


CATHERINE HAKIM

EROTIC  
CAPITAL




THE POWER  
OF ATTRACTION IN  
THE BOARDROOM  
AND THE BEDROOM



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*The Power of Attraction in the  
Boardroom and the Bedroom*

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# INTRODUCTION

## Erotic Capital and the Politics of Desire

Anna lost her well-paying job in financial services, so she had to work hard at finding a new one. She ate less, exercised, lost weight, and looked ten years younger. She went to the hair-dresser, got her hair cut shorter, colored, and restyled, and she looked even younger and more lively. She went shopping and invested in an expensive new suit that showed off her new trim figure and that made her look attractive as well as professional—and she wore it to all her job interviews. Anna felt confident wearing it. Three months later she had won a new job in consultancy paying fifty percent more than the old one.

Anna works in the private sector, where appearances count rather more than in the public sector. But when it comes to looking better, anyone can do the same. Why would anyone not invest in and deploy an asset that supplements intelligence, specialist knowledge, and experience? People looking for a new job are often advised to rely on their social network, to exploit their social capital. But updating your appearance and style can be equally effective.

I coined the term “erotic capital” to refer to a complex but crucial combination of beauty, sex appeal, skills of self-presentation, and social skills—a combination of physical and social attractiveness that makes some men and women agreeable to company and colleagues, attractive to all members of their society and especially to the opposite sex. We are used to valuing human capital—qualification, training, and work experience. More recently, we have begun to recognize the importance of what is now called “social capital” and networking—who you know instead of what you know. This book presents the evidence for, and impact of, a talent so completely ignored until now that there has never even been a label for it. Now there is: erotic capital.

Erotic capital is just as important as human and social capital for understanding social and economic processes, social interaction, and upward social mobility. It is essential for making sense of sexuality and sexual relationships. In sexualized and individualized modern societies, erotic capital is becoming more important and more valorized, for men and women. But women have a longer tradition of developing and exploiting it, and studies regularly find that women have greater erotic appeal than men. Artists have known this for centuries.

Counselors who advise on job hunting remind us that you never get a second chance to make a good first impression. People who are short-listed for interview are all suitably qualified and have appropriate work experience. Interviewees display any extra talents—such as erotic capital—that help to make a winner. Anna already had the degrees and experience, so she invested in this other asset.

that is so often overlooked. For people who have few or no qualifications, erotic capital can be their most important personal asset.

Like intelligence, erotic capital has value in all areas of life, from the boardroom to the bedroom. Attractive people draw others to them, as friends, lovers, colleagues, customers, clients, fans, followers, voters, supporters, and sponsors. They are more successful in private life (with a greater choice of partners and friends) but also in politics, sport, the arts, and business life. In this book I want to explore the social processes that help attractive people to achieve more, faster. At what age does being attractive start to matter? Are the most beautiful and handsome people aware of their advantage? Is there any link between beauty and brains, so that a lucky few have a double advantage? If you are not born beautiful, can you develop attractiveness anyway?

At an early stage, my study threw up a puzzle. Research shows that men benefit financially even more than women from high erotic capital! As I expected, women score higher on levels of social and physical attractiveness—probably because they invest more effort in looking good and being agreeable. However men are rewarded more highly for their lesser efforts. In effect, women's erotic capital seems to be less well rewarded than men's—most demonstrably in the workforce.

Why is men's erotic capital more valorized than women's? Part of the explanation seems to lie in what I call the "male sex deficit"—men's greater sexual desire, which leaves them frustrated from an early age. This deficit exerts a hidden influence on men's attitudes to women in private relationships especially but also in public affairs. I discovered the male sex deficit by accident while trawling through the results of the recent sex surveys around the world. It is a popular truism that men never get enough sex. The male sex deficit interacts with erotic capital to color all relationships between men and women, at home and at work. Patriarchy has worked hard to conceal this in a fog of moralizing that controls women's public dress and behavior. As I see it, radical feminism has gone down a dead-end by adopting similar ideas that belittle women's allure. Why didn't feminists challenge male conventions about appropriate dress and proper behavior for women? Why not champion femininity rather than abolish it? Why does no one encourage women to exploit men whenever they can? Radical feminism can seem restricting rather than liberating. Even attractive feminists like Gloria Steinem, who once worked as a bunny in a Playboy club, have never championed women's erotic capital.

This is not a book presenting personal opinions and prejudices. All the arguments are based on and indeed developed from the extensive social science research evidence on these topics. My two central concepts—erotic capital and the male sex deficit—are new but evidence-based.

