

Social Work in Light of Jane Addams

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Abstract

Classics of literature and science may characteristically be read anew outside their time and interest area, giving birth to new insights. Jane Addams is one such classic author. Her writings can be read as classic texts that educate readers in the discipline of social work, among other things. Her impact on the beginnings of modern social work is foundational. She contributed to radical changes on basis of thought, understanding, and practice in the field. Many have read her texts and written about her, resulting in multiple perspectives. The authors will highlight some relevant areas ripe to be re-examined in our time.

Keywords

Social work history, migration, democracy, tacit knowledge, narratives

The authors are all social workers with long and varied experiences. They have master degrees in social work and philosophy and have been interested in and engaged with the developments of their fields, written articles, textbooks, and theses on Jane Addams.

Based on this, the authors have become interested in Jane Addams' presentation of social work from practical experience. No one has written more about social work so directly and with such a depth and in so many dimensions as her.

The authors know that she is counted as much as a sociologist as a social worker who has given a wider dimension to the social work knowledge basis. Much has been written about her as social worker, sociologist, democrat, philosopher, etc.

So the authors are not alone in their interest for her. Simultaneously, they are astonished by the fact that she is so little known among social workers for example in Norway.

The authors believe she embodies a social worker role that comprises a helping relation with individuals,

the importance of research, and the need for social reform and social justice.

First, the authors want to say something (briefly in this connection) about her and the times in which she lived and worked. They will focus on the beginning and the first decades of her work.

Jane Addams was born in 1860 in Cedarville, Illinois. Her mother died when she was two years old. She was the youngest of eight siblings where four lived up. Her father owned the village's mill, sympathized with Quakers, was well off, politically active, societally engaged, and founded the first library for the city at home in his own house.

She went to Rockford Female Seminary where she received a degree/diploma. She began medical studies,

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but quit during her first year. Her father died suddenly. It was a great loss.

She undertook two extensive and long journeys in Europe. This was a type of “formation journey” which was not uncommon for Americans of a certain social standing.

She struggled to figure out what she wanted to do with her life.

She visited Toynbee Hall, a settlement in London which inspired her.

She had (through her father’s work) an early awareness of the existence of poverty.

At Toynbee Hall, she found something meaningful she could do.

She says about Toynbee Hall:

It is a community for University men who live there, have their recreation and clubs and society all among the poor people, yet in the same style they would live in their own circle. It is so free for “professional doing good”, so unaffectedly sincere and so productive of good results in its classes and libraries so that it seems perfectly ideal. (Addams in Davis 1973: 49)

Jane Addams was 29 years old at the time she moved in the earlier residence “Hull-House” in Chicago. It was September 1889 and she was followed by her college friend Ellen Gates Starr, and housekeeper Mary Keyser. Hull-House stood right in the middle of the neighborhood with hundred of thousands of immigrants, a lot from Europe (Addams 1910: 57).

She searched for a long time after a house that could suit her needs. This is what she thought about Hull-House. It is about both aesthetic and ethic.

“...the mere foothold of a house easily accessible, ample in space, hospitable, and tolerant in spirit, situated in the midst of the large foreign colonies which so easily isolate themselves” (Addams 1910: 55).

How about Chicago at that time? It was at the time of one of the industrial revolutions with huge need

for people in the working army together with people in need because of poverty and war. Chicago grew from 4,470 inhabitants in 1840, 1,099,850 inhabitants in 1890, and 2,185,283 inhabitants in 1910 (Smith 2017).

Little to nothing was done by the local government to accommodate this growth. And it was vicious exploitation of labor force, women, men, and children.

The Charter of Hull-House was formulated some years after the beginning.

“To provide a center for a higher civic and social life; to initiate and maintain educational and philanthropic enterprises and to investigate and improve the conditions in the industrial districts of Chicago” (*Hull-House Bulletin 1, no. 1/1896*; Addams 1910: 66).

It says both the humblest neighborhood services, and street level research and work to improve the conditions.

WHAT HAPPEND

Jane Addams’ idea was to be a neighbor, establish herself as a neighbor, and see what happened (Addams 1910).

Residents who lived at Hull-House were to contribute with what they could, and at the same time expected neighbors to contribute what they were able to.

There was a need for Americans and immigrants to get to know one another.

New initiatives emerged eventually as need arised: first kindergartens (child care), then cafes/meetinghouses, art galleries, reading groups, clubs, and classes with instruction. “Not quite clubs, not quite classes”, Jane Addams called it.

The idea was not to copy established approaches that had little effect, but rather to create something that was suited to the new situation (Addams 1910: 249).

