



**Book Review: PERSONAL STORIES Carol Smart
Personal Life Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007, 220 pp.,
ISBN 978-0-7456-3916-1**

Ann Oakley

► **To cite this version:**

Ann Oakley. Book Review: PERSONAL STORIES Carol Smart Personal Life Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007, 220 pp., ISBN 978-0-7456-3916-1. European Journal of Women's Studies, 2008, 15 (4), pp.417-419. 10.1177/1350506808095298 . hal-00571343

HAL Id: hal-00571343

<https://hal.science/hal-00571343>

Submitted on 1 Mar 2011

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Book Reviews

PERSONAL STORIES

Carol Smart

Personal Life

Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007, 220 pp., ISBN 978-0-7456-3916-1

Personal Life is modestly not titled 'a sociology of' (or even 'towards a sociology of'), but it narrates the beginning stages of a journey concerned with the renaming and reconceptualization of an important area of human life. In her readable and well-argued account of the case for focusing on 'personal life', Carol Smart sees this as embracing diverse forms of relationships and connectedness: traditional family ties, including those of kinship; newer configurations such as same-sex partnerships and relationships engineered by reproductive technologies of one kind or another; and, of course, simple friendships (though there is nothing simple about friendship, and it is perhaps the most sociologically ignored of all liaisons). Smart prefers the term 'personal' to 'individual', partly because of the latter's complicity in the individualization thesis advanced by Giddens and others. In order to lay claim to having a personal life, you need not be an unfettered, autonomous agent. The 'personal' includes the 'social', and is lived only in the context of others.

There is nothing very contentious about this; on the contrary, Smart's arguments sum up very nicely many critical features of (post)modern life. For many years, the statistics of household arrangements have proved that the nuclear family has been abandoned by most of us. At the same time, biological ties are clearly still salient, and notions and practices of biology have been invaded by artificial technologies of reproduction, with all their attendant lies and silences. The change in mores and habits with respect to same-sex relationships is obvious. But through all this (and perhaps partly because of it), we remain nostalgic about, and committed to, stories which connect us in some permanent way to others. This quality of permanence, on which Smart does not comment, can achieve extraordinary importance in a world of shifting identities and inbuilt obsolescence.

Personal life is about emotions, love, homes, everyday life, things and their invested meanings – all areas neglected by sociology. The list is so impressive that one wonders what sociology *has* contributed. The answer, of course, is grand (and not so grand) theory. An amazing amount of sociological effort and writing has gone into the construction and recitation of ideas about how society works, and very little, by comparison, into finding out. Smart admits to a weariness, after more than 20 years in the field, with the old debates: how the status of children and the experience

of childhood have been affected by the rise of child-centredness; the extent and meaning of companionate marriage; whether industrialization really destroyed The Family, and whether it is now in its death throes, murdered by the growth of individualism, by women's selfishness in wanting equality with men and by cumulative revelations of families as places of oppression and violence.

After more than 40 years of exposure to such arguments, I share Smart's weariness, but I am fatigued as well by another familiar dispute in which parts of *Personal Life* do seem to participate: the war of methods. Smart talks of the tension between the blandness of survey data and the richness of those gathered in qualitative research, invoking the latter at a number of points in the book to illustrate or develop a point in her argument. It is surely true that painstakingly transcribed interview data tell us about change, contradiction and, above all, complexity, but it is equally reasonable to suggest that what debates about family and personal life have most lacked is a rooting in representative and appropriately gathered large-scale evidence. In this they are not alone, just as the quantitative–qualitative divide has formed a generic structural weakness in much sociology in the UK and elsewhere.

The most interesting parts of the book for me are the autobiographical. Its starting point is Smart's promotion to the status of keeper of the family photographs. It is easy to feel engaged by the photographs of her grandparents, cockily posed outside the saloon bar of the local pub, and by the story of her grandmother, Gertrude, born to a poor rural family in 1882, and inheriting the traditional female legacies of illegitimate pregnancy, domestic service and unhappy marriage. The family secret, that three of Gertrude's legitimate children were consigned to an orphanage and the husband and son written out of the story when the marriage disintegrated, seems less dramatic than it is, perhaps because there are no telling interview data here to draw on.