Erotic capital is gaining importance in affluent modern societies. Just as IQ levels have been rising steadily by about six percent per decade over the last century, levels of physical attractiveness are also rising slowly over time. The two processes are probably linked in some way, just as tallness is linked to cognitive ability and social skills. Can erotic capital be measured, just like IQ and height? Which is more important, physical attractiveness or social attractiveness?

It is well-known that being tall carries social and economic advantages, especially for men. Most U.S. presidents have been tall men, and almost always taller than their opponent in the other party. In the same way, it appears that social and physical attractiveness delivers a wide range of important benefits in the workforce and general social life as well as in private relationships.

The benefits of physical and social attractiveness for men and women in everyday life are measurable—in friendship, dating, courtship, marriage, seducing lovers, having affairs, making friends, being regarded as good and honest, and generally having an easier time of it in most contexts. These lifetime benefits of erotic capital are sometimes called discrimination, but this is inappropriate. Scarcity confers value on any commodity, talent, or skill, be it the ability to be charming and persuasive, a knowledge of IT programs, the ability to fly a plane or run faster than others.

Erotic capital can be crucial within established couples, subtly altering day-to-day negotiations between partners over roles and responsibilities. Most research looks at heterosexual couples, but a similar pattern emerges among homosexual couples where one partner is younger and more sexually attractive. This results in the “sexual economics” of private relationships, or, as I put it, the “sexonomics” underlying all exchanges and relations between men and women.

Erotic entertainments, the commercial sex industry, and much of the advertising industry are businesses that sell erotic capital. Whether or not sexual services are involved, women and men in the entertainment industry broadly defined tend to be young, certainly younger than most customers, attractive, often beautiful, fit and lively, with high sex appeal, and they frequently offer a variety of other social skills or artistic talents, such as dancing and singing or acrobatics. Even the music industry has become increasingly eroticized, with singers occasionally recruited primarily on the basis of their ability to project sex appeal and vitality in videos and stage shows. Advertisements for clothes and fragrance have become highly sexualized. Advertising regularly deploys women’s sex appeal and beauty to sell products of all kinds—from detergent to cars and motor oil.

Erotic capital has a business value. Erotic capital helps sell products, services, ideas and policies in politics, the media, the workplace, sports, and the arts. In service industries, the social skills element of erotic capital can be especially important for creating a particular style and feel to the service provided, for example in a club or bar. But social skills are important in all white-collar jobs, especially in management and in professions that involve contact with customers or clients. Even politicians and academics find it helps to be attractive and well-groomed in addition to being well-informed, because TV exposes them, as well as their ideas, to the public gaze. While the returns to erotic power are concentrated in particular occupations, several studies show that there is a noticeable ten to twenty percent “beauty premium” in earnings across the whole workforce, just like the ten to twenty percent earnings markup for tallness.

Erotic capital seems such an obvious idea that one has to ask why it has never been identified until now. My argument is that the politics of desire led to women losing out, across the board. Erotic capital plays a major role in stimulating male

desire and, less aggressively, female desire. Debates about erotic capital, and its value, are routinely colored by male desire and sexual needs. Men have generally been unwilling to admit this, lest women recognize, and exploit, “men’s weakness.” Women’s erotic capital thus becomes entangled with the male sex deficit, male egos, and the rhetoric surrounding power struggles between men and women. Modern sexual politics involves constant denial of the value of women’s erotic capital and sexuality in private life.

Feminists claim that it is a myth that men have stronger libidos than women have and that it is merely an excuse used to exonerate bad behavior. They insist that there is no real difference between men and women in sexuality, as in other areas. The evidence goes against them. To prove them wrong, I examine the evidence and consider the implications of differing levels of desire between men and women for the value of erotic capital. My interest is in the impact that ubiquitous difference has on the importance of erotic capital—and in its relationship to the denial of the value of erotic capital. To justify my conclusion that this difference in desire—this male sex deficit—is a universal phenomenon, I present the evidence from sex surveys around the world. It is crucial to establish this as a new social fact that social scientists have mostly sidestepped, and explore its impact on relationships between men and women, in both private and public life.

Since the benefits of erotic capital are substantial, we have to ask, why is it that this personal asset has so far not been recognized explicitly? I argue that patriarchal ideologies have systematically trivialized women’s erotic capital to discourage women from capitalizing on it at men’s expense. Because women generally have more erotic capital than men, men deny it exists or has value, and have taken steps to ensure that women cannot legitimately exploit their relative advantage. Unfortunately, radical feminists today reinforce patriarchal “moral” objections to the deployment of erotic capital. A lot of modern feminist writing colludes with male chauvinist perspectives by perpetuating this contempt for female beauty and sex appeal. “Lookism” and the revolt of the obese are the latest expressions of this denial of the social and economic value of erotic capital.