Here are some examples of their activity:

“The front door” was a concept at Hull-House.

It was a distinct assignment for residents to meet people at the door and greet them on the telephone. The main door was always open. They could not know what was to be expected or prepare themselves by any other means than to expect the unexpected. That is to say, quietly and with openness. Jane Addams put it this way: “per chance one of them would be found an angel” (Addams 1910: 75).

THE PLAYGROUND ESTABLISHED

She and Hull-House had a special focus on the need of the children. This is an example (see Figure 1):

THE RESEARCH ACTIVITY

Research and praxis are connected. She was not to be simply an observer of a problem.

She did something about it. She wrote about the

problems in addition to her studies and actions. *Hull-House Maps and Papers* became a well-known example of city research (see Figure 2).



Figure 1. Announcement for the First Playground.

Hull-House maps and papers : a presentation of nationalities and wages in a congested district of Chicago, together with comments and essays on problems growing out of the social conditions

Published [1895](#)

Topics [Social settlements](#), [Sweatshops](#)

Prefatory note / Jane Addams -- Map notes and comments / by Agnes Sinclair Holbrook -- **The sweating-system** / by Florence Kelley -- **Wage-earning children** / by Florence Kelley and Alzina P. Stevens -- Receipts and expenditures of cloakmakers in Chicago / by Isabel Eaton -- The Chicago ghetto / by Charles Zeublin -- The Bohemian people in Chicago / by Josefa Humpal Zeman -- Remarks upon the Italian colony in Chicago / by Alessandro Mastro-Valerio -- The Cook county charities / by Julia C. Lathrop -- **Art and labor** / by Ellen Gates Starr -- **The settlement as a factor in the labor movement** / by Jane Addams -- Appendix. Hull-House: a social settlement

Figure 2. Table of Contents for Hull-House Maps and Papers.

She called herself “Jane Addams of Hull-House”. She did not use professional titles.

The people who lived in Hull-House were named residents and were in the beginning most women, and most of them were well educated, within different professions in literature, social work, sociology,

medical doctors, women with doctor degrees and other universities degrees from Europe and so on.

Just to give you an expression of the time:

Three years after Hull-House opening, in 1892, the Chicago University opened for women as the first university in America. It was at the same time

possible to study sociology.

Hull-House residents and some university philosophers had much to do with each other (ex. John Dewey, George Herbert Mead, and William James) (Deegan 1990).

Here are some illustrating numbers of the activity at Hull-House:

Hull-House grew into 13 buildings in all.

1894: 1,500 people visited per week.

1906: 9,000 people visited per week (in the winter months).

1896: 25 residents.

1906: 46 residents (Addams 1894; *Hull-House Yearbook 1906-1907*).

In 1963, the area, apart from the first Hull-House building levelled to make room for Chicago University. Jane Addams' Hull-House is today an active museum.

WHY JANE ADDAMS NOW?

The authors want to answer this question in four items.

First, it has to do with personal and professional identification. Something goes through history and is not tied up to a special time.

"...When I say tradition, I don't mean something you can follow from one point to another, I mean something more like being typical for the artistic individual through history. I don't believe in influences, but identifications. One recognizes one's fellow members in the resistance movement's cell" [Gunnar Ekeløf (Swedish poet) 1957 (the authors' translation)].

Reason Number 2: A Sign of Our Time

New positivistic ideal affects our field and our work. This has to do with what counts as valid knowledge. Social work as a discipline is under pressure. The overall influence of new public management and the claim of evidence based knowledge make our

professional knowledge dilute.

The times we live in/parallel to a century ago. We are seeing mass migrations, people fleeing from war and oppression and people who want a better life for their children and families just as during Jane Addams' time.

Focus on the individual vs the society. We have individual explanations for people's problems instead of structural explanations. Jane Addams analyzed the influence of the society and the living conditions on people.

Reason Number 3

Jane Addams' thoughts and practice is the counterweight to all these signs in our time.

Jane Addams' keyword is "doing with people" not for or on behalf of or to people.

Her term used in modern therapy (ex. Harlene Anderson) and in user participation/involvement, is also from Jane Addams. She originated this term.

Important is also her naming of the people who were in need for help from the settlement: "Neighbors". She was first and foremost a neighbor.

If you have seen Ken Loach's film "I, Daniel Blake", you remember his speech: I am not a customer, not a client, not a user, but a citizen.

Another central term in Jane Addams' texts is to "act with others". She was aware of the perspective of and need for actions in social work's practice (Addams 1902: 63).

