
Erotic Capital

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We present a new theory of erotic capital as a fourth personal asset, an important addition to economic, cultural, and social capital. Erotic capital has six, or possibly seven, distinct elements, one of which has been characterized as 'emotional labour'. Erotic capital is increasingly important in the sexualized culture of affluent modern societies. Erotic capital is not only a major asset in mating and marriage markets, but can also be important in labour markets, the media, politics, advertising, sports, the arts, and in everyday social interaction. Women generally have more erotic capital than men because they work harder at it. Given the large imbalance between men and women in sexual interest over the life course, women are well placed to exploit their erotic capital. A central feature of patriarchy has been the construction of 'moral' ideologies that inhibit women from exploiting their erotic capital to achieve economic and social benefits. Feminist theory has been unable to extricate itself from this patriarchal perspective and reinforces 'moral' prohibitions on women's sexual, social, and economic activities and women's exploitation of their erotic capital.

Madonna flaunted it in her *Sex* book, and still has it at 50. Jesus Luz, her toyboy lover, clearly has it, but it is rather easier at 22 years. Pierce Brosnan has it, even as he ages, long after dropping the James Bond role. Catherine Deneuve still has it, remaining sexually attractive after she reached 60. The sexy, energetic singer Tina Turner, with her fabulous legs and erotic voice, still had it at in her 50s. The commodity is erotic capital, to which sociological and economic theory have been blind, despite its palpable importance in all spheres of social life. Writers and artists are very sensitive to it. Shakespeare captured it nicely when describing Cleopatra: 'Age cannot wither her, nor custom dull her infinite variety.' The expanding importance of self-service mating and marriage markets, speed dating, and Internet dating contributes to the increasing value of erotic capital in the 21st century. Sociology must rise to the challenge of incorporating erotic capital into theory and empirical research.

This paper presents a theory of erotic capital and its applications in studies of social mobility, the labour

market, mating, and other topics. We argue that erotic capital is just as important as economic, cultural, and social capital for understanding social and economic processes, social interaction, and social mobility. It is essential for analysing sexuality and sexual relationships. There are difficulties of measurement, but these are no greater than for social capital. In sexualized individualized modern societies, erotic capital becomes more important and more valorized, for both men and women. However, women have a longer tradition of developing and exploiting it, and studies regularly find women to have greater erotic appeal than men. We ask why erotic capital has been overlooked as an asset in sociological theory. The oblivion of the social sciences to this factor suggests that a patriarchal bias still remains in these disciplines. As women generally have more erotic capital than men, so men deny it exists or has value, and have taken steps to ensure that women cannot legitimately exploit their relative advantage. Feminists have reinforced 'moral' objections to the deployment of erotic capital.

A Theory of Erotic Capital

Four Forms of Capital

The distinction between economic capital, cultural capital, and social capital was initiated by Bourdieu in the 1980s, but the concepts proved so useful that they were subsequently developed by other sociological theorists (Bourdieu, 1997; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992; Mouzelis, 1995). Economic capital is the sum of the resources and assets that can be used to produce financial gains—such as money or land. Cultural capital consists of information resources and assets that are socially valued, such as knowledge of art, literature, and music. Human capital combines economic and cultural capital, consisting of educational qualifications, training and work experience that are valued and can be traded for income. Social capital is the sum of resources, actual or potential, that accrue to a person or group from access to a network of relationships or membership in a group—who you know as distinct from what you know. Social capital can be used to make money (good social contacts can be crucial to certain business ventures), to exert power and influence, or for social mobility. Political capital is a special form of social capital, and refers to a person's political networks, assets, and resources. Societies can accord different weights to the various types of capital. This typology has proven useful, because it explains how people with little or no economic capital can still be successful in capitalist societies through their use of other forms of capital.

Erotic capital is a somewhat different fourth asset, previously overlooked, but just as important.

Six (or Seven) Elements of Erotic Capital

Erotic capital is multi-faceted. Particular aspects may be more or less salient in different societies and at different points in time. Acknowledging that there are difficulties of measurement is not an excuse for failing to recognize the social and economic importance of erotic power in all areas of social activity.

Beauty is clearly a central element, although there are cultural and temporal variations in ideas about what constitutes beauty. Some African societies admire women with large voluptuous bodies. In Western Europe, fashion models are tall and stick-thin to the point of being anorexic. In previous centuries, women with small eyes and tiny rosebud mouths were considered delicately beautiful. The modern emphasis on photogenic features means that men and women with large eyes and mouths and 'sculptured' faces are

prioritized. Studies show that conventionality, symmetry, and an even skin tone contribute to attractiveness, and that it is an achieved characteristic, in part (Webster and Driskell, 1983), as illustrated by the *belle laide*.¹ Great beauty is always in short supply, and is therefore universally valorized.

A second element is sexual attractiveness, which can be quite separate from classic beauty. To some extent, beauty is about facial attractiveness in the main, while sexual attractiveness is about a sexy body. However, sex appeal can also be about personality and style, femininity or masculinity, a way of being in the world, a characteristic of social interaction. Beauty tends to be static, hence is easily captured in a photo. Sexual attractiveness is about the way someone moves, talks, and behaves, so it can only be captured on film. Many young people have sex appeal, but it can fade rapidly with age. Personal tastes also vary. In the Western world, men reputedly divide into those who prioritize breasts, bums, or legs, but in most cultures it is the overall appearance that matters. Some men prefer women who are small, petite, even tiny, while others prefer tall and elegant women. Some women prefer men with well-developed muscles and strong bodies, while others prefer a slender, 'effete', elegant appearance. Despite this variation in tastes, sex appeal is in short supply, and is therefore valorized.

A third element of erotic capital is definitely social: grace, charm, social skills in interaction, the ability to make people like you, feel at ease and happy, want to know you, and, where relevant, desire you. Flirtatious skills can be learnt, but again are not universal. Some people in positions of power have lots of charm and charisma; others have none at all. Some men and women are skilled at discreet flirtation in all contexts; others are incapable. Again, these social skills have value.

A fourth element is liveliness, a mixture of physical fitness, social energy, and good humour. People who have a lot of life in them can be hugely attractive to others—as illustrated by people who are 'the life and soul of the party'. In most cultures liveliness is displayed in dancing skills or sporting activities.

The fifth element concerns social presentation: style of dress, face-painting, perfume, jewellery or other adornments, hairstyles, and the various accessories that people carry or wear to announce their social status and style to the world. Monarchs and presidents dress for public functions to emphasize their power and authority. Ordinary people going to a party or other social event dress to make themselves attractive as well as to announce their social status and wealth to any strangers they meet, or to make style statements. The

relative emphasis on sexy attire or social status statements depends on the venue and event. People who are skilled at social presentation are more attractive than people who look like homeless tramps.

The sixth element is sexuality itself: sexual competence, energy, erotic imagination, playfulness, and everything else that makes for a sexually satisfying partner. Whether or not someone is a good lover is known only to their partners. Of course, this competence may vary not only with age but also with the partner's competence and enthusiasm, given the interactive element. A strong libido does not by itself guarantee sexual competence. However, people with a strong libido are more likely to acquire the experience that eventually leads to greater skill. National sex surveys provide no information on levels of sexual competence, but they reveal dramatic variations in sex drive in all populations. A small minority of men and women are extremely sexually active; the majority are moderately active; a minority are celibate. It seems reasonable to conclude that sexual skill is not a universal attribute, even among adults, and extreme competence is a minority asset. This factor is listed last, as it usually applies only in private, intimate relationships with lovers, whereas the other five can come into play in all social contexts, visibly or invisibly.

