Out in the Storm: Drug-Addicted Women Living as Shoplifters & Sex Workers examines the lives of women who use crime as a means to support their drug addictions. It is not simply a discussion of women and crime; rather, through her use of in-depth interviews, Caputo offers real insight into the lives of thirty-eight women who employ either shoplifting or sex-work as a career to support themselves and their addictions. Caputo’s work serves three main purposes: (1) to narrate from the women’s own points of view the etiology of their criminal behaviors; (2) to explore how the women actually manage and carry out their work; and (3) to examine how the women approach the drawbacks and risks inherent in their work. In other words, as the author emphasizes in the introduction, “this book is not about drug addiction per se but about women’s reliance on crime to finance drug addiction” (p. 1).

This book is divided into six chapters. The introduction offers the reader a brief yet thoughtful overview of the purpose of the book and of the type of research being discussed. Caputo describes her participants’ backgrounds in terms of socio-economic status, race, and drug use in order to bring attention to the similarities and differences among the women. Not only does this effectively draw the reader into the book, it also introduces one of the greatest strengths of Caputo’s work: her practice of comparing and contrasting the women who shoplift with the women who work in the sex trade.

Taking a closer look at the women’s backgrounds, the second and third chapters, ‘Early Life Trauma’ and ‘Coming of Age,’ respectively, offer a somewhat unsettling look at the trauma the women experienced during their childhoods, and their reactions to such trauma during adolescence. Alarming statistics combined with compelling excerpts from the interviews bring the challenges of growing up in abusive homes and poverty-stricken neighbourhoods into sharp focus. Caputo’s ethnological approach to the research and her feminist background come to life as the women’s own words and experiences are purposefully used to offer a degree of agency to their lives; she provides the women with an opportunity to tell their stories. The book becomes more than just Caputo reporting what she has been told: it becomes a forum for the women to have their stories heard.

The fourth chapter, ‘Making Crime Specialization Work in the Urban Drug Culture,’ shifts away from the women’s pre and early crime days into an examination of how the women make their criminal careers work for them. Caputo, through the voices of her participants, explains how demand for products from baby formula to sexual services shape the criminal activity of women working to meet their own drug needs. We see that by fulfilling the demands of their neighbourhood bodegas and johns, the shoplifters and sex trade workers are able to ensure a steady stream of customers and thus a steady income. Caputo convincingly argues that these women are more than criminals; they are entrepreneurs making a living in the best way they know how. This argument, that crime is a matter of work, is an increasingly popular point of view in criminological research, and is replacing the previous outlook on crime as an expression of deviance.

In the fifth chapter, ‘Risk Management and Strategies for Shoplifters and Sex Workers,’ Caputo examines how the women balance the demands for their services, their own needs for income, and the risks inherent in a life based on crime. Caputo explains that the two lines of work involve different types of risks: for shoplifters there is the risk of apprehension and incarceration; for sex workers the greatest risk is that of violence. Regardless of the type of risk involved, Caputo suggests that the women make their work worthwhile by making enough money at each job to offset the potential risks.

In her conclusion, Caputo offers a brief summary and adds more discussion on the theory behind women’s crime and drug use. She makes further observations on the agency and choices...
available to the women. She does not speak of the women as needing to be saved, or needing help; she simply, without judgment, offers each an opportunity to tell her own story.

Arguably the greatest strength of Caputo’s work is the inclusion of two distinct groups of women. With each new topic, Caputo begins with a look at the responses of the shoplifters, followed by those of the sex workers; finally, she applies feminist and/or criminological theory to the two groups to explain their responses. For example, Caputo refers to current feminist theory in her argument that the women’s practice of sex work and shoplifting is a matter of work and not necessarily a result of childhood abuse. Also, in her discussion of how the women make crime specialization work for them, she discusses how women’s sexuality limits and determines their criminal options. In other words, she explains that patriarchal expectations make the option of sex work seem obvious, even logical, while occupations such as drug trafficker or bookie are traditionally reserved for men. This combination of feminist and criminological theory strengthens Caputo’s work and provides greater validity to her arguments and conclusions.

Caputo’s book is unique and thoughtful. The recurring use of interview excerpts allows the voices of the women in the study to be heard, offering a human voice to academic research. Furthermore, her technique of comparing and contrasting the experiences of shoplifters and sex workers is not only highly functional; it is also reader-friendly and allows the research findings to come through with ease. This book could easily be used as a launching point for further study of women’s criminality. It would also lend itself to use in the classroom, particularly in senior-level criminology or women’s studies courses.

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