Feminism is a broad church, with many competing elements. French and German feminism have generally recognized and valued women’s erotic capital (without using the concept). Their awareness of women’s erotic capital helps to explain the deep gulf dividing Puritan British and American radical feminists from most of their continental sisters.

Erotic capital exposes one aspect of life where women undoubtedly have an advantage over men, reinforced by the male sex deficit. It is an advantage that men have so far refused to admit. Recognition of erotic capital as the missing fourth personal asset exposes how the social sciences continue to be sexist and patriarchal in the twenty-first century despite the contribution of feminist thinkers. It also prompts a new perspective on some hotly debated areas of public policy—such as prostitution and surrogate pregnancies.

The concept and theory of erotic capital emerged from a wideranging assessment of the research evidence on women’s position in the labor market and



in private relationships, of what seems to be missing from existing theories about what makes for success in life, and of popular understanding of how relationships work. My aim in this book is to offer a new perspective that illuminates all aspects of relationships, in public as well as private life—and I hope in the process encourage women to bargain for a better deal.

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# **PART I**

## The Fourth Personal Asset and the New Sexual Politics

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# CHAPTER 1

## What Is Erotic Capital?

Attractive people stand out. People notice them, are drawn to them, are well disposed toward them. President Barack Obama has many talents, is clever and highly educated, but it is very likely that being handsome, slim, fit, and smartly dressed also contributed to his becoming the first African-American president of the United States. It hasn't hurt that his wife, Michelle, also ticks all the boxes. Elizabeth Taylor was a luminous beauty from childhood and lit up the screen for decades. Men always found her attractive, and over her long life she married (and divorced) seven different men.

Exceptional beauty, fitness, and social skills have universal appeal. The Chinese actress Gong Li is one of the great beauties of the world, as mesmerizing in the American film *Miami Vice* as she was in a string of masterworks by the Chinese director Zhang Yimou. The golfer Tiger Woods is said to be the first athlete to achieve over \$1 billion in career earnings, most of it from multimillion-dollar sponsorship deals rather than from his main occupation as an athlete, because his appeal as a mixed-race, attractive, fit, lively athlete is global, not purely local. Here again, an attractive spouse and children were part of his appeal—until he got divorced.

These examples concern famous people, but the same pattern can be seen with people who are not so famous. People who are physically and socially attractive have an edge, an advantage, an allure that can serve them well in almost all aspects of life and in nearly all occupations.

How does a person succeed in modern societies? It helps to start out with a silver spoon in your mouth. Thus a first contributor to success might be money, but there are other forms of capital, which can also be important. Since Western economies have become meritocracies, we have become accustomed to talking about “human capital” to refer to the enormous economic and social benefits of good education and work experience. Human capital also describes the contribution of employees to any enterprise in the knowledge economy. More recently, we have adopted the term “social capital” to refer to the economic and social value of friends, relatives, and business contacts—who you know, as distinct from what you know. Erotic capital is the fourth personal asset, until recently overlooked and ignored, even though everywhere there are daily reminders of its importance.

Erotic capital combines beauty, sex appeal, liveliness, a talent for dressing well, charm and social skills, and sexual competence. It is a mixture of physical and social attractiveness. Sexuality is one part of it, a part that is easily overlooked and

it applies only in intimate relationships. However sex surveys carried out around the world show that people in affluent societies are now having more sex, with more partners, than was generally feasible before the invention of modern contraceptives. So sexuality plays a larger role in modern life than before, increasingly pervading literature, popular culture, and advertising, as well as fueling a massive expansion in sexual entertainments of all kinds. Some welcome this new “sexual liberation.” Many hate it. The ubiquity of erotic images in public advertising provokes as much feminist anger as images of housewives’ domestic bliss did in previous decades.

The inescapable fact is that sexuality has become more important in modern life for everyone, not just for the elite and the wealthy, as in the past, with kings, harems and aristocrats’ concubines. One consequence is that the value of women’s erotic capital is raised, if only because male demand for sexual entertainments seems inexhaustible, something many women do not fully understand.

In this book, I present a new theory of erotic capital as a fourth personal asset and its application in all spheres of social, economic, political, and romantic life. I show 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 analyzing 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 is becoming more important and more valorized, for both men and women.