For men as well as women, all six elements contribute to defining someone's erotic capital. The relative importance of the six elements usually differs for men and women, and varies between cultures and in different centuries. In Papua New Guinea, it is men who decorate their hair and paint their faces with brilliant colours and creative designs. In Western Europe, women paint their faces with make-up, but men rarely do. The value of erotic capital depends on someone's occupation, which may or may not valorize it. For example, information technology (IT) personnel do not generally need it, which may be why they are widely stereotyped as 'geeks'. In contrast, Japanese geishas and courtesans deploy erotic capital as an essential and central part of their work. The exact mix of the six elements varies because geishas are all-round hostesses, entertainers, and artists who normally work in teahouses and other public places and do not offer sexual services, while courtesans might offer sex as one of their attractions. In both cases, there is great emphasis on social skills, lavish dress, flirtatious conversation, grace, and charm to ensure an agreeable social encounter, and this is reflected in the fees for their time. The social and economic value of erotic capital is highlighted in what can broadly be described

as entertainer occupations,² but can also be very real in private contexts (Blanchflower and Oswald, 2004).

In some cultures, women's erotic capital is closely tied to their fertility. Among many West Indian groups, fertility is so crucial to a woman's sex appeal that girls demonstrate their fertility *before* a marriage is finalized. Thus, it is commonplace for fiancées to get pregnant and deliver a healthy child before a wedding is arranged. In India, children are considered so essential to marriage, and so central to life itself, that childless couples are regarded as the unfortunate victims of infertility rather than voluntarily childfree. One reason for stigmatizing homosexuality in some cultures is that it cannot produce offspring (Eder *et al.*, 1999). In many cultures, a fertile woman is regarded as having additional attractions, especially if her children are healthy and beautiful. An Italian woman remarks that in Italy men admire her for her beautiful son, whereas in the United States men only admire her for her lovely long legs and lustrous long hair. From a theoretical perspective, we can treat fertility as an additional seventh element of erotic capital, an element that is unique to women since men are unable to bear children. In some cultures, this element carries huge additional weight, automatically giving women an advantage over men. Alternatively, reproductive capital is a separate, seventh asset, which appears to be of lower value in the 21st century in modern societies than it was in agricultural societies characterized by high fertility.

In some cultures, erotic and cultural capital are closely intertwined, as illustrated by the ancient Greek *hetaire*, Japanese geisha, and courtesans of the Italian renaissance (Masson, 1975). Such women are admired as much for their artistic skills—in singing, playing music, composing poetry, dancing, or painting—as for their beauty and sex appeal. Veronica Franco was a renowned poet as well as a courtesan. The modern equivalents are the actors and singers who project sex appeal in films, videos, and on stage, such as Beyonce Knowles and Enrique Iglesias.

Erotic capital is thus a combination of aesthetic, visual, physical, social, and sexual attractiveness to other members of your society, and especially to members of the opposite sex, in all social contexts. In some cultures, fertility is a central element of women's greater erotic capital. We use the terms 'erotic power' and 'erotic capital' interchangeably, for stylistic variation. Erotic capital includes skills that can be learnt and developed, as well as advantages fixed at birth. Women generally have more of it than men, even in cultures where fertility is not an integral element, and they deploy it more actively.

It would be worthwhile comparing cultures, and studying trends over time in how erotic capital is valorized compared to other assets, which elements carry most weight, and how it differs between men and women. Our focus here is limited to contemporary modern societies.

Intellectual Precursors

It is notable that erotic capital has attracted little attention among theoretical sociologists, psychologists, economists, and researchers. Scholars who address the relationship between intimacy, sexuality, and money regularly fail to identify this category of assets and resources. For example, Zelizer (2005) demonstrates the intertwining of economic and personal-social relationships, and concludes that money and love cannot be disentangled, as Western ‘moralists’ argue. However, she focuses on care work as the main commodity (or service) exchanged for money.

The global acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) scare prompted the USA and many European countries to carry out national surveys of sexual attitudes and behaviour in the 1980s and 1990s. None of these sex surveys displays any awareness of erotic capital, nor do they attempt to measure it.³ Analyses and reports refer to human capital and social capital as the only assets deployed in sexual markets.⁴

Berscheid and Walster (1974, pp. 206–7) argue that physical attractiveness is a ‘homely’ and ‘humble’ variable that will never form the core concept for any psychological theory. Early studies of the social impacts of beauty were dismissed as ‘theoretically uninteresting’ (Hatfield and Sprecher, 1986, pp. xvi). One reason for the failure to address erotic power is that it may be the most widespread and democratic form of capital, so it becomes invisible. Potentially, all women and men possess it, can develop it, and exploit it. However, social capital is also widespread, also intangible, and yet has been identified theoretically, despite great difficulty in measuring it with any reliability in empirical research.

Hans Zetterberg came close to identifying erotic capital in 1966. In a rather muddled speculative essay, he suggested the new concepts of erotic rankings and erotic stratification. He defines erotic rank as people’s privately known probability of being able to induce a state of emotional surrender in persons of the opposite sex—roughly our second element. He considered erotic rank to be relatively invisible, secret, and interactional, making it virtually impossible to do research on the phenomenon, even if it is recognized in common sense

knowledge. Zetterberg effectively identified a theoretical gap in sociology, but was unable to fill it.

Webster and Driskell (1983) also come close to identifying erotic capital, but they too limit the concept to a single dimension—beauty, our first element. Their simple and elegant theory states that physical attractiveness confers status. It is a valued commodity, which is in short supply in any society, and is therefore a luxury good. They review a large body of empirical research evidence showing that beauty confers substantial concrete benefits on individuals, and even on their spouses, by association. For example, attractiveness is an important determinant of popularity, persuasiveness in a disagreement, attributions of ability and competence, influence over other people, marital success and happiness, and successful affairs. Attractiveness affects not only perceived abilities but also actual interaction, so that attractive people are more successful at wielding influence to get what they want, in the workplace and in business as well as in private relationships. Relying partly on the extensive review in Berscheid and Walster (1974; see also Hatfield and Sprecher, 1986), they demonstrate that attractiveness effects are substantial, help men as well as women, and are not dependent on the sex of the observer or the respondent/informant. They note that what counts as beauty can be culturally specific, and hard to define, but show it is real in its social consequences. Our definition of erotic capital is drawn more widely, and is an even more powerful social asset.

What Arlie Hochschild (1983/2003) labels ‘emotional labour’ is the third element of erotic capital. It is no accident that her main illustration of emotional labour concerns the social interaction skills of women airline cabin attendants, one example of the hostess job. Hochschild claims that women are more likely than men to be required to deploy emotional labour in their jobs. This is doubtful, given that social interaction skills are essential in virtually all senior management and professional occupations, and possibly in all service sector occupations. However, she is probably right to conclude that these social skills are more important for women and men in the entertainment and hospitality industries, where women predominate, and that women do more emotion work in families.

A far more complete and concrete theory of manners and emotion management was developed in the 1930s by Norbert Elias (Elias, 1937/1994; Smith, 2000; Loyal and Quilley, 2004). He showed that a central feature of the civilizing process in all societies was people internalizing norms and skills of self-control, emotion management, and courtesy

towards others, which become ‘second nature’, habitual, and apparently instinctive. These skills are applied in all human activity, including interaction with strangers, private activities like eating and love making, public and commercial activities such as being punctual for meetings or honouring contracts. These social habits and norms develop first in the upper classes, and gradually filter down to other classes. Elias believed women play an important role in disseminating peaceful forms of conduct, in part through socializing children. He regarded all emotions as learned and socially structured, a conclusion confirmed by recent research (Heelas, 1986; Simon and Nath, 2004). For example, the Western obsession with ‘love’ is not universal (Heelas, 1986).

Elias was not concerned with erotic capital as such, but his theory of the civilizing process applies to sexual, romantic, and private relationships, *inter alia*. It helps to explain why erotic power becomes increasingly important in the most advanced societies, because it incorporates interpersonal skills. It confirms that sexuality is a performance, one that is learnt well enough to become second nature, and includes emotion management.