Interviews and autobiographies are effective ways of telling stories. Significantly, both have suffered from mistreatment within sociology as the poor cousins of grand theory. Smart almost seems to apologize for the incursion of the autobiographical 'I', but she joins a growing band of us who are trying to take a more inclusive attitude to methods of all kinds. In Volume 2 of *Personal Life* (which she anticipates in this volume), I hope there will be more autobiography. It would also be good to see an analytic approach that foregrounds gender (the gendering of methods and areas of sociological work) more than is evident in Volume 1. It seems highly probable that the case for reconceptualizing the study of the family and private life as 'personal' is long overdue, in part because of the personal biases of masculinist theorists. (This may also help to explain the 'bizarre' (p. 184) fact that love and hate are mostly absent from books about families and kinship.)

Personal Life may not claim to have established a sociology of personal life, but the book's subtitle, 'new directions in sociological thinking', implies a break with the past. Smart sees it as 'the beginning of a process of connecting ideas and concepts in order to create an imaginative, multi-dimensional field of study' (p. 182). The vision and the agenda are both appropriate and well accomplished. I am somewhat less sure about the claim to link empirical work and theorizing in new ways. Theories built on rich data from tiny samples can be shaky. But personal life as a domain and a proper subject for sociological study are definitely here to stay,

and hopefully this book will refocus the selective eye of sociology to provoke a much more informed and informative view of personal life as a fundamental feature of the human condition.

Ann Oakley

Institute of Education, University of London

PITY AND COURAGE IN COMMERCIAL SEX

Laura María Agustín

Sex at the Margins: Migration, Labour Markets and the Rescue Industry

London: Zed Books, 2007, 224 pp., ISBN 978-1-8427-7859-3 (hbk), 978-1-8427-7860-9 (pbk)

Over the last 10 years Agustín's sharp analysis has represented a unique, not to mention free, online resource to those attempting to move in the difficult field of 'prostitution' and 'trafficking', whether as an 'insider, outsider, stakeholder, political actor . . . researcher-with-a-self-interest', or, as she is, a shifting mix of all those positions (p. 141). The best word to describe Agustín's work is *courageous*. And so is *Sex at the Margins*, her first book published in English with an exhaustive and up-to-date set of references.

Agustín takes us carefully through her own journey to understand that the sex industry in Europe may only be analysed together with its counterpart, the social sector. Why is there such a gap between the way people in Central, South America and Cuba talk about travelling to Europe and the way those reaching out to migrants in Europe discuss them as victims (p. 135)? 'Why [have] so much passion and effort [in the social sector] not managed to improve life for people who sell sex?', asks Agustín (p. 135). She turns our gaze towards privately and publicly funded services, projects and programmes and towards individuals, practitioners as well as theorists – largely women, often feminists, typically in good faith – wanting to 'do something about the problem'. Agustín's lucid critique does not spare rights activists, including sex workers themselves. Indeed, Agustín is likely to make us all uncomfortable, in one way or another. While coming out as a rather crude invitation to reflexivity, her book grows into what might be seen as a twofold intellectual project. In Chapters 1, 2 and 3, Agustín sets out to fill in the silences on commercial sex in theories of migration and of economic services. In Chapters 4, 5 and 6, she exposes important aspects of the material foundation of the interventions on 'prostitution' and 'trafficking'.

Through her original ethnographic work among 'helpers' in contemporary Madrid and through her reading of mid-19th century regulations of working-class women selling sex in France and England, Agustín convincingly demonstrates that the machinery of interventions on 'prostitution' and 'trafficking' is mainly oriented to the self-reproduction of the 'helpers' themselves. While it produces little benefit, or even further exclusions of working-class and migrant people in the sex industry, this machinery of discourses, policies, theories and protests has historically provided middle-class women (and still provides