## **The Six (or Seven) Elements of Erotic Capital**

Erotic capital is multifaceted. Particular aspects may be more or less salient in different societies and at different points in time. But beauty is always a central element of it, despite cultural and temporal variations in definitions of beauty. Some African societies, notably in southern Africa, admire women with large voluptuous bodies. In western Europe, fashion models can be tall and thin to the point of seeming anorexic. In a previous time, 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, big mouths, and “sculptured” faces are now prioritized. The latest research shows that conventionality, symmetry, and an even skin tone contribute to attractiveness.

Most people think beauty is innate, but can it be achieved? The French think so; they speak of the *belle laide* (or *beau laid* in the case of men), the ugly woman who becomes attractive through her presentational skills and style. Getting fit, improving posture, wearing flattering colors and shapes, choosing appropriate hairstyles and clothes—such changes can add up to a completely new look. Yet many people fail to make the effort. Great beauty is always in short supply and

universally valued.

The second element of erotic capital is sexual attractiveness, which can be quite separate from beauty. To some extent, beauty is mainly about facial attractiveness, while sexual attractiveness is about the body. But 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 and is easily captured in a photo. Sexual attractiveness is about the way someone moves, talks, and behaves, so it can best be captured on film and video or observed directly. Many young people have sex appeal, but it can fade rapidly with age. In the Western world, men reputedly divide into those who most value breasts, buttocks, or legs, but in most other cultures it is the overall appearance that matters. Some men prefer women who are small, while others prefer tall and elegant women. Some women prefer men with well-developed muscles and strong athletic bodies, while others are attracted to a slender, elegant appearance. These two versions of ideal masculinity are both depicted in Indonesian shadow puppet theater and Chinese opera: the refined, civilized, clever scholar and the forceful, dynamic warrior—the power of the pen and the power of the sword. Despite these variations in personal taste, sex appeal is in short supply, and is therefore universally valued.

The 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. Flirtation skills can be learned but again are not a universal talent. Some people in positions of power have lots of charm and charisma; others have none at all. Some men and women are good at discreet flirtation in all contexts, while others aren't. Again, these social skills have value.

The fourth element of erotic capital is liveliness, a mixture of physical fitness, social energy, and good humor. People who have a lot of life in them can be hugely attractive to others—as illustrated by those who are “the life of the party.” Some cultures value humor. In most cultures liveliness is displayed in dancing, skills or sports, which is why athletes generally have a special allure.

The fifth element of erotic capital concerns social presentation: style of dress, face-painting, perfume, jewelry, 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. Military and other formal uniforms announce status, rank, and authority and carry erotic connotations for some people. 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. The relative emphasis on sexy attire or social status symbols depends on the venue and event. In the past, sumptuary laws controlled people's use of status symbols in their apparel, including the wearing of royal colors such as purple or gold, and specified different clothing for men and women. Nowadays, fashion serves this role, with a constant parade of this-season styles and colors. Today, the focus is on the display of sexuality and style tribes as much as economic status—are you

mini or a maxi girl? Throughout the world, weddings encourage glamorous dressing up, while funerals demand modesty, simplicity, and dressing down. People who are skilled at social presentation and appropriate dress 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 usually known only to the 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 of itself guarantee sexual competence. However people with strong libido are more likely to acquire the experience that leads to greater skill. With rare exceptions, national sex surveys provide no information at all on people's sex appeal and sexual competence, but they reveal dramatic variations in sex drive. A tiny minority of men and women are extremely sexually active; the majority are moderately active; a minority are mostly 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, whereas the other five 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 often differs for men and women, and varies between cultures and in different centuries. In Papua New Guinea, it is men who decorate their hair with feathers and paint their faces with brilliant colors and creative designs. In Western societies, women paint their faces with make-up, but men rarely do. The value of erotic capital can depend on someone's occupation. IT personnel do not generally need it, which may be why they are widely stereotyped as geeks. In contrast, Japanese geishas and Pakistani tawa'if courtesans display erotic capital as an essential 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, restaurants, nightclubs, and other public places and do not routinely offer sexual services, while tawa'if courtesans might offer sex as one of their attractions, in addition to being skilled dancers and ghazal singers. In both cases, the emphasis is 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, but it is also very real in all social contexts.