The terms ‘sexual capital’ and ‘erotic capital’ are used by Martin and George (2006) and Green (2008) when discussing the two main theoretical frameworks for the analysis of sexual behaviour: market economics and sexual cultures (or ‘fields’). However, their definitions are left implicit, and refer essentially to sexual attractiveness, our second element. Our concept of erotic capital goes much wider; is informed by the recent research evidence on sexuality and erotic entertainments; is precise about constitutive elements; and applies to the heterosexual majority as well as to minority gay cultures.

A study of married men and women involved in sexual affairs concluded that ‘erotic power’ was a crucial element in the initiation and conduct of these relationships (Hunter, 2010). Women with high erotic power had the upper hand in these affairs, contrary to the men’s expectations that their career success and money entitled them to be in control. Our theory of erotic capital applies to all sexual relationships, and also to many other social and economic contexts.

Finally, evolutionary psychologists have long argued that men exchange economic assets for women’s beauty, as noted below in relation to marriage and mating markets. This thesis focuses on beauty, only one element of our much wider concept of erotic capital, which we show has applications well beyond the mating process.

Interactions between Forms of Capital

Erotic capital has enhanced value in situations where public and private life can become closely intertwined—such as politics and jobs in the media and entertainment industries.

In *Married to the Job*, Janet Finch (1983) analyses the two-person career that draws wives into carrying out some of their husband’s occupational duties. One of her examples is diplomatic wives, who are required to do a large amount of entertaining and attending diplomatic social functions in conjunction with their spouses. Diplomatic wives clearly deploy erotic capital in their social activities. However, Finch does not identify erotic capital as a spouse’s key contribution to a marriage. This is because many of the occupations that produce two-person careers require little erotic capital. For example, wives of self-employed plumbers, electricians, and other skilled tradesmen usually do the paperwork, deal with correspondence, and keep the accounts for their husband’s business. This is routine clerical work that requires virtually no deployment of erotic capital. Skilled tradesmen spend no time entertaining their clients. Erotic capital becomes valuable in occupations with business-related socializing and public display, which is more common in the highest-grade occupations. In these occupations, private life is in part a public performance, and erotic capital becomes especially valuable for both spouses.

We argue that erotic capital has greater value when it is linked to high levels of economic, cultural, and social capital. An attractive and charming spouse has greater value for monarchs, presidents, and company directors, among whom public display and social networking are prioritized, than for the local plumber or electrician. Erotic capital is thus partially linked to social stratification. Higher-status people choose spouses with the highest erotic capital, increasing the likelihood of their children having above-average endowments of erotic capital as well as status and wealth. In the long run, class differentials in erotic capital may develop.⁵ This thesis suggests that beauty and sex appeal filter up the class system, while Elias’ theory of the civilizing process, discussed above, says that emotion management and other social skills filter downwards, over time.

Erotic Capital as a Performance

As Simone de Beauvoir (1949/1976, pp. 295) pointed out, sexuality is in large part a *performance*. One is not born knowing how to be a woman or a man; one has to learn how to perform the role, as prescribed by the

society you live in. Masculinity and femininity are skilled performances, and those who excel at the art are admired and sometimes envied. In particular, the performance of femininity and female beauty is often highly valorized.

The performance character of sexuality, and erotic capital more generally, is displayed most clearly by transvestite and transgender men, who dress and act as women, and, in some cultures, perform as female dancers and entertainers. In the past, when women were excluded from stage acting, in countries such as China and Britain, men developed great skill in taking female roles on stage, reproducing feminine styles of behaviour, voice, and manner as well as female dress. Today, such performances are delivered by the lady-boys of Thailand, and the transvestites of Brazil, many of whom work in the entertainment industry or earn a living by selling sex. In New York, there are 'underground' vogue balls in which men compete to deliver the best impersonation of a beautiful and glamorous woman. There are no equivalent competitions for women to excel at impersonating men (possibly because it is easier)—a fact of some theoretical importance.

Beauty and sex appeal, and female beauty in particular, are a creation, a work of art, which can be achieved through training. Women have more erotic capital than men in most societies because they work harder at personal presentation and the performance of gender and sexuality. This sex differential is not fixed, and can vary over time, due to social and economic changes. Homosexuals often devote more time and effort to the performance of sexuality and personal presentation than is typical among heterosexuals (Green, 2008). The performance of gay subculture styles (such as clones or leather) is the equivalent of heterosexual performance of masculinity and femininity.

It is notable that in the 21st century, men in Western Europe are devoting more time and money to their appearance, and work harder at developing their erotic capital. Men work out in gyms to maintain an attractive body, spend more on fashionable clothes and toiletries, and display more varied hairstyles. The English footballer David Beckham is a prime example, reputedly earning more from modelling and advertising contracts than from his profession as an athlete. Men now constitute an important part of the customer base for cosmetic surgery and Botox, ~10–20% of the expanding market in Britain. In Italy, Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi is a known user, looking 20 years younger than his 72 years. Women are gaining greater economic capital, through qualifications and work

experience, so they bring both economic and erotic capital to mating markets. Men now find it necessary to develop their erotic capital as well, instead of relying exclusively on their earning power in mating markets, as in the past. Therefore, sex differences can shrink in certain conditions.

The Increased Salience of Sexual Activity

Across the globe, sexual activity is regarded as an essential factor in quality of life, but men rank sex as more important than do women (Saxena *et al.*, 2001, pp. 714). Sexual activity in all its forms has increased dramatically in prosperous modern societies. The main reason is the contraceptive revolution of the 1960s, which removed the threat of unwanted pregnancies. People have always had ways of avoiding pregnancy, but modern methods of contraception do not interfere with the sexual act itself, as do condoms or withdrawal. Recreational sex has expanded in consequence, and the varieties and types of sexual activity have multiplied, as illustrated by the diversity of pornography now available, and by annual international trade fairs devoted to erotica of every kind. The Internet strengthens this trend, facilitating the coalescence of groups with arcane tastes and interests, including groups with minority sexual tastes. People are having more sex now than ever before, and sexual activity has become a more important part of life generally, aided by books, magazines, and websites devoted to helping and encouraging people to get the best and most varied sex feasible. Today, people are having, expecting and, demanding bigger and better sex lives. Sex and sexuality have become a major leisure activity.

Due to the AIDS scare, large-scale sex surveys have been carried out recently at least once in a dozen European countries and China. The USA has a long string of sex surveys. Finland ran surveys in 1971 and 1992; France did so in 1972 and 1992. Britain has a regular series, with surveys in 1990, 2000, and 2010, although there is only one comprehensive book-length report so far.⁶ All the surveys show that sexual activity is increasing—people are having more sex, with more varieties of activity, more partners, and for longer in life. The use of commercial sexual services and autoeroticism (fantasy, use of erotica, and masturbation) has increased at the same time as partnered sexual activity. These results are obtained partly from greater honesty by survey respondents. However, it is agreed that there is a genuine increase in all forms of sexual activity, including commercial sex.⁷ All the surveys reveal broadly similar patterns of sexual activity and rising trends.

As Graham Fennell points out, personal sex-life histories are essential complements to sex survey statistics, even though most such accounts are written by men (Zetterberg, 2002, pp. 1–9). The diary of a London call girl named Belle de Jour and a sex memoir by Sean Thomas provide illuminating evidence on contemporary sexual lifestyles from a single woman of 29 and a single man of 39, respectively. The diary of Belle de Jour (2007) reveals an extremely high libido, and a very active sex life that started as a teenager and extends well beyond her commercial sex work. She enjoys, and sells, the full range of sexual activities, including dominance and mild BDSM (bondage domination sadism masochism), with men and women. A rough estimate is that a call girl like her has up to 200 bookings a year, suggesting around 1000 sexual encounters by the time they quit for marriage and conventional employee jobs.⁸ However, women who enjoy sex orgies can have over 40 sexual partners in an evening, and have many more partners in total than any call girl or man (Millett, 2002).

