?

One explanation is that people in the Western world, especially women, experience what a colleague calls “mixed messages”. They see attractive women who know how to exploit this asset becoming far more successful, socially and financially. On the other hand, throughout their lives women are taught to be modest and *not* exploit their erotic capital. Men generally do not have this problem. Who benefits from this ideological underpinning to modern “morals”? Men of course – men who might be disadvantaged when dealing with very attractive female friends and colleagues. Western women are the victims of the patriarchal ideology that debases female beauty and sex appeal as superficial and worthless. It is thus not surprising that what economists call the “beauty premium” is larger for men than women: an earnings mark-up of around +17% for men compared to only +12% for women, on average across the whole labour market. In the Far East, the beauty premium is larger for women, similar to that for men. Women in China, Japan, Thailand and other non-European cultures have a clear understanding of the value of their erotic capital, and exploit it as successfully as do men.

The latest research shows that intelligence is roughly 50% genetic and 50% due to the social environment and social learning. Much the same is true of erotic capital, which is a combination of physical and social attractiveness. So genetic good luck plays an equal part in intelligence and attractiveness. Yet the Western world treats intelligence as having some sort of superior “moral” value that good looks do not.

Being tall offers similar advantages to good looks. Yet no-one agonises over the unfairness or immorality of extra height. The genetic advantage of good looks is readily challenged, while the genetic advantage of standing out in a crowd purely due to being tall is accepted.

Being intelligent offers even more advantages than attractiveness. We readily accept the “unfairness” of clever people getting ahead in life and earning more than less intellectually able people, even though cognitive ability is inherited, in large part, and is unequally distributed. Yet we do not apply the same logic to good looks. As I point out in a new paper just published in the Italian online journal *Sociologica*, the latest social science research evidence suggests that intelligence and beauty are both more important in the 21st century than they were in the past, when family status was the main predictor of life chances.

There is also some evidence that genetic inheritance is becoming more important in affluent modern economies. This is shown clearly by research on height. In poor countries, genetics and people’s social circumstances (social class for sociologists) are equally important determinants of adult height. When living conditions were poor for the majority of the population, higher parental income could make a big difference – in ensuring adequate nutrition and freedom from disease (or access to a doctor if you were ill). Paradoxically, as living conditions improve for everyone and are equalised by public policy, genetics matter more today. Height is now determined three-quarters by genetics and only one-quarter by the social environment of family of origin.

We know that standards of intelligence and beauty are rising steadily in the long term. It seems possible that genetic inheritance is gradually playing a bigger role in both these personal assets, as educational opportunities are extended to everyone and the cosmetics and other industries offer everyone access to good grooming and style.

So the Western world needs to drop the traditional ideological opposition to biology and nature as unimportant or irrelevant factors. There is no basis for regarding intelligence as morally superior to outstanding good looks. Similarly, there is no reason to denigrate sex appeal and sexuality as base.

So we can get depressed about the rising importance of what some dismiss as merely “the body” – in contrast to the superior nature of “the mind”. Alternatively, we can get cheerful about the rising value of women’s erotic power over men, an advantage we might all exploit – as men surely would, if they had the opportunity. As a social scientist, my primary interest is in discovering and mapping out new social trends – such as the rising importance of erotic capital in all areas of public and private life. It makes sense to be aware of and understand new developments, rather than adopting the Luddite response of treating everything new as dangerous, best rejected and destroyed.

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