In some cultures, women's erotic capital is closely tied to their fertility. Many of the earliest images of the human form, such as the Japanese Dogu clay figurines which are 13,000 years old, are of women, probably goddesses, who are believed to be fertility symbols. In Christian societies, images of the young mother Mary with her child are ubiquitous. Among many West Indian groups, fertility is so crucial to a woman's sex appeal that girls demonstrate their fertility before 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 being child-free by choice. One reason for stigmatizing homosexuality in some cultures is that it cannot produce offspring. In many cultures a fertile woman is regarded as having additional attractions, especially if her children are healthy and beautiful. An Italian woman remarked that in Italy men admire her for her beautiful children, whereas in the United States men only admire her for her lovely long legs and lustrous long hair. In some cultures, fertility is an additional seventh element of erotic capital, an element that is unique to women since men are unable to bear children. In certain cultures, this element carries huge additional weight, automatically giving women an advantage over men. Alternatively, reproductive capital is a separate, fifth personal asset, which appears to be of lower value in the twenty-first century in modern societies than it was in agricultural cultures characterized by high fertility.

In some cultures, erotic and cultural capital are closely intertwined, as illustrated by the ancient Greek hetaire, Japanese geishas, and the courtesans of the Italian renaissance. Such women are admired as much for their artistic skills—in dancing, singing, playing music, painting, reciting or composing poetry—as for their beauty and sex appeal. Veronica Franco was a renowned Italian poet as well as a famous courtesan. Modern equivalents are actors and singers who project sex appeal in films, videos, and on stage, such as Elvis Presley, Marilyn Monroe, George Clooney, and Beyoncé Knowles. Some entertainers create a work of performance art out of their own persona, on and off-stage—as illustrated by the extravagant dress styles of Lady Gaga, Cher, and David Bowie.

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. Erotic capital includes skills that can be learned and developed, as well as features fixed at birth, such as being tall or short, black or white. Women generally have more of it than men, even in cultures where fertility is not an integral element, and they employ it more actively. Erotic capital is an important asset for all groups who have less access to economic, social, and human capital, including young people, ethnic and cultural minorities, disadvantaged groups, and cross-national migrants.

My concept of erotic capital goes much wider than previous versions that are narrowly focused on sex appeal. My theory is informed by the recent research evidence on sexuality and erotic entertainments, is precise about constitutive elements, and applies to the heterosexual majority culture as well as the minority gay subcultures of North America and Europe.

It would be worthwhile comparing cultures, and studying trends over time in how erotic capital differs between men and women, which elements carry more weight, and how it is valued compared to the other personal assets. My focus in this book, however, is on contemporary modern societies, because it is here and now that erotic capital has acquired its greatest importance and value.

# The Fourth Personal Asset

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Individuals have four types of personal asset. The distinction and relationship between three of them—economic capital, cultural capital, and social capital—was first set out in 1983 by the French sociologist, anthropologist, and philosopher Pierre Bourdieu. The concepts proved so useful that they quickly passed into everyday language as well as the social sciences, especially in Europe.

According to Bourdieu, economic capital is the sum of the resources and assets that people use to produce financial gains—such as money, land, and property.

Bourdieu's cultural capital includes human capital as defined by economists: educational qualifications, training, skills, and work experience that are valuable in the labor market and can be used to produce an income. But Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital is wider than human capital and includes cultural knowledge and artifacts. It includes the information resources and assets that are socially valued, such as a knowledge of art, literature, and music, the internalized culture that defines good taste, and the appropriate accent that makes someone appear "distinguished." It includes cultural artifacts, such as paintings, musical sculptures, plays, books, beautiful furniture, architect-designed or historic homes, concrete things that can be owned, bought, and sold (unlike good taste) and help to raise someone's social standing. Self-made millionaires often consolidate their new social status by investing in cultural artifacts.

As defined by Bourdieu, 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, tribe, or club that can produce useful relationships—who you know, as distinct from what you know. Applying the term "social capital" can thus transform nepotism and corruption into something apparently acceptable. The Italian Mafia relies heavily on social capital, as do politicians and academics who create debts of mutual support and recognition to advance their careers. Social capital can be used to climb the social ladder, to exert power and influence, or to make money—good social contacts can be crucial to certain business ventures. Political capital is a special form of social capital and refers to a person's political networks, assets, and resources. Social (and political) capital accrues to individuals, and the richer and more successful they are, the easier it is for them to make connections: they are known to more people than they know. The volume or value of a person's social capital is a function of the size of their network and the value of economic and cultural capital possessed by people in the network. So if all your friends are poor and uneducated, your social capital may in practice be close to zero in value.

Erotic capital is just as valuable as money, education, and good contacts, even though it has been overlooked by Bourdieu and other social scientists. Societies can accord different weights to the various types of capital, which can be more or less convertible into financial benefits. Some individuals are well-endowed with all forms of capital. The poorest may have virtually none of any substance or value. Most people have varying combinations of personal assets at different times.



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