Contemplating marriage finally at age 39, Thomas reviews his sexual history to assess whether he has slept with enough women before becoming monogamous. He works out that he has slept with 60 women, or 70 if prostitutes are included, and decides that this score is average for his peer group. He underlines his raging libido, and reports that the only time he ever felt truly relaxed was during a sex holiday in Thailand. For the first time in his life, he had enough sex to become calm (Thomas, 2006, pp. 258–261, 293). For comparison, even Casanova only bedded 130 women in his entire life, according to his detailed memoirs (Kelly, 2008). Sex survey evidence covers a shorter time span, but also indicates a sharp rise in sexual activity across age cohorts, such that young people today report just as many lifetime partners as old people.

Women's Advantage

Women do not have a monopoly of erotic power. However, they have more erotic capital than men, and this gives them a significant potential advantage in negotiations with men.⁹ Many women are unaware of this because men have taken steps to prevent women exploiting their unique advantage, and even persuade women that erotic capital is worthless. Nevertheless, it is most commonly, beautiful and glamorous women who decorate adverts for products of all kinds, not men or couples.

As Laumann *et al.* (1994, pp. 11) and Baumeister and Vohs (2004) remind us, market value is determined by desirability relative to scarcity, supply, and

demand. Men's demand for sexual activity and erotic entertainment of all kinds greatly exceeds women's interest in sex. At a common sense level, this has been known for centuries (Levitt and Dubner, 2009). Feminists argue that this imbalance was socially constructed, and would vanish once restrictions on women's sexual lives and activities were eliminated. Although there was some truth in the feminist argument as regards conditions in the past, their idea that sex differences in sexual interest melt away with social and economic equality between women and men has proven false.¹⁰ In the absence of distorting social constraints, there appear to be no sex differences in sexual interest among younger people, up to age 30–34. Social constraints have always been most vigorous in relation to young people, in order to channel youthful sexual energy into appropriate forms of behaviour and marriage. However, for most women, sexual interest declines sharply after childbearing, when their attentions switch to childrearing instead.¹¹ Some women experience a revival of sexual interest later in life, after the menopause, when the risk of pregnancy is eliminated. But, overall, women's sexual interest is severely reduced, and often truncated permanently by motherhood. In contrast, men's sexual interest is rarely affected or diminished in the same way by parenthood. Since it takes two to tango, men need female partners, especially when marriage is delayed until the late 20s or even the late 30s. However, men prefer partners with sex appeal, erotic capital.

All recent sex surveys show that over the life course as a whole, men's demand for sexual activity of all kinds is substantially greater than among women.¹² This is seen in the use of commercial sexual services, having affairs, autoeroticism, interest in erotica generally, levels of sexual activity over the life course, and varieties of sexual activity. Men express 2–10 times more enthusiasm than women for every variety of sexual activity. The average number of sexual partners over a lifetime is two to three times higher among men. Regular masturbation is three times more common among men, even among married men. They are three times more likely to have frequent sexual fantasies, and to use erotica of all kinds. Men are twice as likely to report five or more sexual partners in the last year (Laumann *et al.*, 1994). In Britain, they are five times more likely to have had over 10 partners in the previous 5 years (Johnson *et al.*, 1994). In most cultures, men are more promiscuous than women, and celibacy is more common among women.

From the age of 50–54 onwards, sexual inactivity rises among men; but it rises from the age of 35

among women, and rises much faster and much higher (Laumann *et al.*, 1994, pp. 91). Sexless marriages and partnerships are balanced by activities elsewhere. Married men are much more likely than married women to engage in short-term ‘flings’ and more extended sexual affairs. All sex surveys find men report affairs at least twice as often as women—in the USA, Britain, Italy, Spain, Finland, Sweden, Japan, and China. Customers for commercial sexual services are almost invariably male even in Scandinavian countries.¹³ In Spain, 25% of men, married and single, buy sexual services, compared to only 1% of women (Malo de Molina, 1992, pp. 204). A study of the users of websites for extramarital affairs found that men outnumber women by over 10 to 1; that women’s erotic power is highly valorized in this context; that women have the upper hand in choosing lovers; and that men (especially older men) must work hard to please and be generous to compensate for low erotic capital (Hunter, 2010).

Feminists claim that these results are explained by men having more money to spend. But the sex surveys deny this, showing that women are more likely to be persuaded to engage in sex (with a spouse or with someone else) when there is an emotional or romantic attachment, whereas men seek sexual fulfilment and sexual variety in and for themselves, whether through commercial avenues or otherwise. Women are more interested in the emotional games surrounding sex, while men can seek and enjoy sex as a goal in itself, even with a stranger. A Finnish study showed that even among high-income earners, men had twice as many affairs as did women (Kontula and Haavio-Mannila, 1995, pp. 126). A Dutch study of well-educated liberal groups shows that sexual deprivation in marriage leads men, but not women, into sexual affairs (Buunk, 1980).

Analyses of sex surveys identify distinctive ‘sexual lifestyles’, and show that men and women differ both quantitatively and qualitatively in their sexual interest, values, and activities. Few women adopt the hedonistic libertine ideology of recreational sex that is popular among men (Laumann *et al.*, 1994, pp. 509–540, 547; Laumann and Michael, 2001, pp. 109–147, 265–269). In Sweden two-thirds of men said they enjoyed sex unrelated to any romantic involvement, while four-fifths of women insisted that love was the only basis for a sexual relationship (Zetterberg, 2002, pp. 114–115). An Italian survey found that ‘falling in love’ was more commonly the catalyst for an affair among women than men, who mostly sought variety, novelty, and excitement (Vaccaro, 2003). The British sex survey reveals that 5% of men but only 2% of

women are highly libidinous, sexually active, and promiscuous throughout life (figures calculated from Table 3.5 in Wellings *et al.*, 1994)

To get the sex they want, when they want it, in the right form, men are prepared to pay for it, as this can be the cheaper option. The alternative is to devote time and effort to seducing women, which still costs money. Whether we focus on commercial sex and related erotic entertainments, or on affairs, the evidence is that male interest in sex and sexual variety is between 2 and 10 times greater than female sexual interest, on average, over the life course.

Sex differentials that were once regarded as universal and innate [such as differences in maths ability, or in overall intelligence quotient (IQ)] have been found to be socially constructed, and virtually eliminated. However, recent reviews (Swim, 1994; Eagly, 1995; Hyde, 1996, pp. 114, 2005; Campbell, 2002; Pinker, 2002) find that two sex differentials remain unchanged. They appear to be unvarying across time and across cultures: men are substantially more aggressive than women, and they have fundamentally different attitudes to sexuality. Murder and promiscuity tend to be male specialities. Even if women and men had identical levels of erotic capital, men’s greater demand for sexual activity and erotic entertainment of all kinds at all ages automatically gives women an advantage due to the large imbalance in supply and demand in sexual markets.¹⁴

Baumeister and Vohs (2004) set out the implications in their theory of sexual economics. However, they regard this as applying only to the premarital mating phase, not to marital sex, which is ‘off-market’, and not to sexual relations between homosexuals. The idea that marital sex and homosexual sex are ‘off-market’ and therefore not open to bargaining is denied by all relevant studies (for example, Arndt, 2009; Green, 2008). Our theory of erotic capital is applicable to all sexual interactions, both heterosexual and homosexual, commercial and private, and to all age groups, and confirms women’s advantage.

Erotic capital is also an important asset for other groups who have less access to economic and social capital, including adolescents and young people, ethnic and cultural minorities, and working-class groups.

The Rising Importance of Erotic Capital

As the technical aids to enhancing erotic capital increase, the standards of exceptional beauty and sex appeal are constantly raised. Expectations of attractive appearance now apply to all age groups instead of just young people entering the marriage market. Rising

divorce rates and serial monogamy across the lifecycle create incentives for everyone to develop and maintain their erotic capital throughout life rather than just in the period before (first) marriage. Twice-divorced Madonna at 50 can look more youthful and sexy than many women of 25. Now expectations for men are also rising, albeit more slowly, as women insist that partners look stylish and attractive rather than just dependable and pleasant good providers.

