

An abstract graphic on the left side of the cover features several translucent, flowing ribbons in shades of red and blue. These ribbons are intertwined and looped, creating a sense of movement and connection. The background is a solid, deep black, which makes the glowing ribbons stand out prominently.

# AFFINITIES

Potent Connections  
in Personal Life

JENNIFER MASON



**'Affinities is a work of profound originality showing us what is to be gained from finding ways to become attuned to the effervescent, atmospheric aspects of social life. Beyond sociological clichés and comfortable academic conventions, this beautiful book is proof that sociology can be magical if we have the courage to believe in that possibility.'**

Les Back, Goldsmiths, University of London

**'Jennifer Mason has created a beguiling example of the contemporary sociological imagination at work. She shifts boundaries to incorporate fresh fields of vision, giving new depth to sociological enquiry. Unquestionably a delightful work of perceptive scholarship.'**

Carol Smart, University of Manchester

**'This book is a guide for retraining social science's rationalistic or categorical version of reality into a more worldly realism of potencies, energies and sentience. It conjures a world in which affinities matter as a way of conceptualizing how to live.'**

Kathleen Stewart, The University of Texas at Austin

How is it possible to feel an affinity with a place? What is happening when someone feels almost literally transported to another time by a smell or a texture or a song? Why do striking family resemblances sometimes feel uncanny? In each of these cases a potent connection is being made, involving forces, flows, energies and atmospherics that conventional sociological approaches can find hard to grasp, but that are important nonetheless.

In this innovative book Jennifer Mason argues that these are affinities – potent charges and charismatically lively connections in personal life, that rise up and matter in some way and that enchant or toxify the everyday. She suggests that exploring affinities opens up new possibilities for conceptualising the experience of living in the world through what she calls the 'socio-atmospherics of everyday life'. This book invites the reader to embrace possibilities and themes that may seem outside the usual range, and to engage in a more open, attentive, inventive and poetic sociological sensibility.

**Jennifer Mason** is Professor of Sociology at the University of Manchester.

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# Affinities

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Personal Life

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# Affinities



‘Those who don’t believe in magic will never find it’  
(Roald Dahl, *The Minpins*)





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# Introduction: Affinities as an Invitation to Think Differently

Why does a woman who discovers relatives she never knew she had, feel so moved when she recognises a family resemblance with them? What does it mean when a life is changed through the serendipity of a chance encounter? How is it possible to have an affinity with a place? What is happening when someone feels almost literally transported to another place or time by a chance encounter with a smell or a texture or a song? In each of these cases, some kind of potent connection is being made, and experienced viscerally and personally. In this book I want to suggest these kinds of connections are *affinities*, and to explore what they are and how they seem to matter so much. Affinities *do* matter, and I suggest that taking them seriously and exploring them opens up new and exciting possibilities for conceptualising living in the world.

I am going to argue that affinities are potent connections that rise up and matter. They are encounters where it is possible to identify a spark or a charge of connection that makes personal life charismatic, or enchants, or even toxifies it. Affinities are those connections that feel 'kindred' in some way, or make things kindred, whether or not they involve a family or kinship link as conventionally defined, and indeed we shall see that affinities can take shape between elements other than people too. Crucially, affinities are personal connections that have *potency*. They can be affinities of opposition, alterity or negativity, just as much as affinities of resemblance, empathy and closeness. They can involve ephemeral and ethereal yet somehow defining and elemental connections, and even epiphanal ones. They may feel *of us*, in ways that seem inscribed or seared into us and yet they also seem to live beyond us and can feel capricious, anarchic, otherworldly and even lyrical and poetic. Affinities involve fascination,

wondering and puzzlement, often about their very potency and ineffability.

The *potency* of the connections is the point, and that is where I want the focus of the book to be. Let me make it clear straight away therefore that this is not a book about kinship systems, where ‘affines’ are formally conceptualised as a specific category or order of kin (usually seen as kin by marriage). Indeed it is not a book about kinship in that sense at all, although I am interested in connections that *feel kindred* in some way. Neither is it a book that uses affinity as a device to study *people* who are strongly attracted to *certain things, or pleasures, or behaviours*, or indeed to *other people*. Both of these examples involve seeing affinities as to do with the fixed points that they connect (people, kinsfolk, pleasures, behaviours, things), and make the assumption that it is these fixed points, and possible correlations or patterns in them, that are of interest. Such an approach might tell us that young men of a particular social class are strongly attracted to online gaming for example.

My approach to affinities, however, is to understand them as *connective charges and energies* that are of interest in themselves and not because of what they connect. It is the character and potency of the connections that I want to explore, more than the points that they put in relation. Central to my arguments about affinities is that they constitute animate or living connections, and hence I focus a great deal on concepts like *flows, forces and energies*. Always something is thought to be moving, flowing, seeking, encountering, making and even forcing connection. Affinities are essentially *living*, and they are lived through multidimensional encounters and sensations in personal life.

Given that affinities are *lived*, they are also, ironically perhaps, *parochial*. I use the term parochial here not in the pejorative sense that has come to characterise it in recent years as the petty or insubstantial, but in a stronger, active and experiential sense to mean the medium and means through which we encounter the world. My reasoning is that our activity of living is always done locally (locally to ourselves) through the medium, as it were, of our own personal ‘parish’. I had been thinking about parochialism and its connection with the concept of personal life in this way for some time, when I came across Robert Macfarlane’s wonderful interpretation of Patrick Kavanagh’s ‘The Parish and the Universe’, in his introduction to Nan Shepherd’s *The Living Mountain*. Following Kavanagh, Macfarlane suggests that the parochial is ‘not a perimeter but *an aperture*: a space through which the world [can] be seen’ (Macfarlane, 2011: xv, my emphasis). This idea of an aperture on the world echoes the argument I want to