In affluent modern societies, extremely high levels of erotic capital can be achieved through fitness training, hard work, and technical aids. Standards and expectations are pushed higher by the mass media's constant dissemination of images of celebrities, film stars, and others who achieve the highest standards and become role models for others. Books offering advice on how to behave, how to flirt, how to make friends, and how to conduct relationships assist people in developing the relevant social skills. All the elements of erotic capital are covered in manuals on how to attract a spouse or a lover, dating skills, and sexual technique.¹⁵

In the past, mating and marriage markets were relatively small and closed, with matches based on class or caste, religion, location, and age. Matches were often decided by parents or family, based on issues of economic and social capital. In today's self-service open, and potentially global, mating and marriage markets, erotic capital plays a larger role than ever before. Thus erotic capital plays an increasing role in prosperous modern societies—most obviously in mating and marriage markets, but also in labour markets, the media, politics, advertising, sports, and the arts. Much of the popular 'self help' literature is devoted to advice on developing your erotic capital in order to improve your market appeal in all social contexts—to make you a nicer, happier, more attractive, and successful person.

In sum, physical attractiveness and sexuality are increasingly important in modern societies, so erotic capital has become just as valuable an asset as economic, social, and cultural capital. This is demonstrated most obviously not only in mating and marriage processes, but also in social interactions in many other contexts.

Applications of the Theory

Mating and Marriage Markets

A first application of the theory of erotic capital is in mating and marriage markets. Sociologists devote their efforts to measuring homogamy between spouses on the factors that are most easily measured: education,

class of origin, age, height, and religion. Yet all the evidence from studies of mating and marriage is that men trade their economic strengths for women's good looks and sex appeal whenever they can, an exchange that has been recognized within psychology but systematically ignored by sociology.¹⁶

A cross-national comparative study organized by Buss (1989, 1994) in the late 1980s is the most commonly cited evidence for the exchange of physical attractiveness for economic power. The study covered 37 countries and cultures in five continents with a bias towards the urban, affluent, and educated sectors of society. The project found that even today, the most educated modern women prefer male partners who are economically strong, and that men seek physical attractiveness in return.

The value of sex appeal is hugely enhanced in modern self-service mating markets. When parents and family chose suitable partners, they could afford to discount the value of erotic capital as compared with economic and social capital. Parents might sell a beautiful young daughter to an old or ugly man if he was wealthy or powerful enough, as illustrated by Goya's (1792) painting *The Wedding*. All the evidence from research on speed dating, Internet dating, and how people approach hook-ups in bars and clubs shows the overwhelming importance of appearance and sexual attractiveness in modern self-service mating markets. Men as well as women are regularly judged on appearance alone, at least initially, but the standard for women is always higher, and men who pay for expenses and offer gifts always attract women.

Speed dating provides an excellent strategic case study of the mate selection process. The extreme brevity of each face-to-face chat (usually only 3–5 min) exposes selection criteria, which can remain hidden, or be dressed up as something else, in personal interviews. Internet dating also provides a real-world social experiment on the matchmaking process. Invariably looks count. Studies show that actual choices do not closely reflect stated preferences, especially for men. In practice, men choose women who are physically attractive, and women choose men who are desirable mates overall. Women are aware that being attractive 'buys' desirable males. Women are more choosy than men, who make more offers to lots of women in the hope of getting lucky somewhere. For both men and women, choosiness increases the more they perceive themselves to be attractive (Todd *et al.*, 2007; Lenton *et al.*, 2008).

Men are assessed in the round. Someone who is not attractive must offer substantial compensating benefits in wealth, effort, and willingness to please in order to

make progress, or else trade down to a lower level of attractiveness in their partner. Standards are always highest for women, as illustrated by the widespread intolerance in modern societies for women who are overweight or obese.

Speed-dating studies confirm that the exchange of female erotic capital for male economic power continues in the 21st century. Earlier studies showed this to be common in the 20th century. The ruthlessly competitive culture of mixed-sex high schools and colleges in the USA makes them marriage markets as well as educational establishments. Coleman's classic study of *The Adolescent Society* showed how girls learnt that popularity and social success are often tied to physical attractiveness, good grooming, and popularity with boys rather than academic ability and scholastic success. Today, girls and women understand that brains and beauty are equally effective assets in the path to success. There is no evidence that women are rejecting the benefits of erotic capital. Women with high social aspirations actively deploy good grooming to maximize the value of their physical assets, and routinely exchange attractiveness for male wealth and power.¹⁷ For example, Udry (1984) shows that girls who were attractive when in high school were more likely to marry; were more likely to marry young; and had higher household income 15 years later.

Hakim's preference theory is the only sociological theory that gives any weight to erotic capital, arguing that marriage markets remain as important as labour markets for women's status attainment (Hakim, 2000, pp. 193). She treats women's physical attractiveness and educational attainment as equally relevant to marriage patterns. Hakim also identifies erotic capital as one of four separate roles or functions offered by women pursuing the marriage career: producing and raising children; housekeeping and domestic work; specialist manager of consumption, leisure and social relations; and luxury consumption good in herself. The 'trophy wife' is a beauty, a skilled sexual partner, a decorative and charming companion, and a social status symbol in herself (Hakim, 2000, pp. 162). Similarly, Baumeister and Vohs (2004) underline women's advantage in the sexual marketplace.

Research shows that the most upwardly mobile men in professional and managerial careers have wives who are full-time homemakers, who do not have paid jobs (Papanek, 1973; Wajcman, 1998, pp. 140–143, 156, 163–165). Putting it another way, a man with a wife who takes care of all domestic and family work is far more likely to be upwardly mobile, and have a higher income, than someone in a dual-career partnership, who has to make compromises to accommodate their

spouse's career. The exact processes at work here have not been studied. However it seems likely that some of these wives will be assisting their husbands' careers by deploying their erotic capital, which they have the time to develop fully, as illustrated by the diplomatic wives described earlier, in addition to the efficiency benefits of a division of labour that allows the husband to focus exclusively on his work and career, without having to share the childcare, cooking, and cleaning.

Women can thus exploit their erotic capital for upward social mobility through the marriage market instead of, or as well as, the labour market. The marriage market remains an avenue for upward social mobility long after the equal opportunities revolution opened up the labour market to women. Indeed, research suggests that marriage markets and labour markets can be equally important routes to social status and wealth for women in modern societies (Thelot, 1982; Erikson and Goldthorpe, 1993, pp. 231–77; Hakim, 2000, pp. 160–163). Overall, at the aggregate level, the value of erotic capital is thus roughly equal to the value of women's human capital in the 21st century.

Bargaining between Partners

A second application of the theory of erotic capital is to bargaining between partners in a couple.¹⁸ Research currently focuses on comparisons of partners' economic capital, relative incomes, or spouses' relative contributions to household income, to assess equality and power relations within couples. Across Europe, wives remain secondary earners, contributing around one-third of household income, on average; so husbands earn roughly double wives' income, and sometimes all the income (Hakim, 2000, pp. 110–117, 2004, pp. 71–73). This is interpreted as showing male dominance and 'gender inequality'. Yet studies of intimate relationships, and books by marital counsellors, point out that sexual access is typically wives' principal bargaining asset, not money. Wives withhold sex to punish their husband for not doing what they want, or offer it in order to persuade the spouse to give her what she wants (Arndt, 2009). This strategy works because husbands almost invariably want more sex than their wives. This imbalance in sexual interest constitutes one of the most common problems presented to marital therapists, counsellors, and advice columns in magazines.¹⁹

Dallos and Dallos (1997) show that wives use sexual access as a power asset and bargaining tool in marriage, especially after the second or third child is born, when they themselves lose interest in sexual

activity. A wife with no earnings of her own may nonetheless have greater bargaining power in a relationship if she has very high erotic capital, making her hard to replace, and if she actively exploits this advantage.

An analysis of the 1984 Detroit Area Study found that the relative incomes of spouses, and even whether the wife had a job or not, were *not* related to marital power, and not important in marital success. Physical attractiveness alone was also not linked to marital power (Whyte, 1990, pp. 153–154, 161, 169). Our broader concept of erotic power, including sexual access, may solve the puzzle here.

An extreme test of the sources of marital power is provided by ‘mail order’ marriages between American men and brides from Thailand, China, the Philippines, and other countries. Typically, the men sought Far Eastern brides because they preferred partnerships with role segregation, with the husband as sole earner and the wife as full-time homemaker, and they believed American women were too ‘feminist’ to accept this modern division of labour. These cross-national marriages are attacked by feminists as exploitative slavery for the wife. Constable (2003) shows, on the contrary, that these non-working wives, who have all the disadvantages of living in a foreign country, away from their own families, regard themselves as having had the freedom to choose a husband to their taste, and are very much the equals of their husbands in bargaining power, as the men themselves report ruefully. Surprisingly, Constable gives no systematic information on the wives’ erotic capital.²⁰ However it is widely understood that such cross-cultural, cross-national marriages generally involve women who are attractive as well as adventurous (and often highly educated as well), who seek an affluent spouse to support them while still treating them as equals.

In sum, Baumeister and Vohs (2004, pp. 359) are wrong to believe their theory of sexual economics does not apply to married couples. Using the broader concept of erotic capital, sexual economics can be applied to bargaining within all couples.

The Labour Market and Workplace Relations

Erotic capital has value in the labour market. It can be crucially important in certain occupations and industries, becoming part of work roles. Erotic capital can also colour relationships in the workplace—negatively in the case of sexual harassment, or positively in the case of casual flirting.

Economists have recently started to measure the economic value of erotic capital. A landmark study by Hamermesh and Biddle (1994) analysed three national survey data sets (two for the United States and one for Canada) that included interviewers’ assessment of respondents’ looks as well as information on occupation and earnings. Among men and women, over half were rated as average, between one-quarter and one-third were rated as above average, and around 1 in 10 were rated below-average in looks. They found that plain people earn less than average-looking people, who earn less than good-looking men and women. The beauty premium ranged from 1% to a maximum of 13% (for women), while the penalty for plain looks ranged between 1% and 10%. The beauty premium and penalty were not explained by differences in intelligence, social class, or self-confidence. Hamermesh and Biddle show that part of the economic benefits of attractiveness are due to people self-selecting themselves into occupations where good looks are profitable, such as sales work, but there was also a beauty premium across the whole workforce.

Similar results are reported from equivalent studies in other countries, and from case studies of the effect of good looks in occupations that involve a lot of social interaction, such as lawyers and managers. In Britain, for example, Harper (2000) found substantial earning supplements for people who are tall and/or attractive, and pay penalties for obese women, with larger effects than in the North American studies. Again, there was evidence of people sorting themselves into occupations where good looks are rewarded, or else into jobs where looks are unimportant. There is a general pattern of the private sector attracting more good-looking people than the public sector.

The most recent study shows that good looks, intelligence, personality, and confidence all determine income, for men and women alike (Judge *et al.*, 2009). Even after accounting for intelligence, good looks raise income, partly by enhancing educational attainment, personality, and self-confidence. The total effect of facial attractiveness on income is roughly equal to that of educational qualifications or self-confidence, but is much smaller than the impact of intelligence. Attractive people find it easier to interact socially, are more persuasive, and are thus more successful in a variety of jobs.

Erotic capital obviously plays a role in occupations in the hospitality and entertainment industries. Hochschild labelled this as ‘emotional labour’, and argued that this was yet another example of women being exploited in the labour market (Hochschild,

2003; Ehrenreich and Hochschild, 2004). Alternatively, certain occupations allow women to exploit their erotic capital and get commercial value from it. Strippers, burlesque artists, erotic dancers, lapdancers, call girls, nightclub hostesses, and waitresses in Europe, and geishas, hostesses, and courtesans in Japan are just some examples. Women and men in many other jobs can also exploit their erotic capital: actors, singers, dancers, models, receptionists, secretaries, and personal assistants (PAs), some people who work in public relations, many people who appear on television (TV) or in films—anywhere where looking good, charm, and social skills are important, including politics and even sports (Guttman, 1996), as illustrated by figure ice skating.

Denial of Erotic Capital

The Male Bias in Perspectives

Why has erotic capital been overlooked by social scientists? This failure of Bourdieu and other researchers is testimony to the continuing dominance of male perspectives in sociology and economics, even in the 21st century. Bourdieu's failure is all the more remarkable because he analysed relationships between men and women, and was sensitive to the competition for control and power in relationships (Bourdieu, 1998). However, like many others, Bourdieu was only interested in the three class-related and inheritable assets that are convertible into each other. Erotic capital is distinctive in not being controlled by social class and status,²¹ and has a subversive character.

Erotic capital has been overlooked because it is held mostly by women, and the social sciences have generally overlooked or disregarded women in their focus on male activities, values and interests. The patriarchal bias in the social sciences reflects the male hegemony in society as a whole. Men have taken steps to prevent women exploiting their one major advantage over men, starting with the idea that erotic capital is worthless.²² Women who parade their beauty or sexuality are belittled as stupid, lacking in intellect, and other 'meaningful' social attributes. The Christian religion has been particularly vigorous in deprecating and disdaining everything to do with sex and sexuality as base and impure, shameful, belonging to a lower aspect of humanity. Laws are devised to prevent women from exploiting their erotic capital. For example, female dancers in Britain are debased by classifying lapdancing clubs as 'sexual encounter' venues, later amended to the marginally less stigmatizing 'sexual entertainment' venues in the new Crime

and Policing law debated in Parliament in 2009. They are prohibited from charging commercial fees for surrogate pregnancies, a job that is exclusively and peculiarly female. If men could produce babies, it seems likely that it would be one of the highest paid occupations, but men use 'moral' arguments to ensure that women are not allowed to exploit any advantage.

The most powerful and effective weapon deployed by men to curtail women's use of erotic capital is the disdain and contempt heaped on female sex workers. Sex surveys in Europe show that few people regard commercial sex jobs as an occupation just like any other. Women working in the commercial sex industry are regarded as victims, drug addicts, losers, incompetents, or as people you would not wish to meet socially (Shrage, 1994, pp. 88). The patriarchal nature of these stereotypes is exposed by quite different attitudes to male prostitutes: attitudes here are ambivalent, conflicted, and unsure (Malo de Molina, 1992, pp. 203). Commercial sex is often classified as a criminal activity so that it is forced underground, as in the USA, and women working in the industry are harassed by the police and criminal justice system. Even in countries where selling sex is legal, such as Britain, Finland, or Kenya, everything connected with the work is stigmatized and criminalized, with the same effect.

Male control of female erotic capital is primarily ideological. The 'moral' opprobrium that enfolds the commercial sale of sexual performance and sexual services extends to all contexts where there is any exchange of erotic capital for money or status. Occupations, such as stripper or lapdancer, are stigmatized as lewd, salacious, sleazy, meretricious, and prurient (Frank, 2002). An attractive young woman who seeks to marry a wealthy man is branded a 'gold-digger', criticized for 'taking advantage of' men unfairly and immorally. The underlying logic is that men should get what they want from women for free, especially sex. Surprisingly, feminists have supported this ideology instead of seeking to challenge and overturn it. Even the participants in beauty contests are criticized by women.²³

The patriarchal 'morality' that denies the economic value of erotic capital operates in a similar way to downplay the economic value of other personal services and care work. England and Folbre (1999: pp. 46) point out that the principle that money cannot buy love has the unintended and perverse consequence of justifying low pay for personal service and care work, a conclusion reiterated by Zelizer (2005, pp. 302).

The Failure of Feminist Theory

Why have women, and feminists more particularly, failed to identify and valorize erotic capital? In essence, because feminist theory has proven unable to shed the patriarchal perspective, reinforcing it while ostensibly challenging it. Strictly speaking, this position is a feature of radical Anglo-Saxon feminism more specifically, but the international prominence of the English language (and of the USA) makes this the dominant feminist perspective today.²⁴

Feminist theory erects a false dichotomy: *either* a woman is valued for her human capital (her brains, education, work experience, and dedication to her career) *or* she is valued for her erotic capital (her beauty, elegant figure, dress style, sexuality, grace, and charm). Women with brains and beauty are not allowed to use both—to ‘walk on two legs’ as Chairman Mao put it.

Any scholar who argues that women have unique skills or special assets of any kind is instantly outlawed by being branded an ‘essentialist’. In principle, biological essentialism refers to an outdated theory that there are important *and unalterable* biological differences between men and women, which assign them to separate life courses. At present, it is often used to refer to the evolutionary psychology thesis that men focus on the sexual selection of the best women with whom to breed, while women invest heavily in their offspring. Put crudely, ‘sexuality for men and reproduction for women’ are treated as the root cause of all social and economic differences between men and women. In practice, the ‘essentialist’ label has become an easy term of abuse among feminists, being applied to any theory or idea regarded as unacceptable or unwelcome (Campbell, 2002). This has the advantage of avoiding the need to address the research evidence for inconvenient ideas and theories. This approach is displayed in books that seek to summarize current feminist debates on sex/gender, in the process demonstrating that these discussions are so ideological, and so divorced from empirical research, that they have become theological debates (Browne, 2007).

A key failure of feminist scholarship is the way it has maintained the male hegemony in theory, although it has been more innovative and fruitful in empirical research. Feminists insist that women’s position in society should depend exclusively on their economic and social capital. Cultural capital (where women can have the edge over men) is rarely pulled into the picture. It follows that women should invest in educational qualifications and employment careers in preference to developing their erotic capital and

investing in marriage careers. The European Commission has adopted feminist ideology wholesale, and insists that ‘gender equality’ is to be measured exclusively by employment rates, occupational segregation, access to the top jobs, personal incomes, and the pay gap,²⁵ treating women without paid jobs as ‘unequal’ to men.

Female social scientists repeatedly dismiss the idea that physical attractiveness and sexuality are power assets for women *vis-à-vis* men. For example, Lipman-Blumen (1984, pp. 89–90) lists this as just one in a series of ‘control myths’ adopted by men to justify the *status quo*; she claims that male vested interests necessarily bias any argument offered by men, even if they are social scientists. Feminist theory has so far failed to explain why men with high incomes and status regularly choose trophy (second) wives and arm-candy mistresses, while women who have achieved career success and high incomes generally prefer to marry alpha males rather than seeking toyboys and impecunious men who would make good househusbands and fathers (Hakim, 2000, pp. 153, 201).

Sylvia Walby (1990, pp. 79) admits in passing that the power to create children is one of women’s few power bases, but she never states what the others might be. Mary Evans admits that Anglo-Saxon feminism is profoundly uncomfortable with sexuality, and frames it in a relentlessly negative perspective (Evans, 2003, pp. 99; see also Walby, 1990, pp. 110). Feminists argue that there is no real distinction between marriage and prostitution; that (hetero)sexuality is central to women’s subordination by men; that patriarchal men seek to establish what Carole Pateman (1988, pp. 194, 205) calls ‘male sex-right’—male control of men’s sexual access to women. Marriage and prostitution are portrayed as forms of slavery (Pateman, 1988, pp. 230; Wittig, 1992). Sexuality is the setting for every kind of male violence against women, overlooking women’s use of sexuality to control men—a very one-sided perspective.²⁶ Feminist theory and debate also display ambivalence about the idea of sex and gender, which is presented as a patriarchal cultural imposition, with no link to the human body and motherhood (Wittig, 1992; Browne, 2007). With heterosexuality (and motherhood) presented as the root cause of women’s oppression, feminist solutions include celibacy, autoeroticism, lesbianism, and androgyny (Coppock *et al.*, 1995). Paradoxically, these solutions reduce the supply of female sexuality to men, and thus raise the value of erotic capital among heterosexual women.

Feminist discourse comes in many colours and flavours, and is constantly changing, but the common

theme is that women are the victims of male oppression and patriarchy, so that heterosexuality becomes suspect, a case of sleeping with the enemy, and the deployment of erotic capital becomes an act of treason. Post-feminism seems at first to avoid this perspective. Post-feminism is a mixed bag of literature, by novelists and journalists as well as social scientists (Coppock *et al.*, 1995; Whelehan, 1995). There is no single theme or thesis, although men are less likely to be treated as the source of all women's problems. However post-feminism is unable to escape from the puritan Anglo-Saxon asceticism and its unwavering antipathy towards beauty and sexuality. Naomi Wolf's *The Beauty Myth*, a diatribe against the rising value and importance of beauty and sexual attractiveness, is reinforced by feminists (Jeffreys, 2005). Lookism encapsulates the puritan Anglo-Saxon antipathy to beauty and sexuality, arguing that taking any account of someone's appearance should be outlawed, effectively making the valorization of erotic capital unlawful (Chancer, 1998, pp. 82–172).

One stream of feminist theory presents men as violent sexual predators who exploit women. Another theoretical stream dismantles the concepts of sex and gender, so there are no fixed 'opposites' for mutual attraction anyway. A third theme treats beauty and pleasure as dangerous traps. Between these three themes, ideas of exuberant sexuality and women's erotic power over men are squeezed out of existence. Feminist perspectives are so infused with patriarchal ideology that they seem unable to perceive heterosexuality as a source of pleasure and entertainment, and of women's power over men.

Conclusions

We present a new theory of erotic capital as a multi-faceted fourth asset that is very different from economic, social, and cultural capital. Erotic capital is an essential concept for understanding sexual relationships. It is important for understanding social processes in the public and private spheres of the individualized and sexualized cultures of modern societies in the 21st century. Our thesis is that erotic capital is rising in social and economic importance today, gives women an advantage, and is a key factor in women's changing status in society and the economy.

In the labour market, erotic capital can be more important than economic or social capital in certain occupations, especially in the leisure and entertainment industries. Like social capital, erotic capital can be an

important hidden factor enhancing success in all jobs. Erotic capital has been overlooked by theorists because it is of special value for women, who work harder at personal presentation and social skills. Men's demand for sexual activity far outstrips women's interest in sex, so there is a permanent male sex deficit. Men's interest in agreeable female companionship probably outstrips women's interest in male friendship. Erotic capital is women's trump card in mating and marriage markets, and women's ability to produce babies is a unique skill. Recognition of erotic capital sheds new light on some theoretical puzzles,²⁷ and reveals how sociological theory continues to be sexist and patriarchal in the 21st century despite the contribution of feminist theorists.

Erotic capital is similar to human capital: it requires some basic level of talent and ability, but can be trained, developed, and learnt, so that the final quantum goes far beyond any initial talent. Erotic capital, its components, and its effects can be studied, just like other intangible elements of social structures, cultures, and social interaction. The foundations already exist in sex surveys, and in research on the social impacts and economic value of attractiveness, mating and dating patterns, sexual lifestyles, and attitudes to fertility.

Space allows only a brief presentation of a theory of erotic capital.²⁸ Elements of the thesis outlined here should be developed in future research. In effect, we are proposing a new agenda for sociological (and feminist) research and theory.

Notes

1. The French concept of *belle laide* refers to an ugly woman who becomes attractive through her presentation skills and style.
2. In Japan, the 'entertainer' visa and license is applied to everyone entering the country to work in the leisure industry, including musicians, artists, women who work in hostess bars, and women who work in the commercial sex industry. In the Western world, the sex industry in its diverse manifestations is also part of the wider entertainment industry (Frank, 2002, pp. 85–95).
3. One partial exception is Zetterberg's 1966 sex survey which asked: 'Would you say that it is easy to make others fall in love with you?' and 'Thinking back over the last 12 months, how

- many people would you say had really been in love with you in that period?', for which results are never reported (Zetterberg, 2002, pp. 275). The 1992 Finnish sex survey replaced this by measuring 'sexual self-esteem' as follows: 'What is your opinion of the following statements concerning your sexual life and your sexual capacity? I have rather great sexual skills. I am sexually active. I am sexually attractive', thus conflating erotic capital with sexual activity. Responses to these three items were scored on a five-point scale from 'totally agree' to 'disagree totally'. Sex differences in scores are analysed in Kontula and Haavio-Mannila (1995, pp. 179–183), showing that women have higher erotic capital than men although it declines rapidly with age.
4. Laumann *et al.* (1994) rely on human capital and social capital. Cameron (2002) notes that economics offers nothing to analyse or explain sexual affairs apart from human capital and risk.
 5. This would be enhanced by higher fertility among beautiful women than among ugly women. There is some evidence that attractive women have more children than ugly women, creating an evolutionary trend towards more attractive women, whereas men have not improved much over time (Leake, 2009).
 6. The surveys vary in size, sampling, and focus. For Britain see Johnson *et al.* (1994); Wellings *et al.* (1994); for Italy, see Vaccaro (2003); for Spain, see Malo de Molina (1992); for France, see Simon *et al.* (1972); Spira and Bajos (1993) and Mossuz-Lavau (2002); for Sweden, see Zetterberg (2002); for Finland, see Kontula and Haavio-Mannila (1995); Haavio-Mannila and Rotkirch (1997, 2000); Haavio-Mannila *et al.* (2001, 2002); for Czechoslovakia, see Raboch and Raboch (1989). American surveys are reported by Halper (1988); Janus and Janus (1993); Laumann *et al.* (1994); Laumann and Michael (2001). China is covered by Liu *et al.* (1997), and Japan by Lafayette de Mente (2006). Reviews of the evidence are offered by Thompson (1983); contributors to Eder *et al.* (1999); Fennel in Zetterberg (2002, pp. 1–79); Hunter (2010); and Hakim (2011).
 7. One reason for the discrepancy between men and women's reports of sexual activity, found in all sex surveys, is that women and men who sell sexual services never participate in such surveys (which do not address their situation), so are excluded from the resulting statistics. Many of men's sex worker partners would be in foreign countries anyway, and automatically excluded. In addition, men are prone to exaggerate their sexual conquests.
 8. In November 2009, 5 years after she stopped working as a call girl, Belle de Jour revealed herself to be Dr Brooke Magnanti, a specialist in developmental neurotoxicology and cancer epidemiology working in a university hospital in Bristol.
 9. See note 3 above.
 10. Feminists underline the pay gap as if this explains everything. But overt sex discrimination in rates of pay for the same job has been eliminated in European societies. The pay gap has shrunk dramatically in Europe (to between 8% and 21%) and is far too small to be the main cause of all the continuing sex differences in behavior and outcomes (Hakim, 1994). The pay gap cannot explain why all sex surveys, even in Scandinavia, find that male sexual interest and activity is far greater than among women, often three times greater, as measured by masturbation, use of erotica, and sexual fantasies, activities where economic and social constraints are not important (Hakim, 2011).
 11. Some women experience a sexual flowering after childbirth, leading to extramarital affairs at that time (Wolfe, 1975; Hunter, 2010).
 12. The results of the recent sex surveys are reviewed in detail in Hakim (2011). See also Baumeister *et al.* (2001); Fennel in Zetterberg (2002) and Hunter (2010).
 13. Kontula and Haavio-Mannila (1995, pp. 200–203) demonstrate strong links between use of commercial sexual services, having affairs, numerous sexual partners, and high sexual self-esteem (meaning in practice erotic capital). Finnish men use prostitutes at all ages, especially after age 35–40 years. In the USA, 17% of men but only 2% of women pay for sex (Laumann *et al.* 1994, pp. 590, 595).
 14. Levitt and Dubner (2009) and Hunter (2010) note that supply and demand vary over time, but

- sexually active women always remain in short supply, even after the sexual revolution.
15. 'Be a creature like no other' advise Fein and Schneider (1995), showing that impression management is as important as concrete skills. See also Louis and Copeland (1998, 2000).
 16. Paradoxically, popular culture can push scholars to pay attention, as illustrated by an American study (Averett and Korenman, 1996) inspired by Wolf's *The Beauty Myth* that found obese white women have lower incomes, because they have a lower chance of marriage, and have lower-earning spouses when they do marry.
 17. See Elder (1969); Glenn, Ross and Tully (1974); Taylor and Glenn (1976); Udry (1977, 1984); Townsend (1987); Stevens, Owens and Schaefer (1990). See also Whyte (1990, pp. 169); James (1997, pp. 222–37); Mullan (1984); and Hakim (2000, pp. 193–222).
 18. The argument is presented in relation to heterosexual couples, but applies equally to homosexual couples where one partner is younger and more sexually attractive.
 19. Therapists and counselors typically refuse to see this as a simple imbalance in sexual interest, and address it as a symptom of other problems in the relationship (Praver, 2006).
 20. On the rare occasions when she does, the women are described as beautiful and attractive, as illustrated by a beautiful 22 year old Filippina girl happily married to a mid-50s heavy American man who provided for her in every way (Constable, 2003, pp. 102, 142, 169).
 21. Martin and George (2006, pp. 126) claim that Bourdieu treated sexual attractiveness as just one part of cultural capital. However, Bourdieu was only interested in embodied cultural capital that displayed social class advantages, such as the accent and social manners that denote higher status social origins and are inculcated within the family. He had no interest in erotic capital because it is not locked into social stratification, structured primarily by class of origin rather than sex and personal initiative. His perspective is also dated because he did not anticipate the modern style tribes that cut across socio-economic groups.
 22. It is notable that economists studying the beauty premium in the labour market often label it as discrimination, although psychologists have demonstrated the real 'value added' it offers in most social contexts.
 23. The journalist India Knight (2009) criticized beauty contests until a black woman who is an Olympic athlete won the Miss England contest. She then admitted beautiful women can be intelligent and admirable high achievers, and that beauty contests did not humiliate women.
 24. French and German feminism tend to valorize femininity, sexuality, and women's role as mothers while still campaigning for equal opportunities in the labour force and public life. However, it is radical Anglo-Saxon feminist theory that dominates educational courses and media debates, as illustrated by the reviews in Walby (1990) and Evans (2003). Such reviews briefly note the divergent lines of French feminism (Evans, 2003, pp. 48), which rejects Anglo-Saxon victim feminism, and criticizes the idea that sexuality is the foundation of men's oppression of women (Badinter, 2003/2006).
 25. This narrow perspective is reiterated in proposals for a European Union Gender Equality Index, with the addition of the gender gap in caring time for children and in leisure time (Plantenga *et al.*, 2009).
 26. The diatribe against heterosexuality was informed by Dworkin (1981, 1987) and MacKinnon (1987), but runs through most feminist debates, in all their many varieties (Walby, 1990, pp. 128; Whelehan, 1995; Wittig, 1992). Alan Soble (2002) offers a rare defence from a liberal-Marxist perspective.
 27. For example, it explains the deep gulf dividing (radical) Anglo-Saxon feminism from French and German feminism. The latter have always recognized and valued women's erotic capital (without using the concept). More generally, it explains why stories of the Prince who marries the beautiful peasant girl, or Cinderella, are so widespread across societies, and why there are more female than male millionaires in a modern country such as Britain.
 28. The thesis is developed more fully, with a full review of the supporting evidence, in Hakim (2011).

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