Her point of view was that you have to make experiences in praxis to get necessary knowledge. She realized that theory cannot be directly applied in praxis.

She showed that people's problems are tied up with societal relations and we are all bound of mutual dependencies. Social work is about—both life world processes and social-political objectives (Nothdurfter and Lorentz 2010).

A quick impression! This is what her friend and college said about her:

“Jane, if the devil himself came riding down Halstedt Street with his tale waving out behind him, you’d say, ‘what a beautiful curve he has on his tail’” (Ellen Gates Starr to Jane Addams referenced in a letter from Jane Addams to Mary Rozet Smith 1910, Brown 1999: 36).

She always looked for resources within people and for understanding the reasons people have for their actions.

Reason Number 4

It is about her thinking on theory, practice, and knowledge. She was an excellent narrator. Because she was local, concrete, and close to the real life, it made her universal and valid in other times. The story of “The Shipping Clerk” is an example (the authors quote it later on). Furthermore, stories, narratives are again in vogue as sources of knowledge in social work.

She wrote a lot: 11 books and a number of articles in magazines and disciplinary journals.

She held innumerable speeches/lectures.

She always was accompanied by a neighbor because there should be someone who understood prevailing conditions better than she did.

She was also a pacifist and a political activist (see Figure 3). She was inspired by Tolstoy and visited him.



Jane Addams (right) and (?) Mary McDowell

Figure 3. Jane Addams Was an Activist for Peace.

She engaged herself against America’s involvement in the First World War. She initiated and led women’s conference for peace in Hague, in 1915. She was also cursed and called a traitor, and her books were burned by Nazis. Later, her reputation was rehabilitated.

She received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1931. She died in 1935.

Now the authors want to take you through some subject that they think is important in Jane Addams’ texts and in this connection.

The authors think that their reason no. 1 is a matter of course.

Their reason no. 2 will not be explored here. They think that social workers and other professionals will recognize these problems.

The authors will focus on reason no. 3—Jane Addams as a counterweight and an inspiration, and reason no. 4 about the knowledge thoughts and the narratives.

They will in a certain dimension use Jane Addams’ own words, in the aspect of “show, don’t tell”, about the relationship between the social worker and the people in need for help.

RECIPROCITY AND EQUALITY

Reciprocity is in relations between different people; various social classes and nationalities characterize the thinking upon which Jane Addams based the activities at Hull-House. Reciprocity became a key term for the philosophy and praxis at Hull-House.

She wrote: “Hull-House was soberly opened on the theory that the dependence of classes on each other is reciprocal; and that the social relation is essentially a reciprocal one...” (Addams 1910: 55).

“The principal aim who lived and worked at Hull House was to understand people enough to construct bridges between social classes” (Leffers 2013: 52).

POVERTY AND SOCIAL WORK

The difference between a helping relationship between neighbors and the settlement and poor people's relationship to the relief-station was first and foremost that neighbors could observe one another through various phases in their lives—including those times when lack of money did not disturb relations. Relations to helpful neighbors were not bounded by time, fragmented, nor only problem-oriented.

Jane Addams wrote:

...illustrated the difference between the relief-station relation to the poor and the settlement relation to its neighbors, the latter wishing to know them through all the various conditions of life, to stand by when they are in distress, but by no means to drop intercourse with them when normal prosperity has returned, enabling the relation to become more social and free from economic disturbance. (Addams 1910: 98)

Being poor is often tied to shame and inferiority. Being resourceful and independent is seen as an ideal to reach for or a virtue. As differences between people's standards of living increase, we must presume that more and more people feel themselves on the outside of society. Being forced to seek help from social services can be a double burden for many.

Addams observed two different ethical standards: one among the poor, characterized by emotional kindness, and the other, the visitors' guarded care.

The neighborhood mind is at once confronted not only by the difference of method, but by an absolute clashing of two ethical standards. The fact that the economic condition of all alike is on a most precarious level makes the ready outflow of sympathy and material assistance the most natural thing in the world. (Addams 1902: 17)

In moments of indignation the poor have been known to say: "What do you want, anyway? If you have nothing to give us, why not let us alone and stop your questionings and investigations? They investigated me for three weeks, and in the end gave me nothing but a black character..." (Addams 1902)

"DOING GOOD TO OR DOING GOOD WITH", "PARTICIPANT AND OBSERVER", JANE ADDAMS AND HANS SKJERVHEIM

Grounded in different attitude, ethics, and theory of knowledge:

"Doing good to" means helping people from a superior position as experts or as do-gooders in charity.

"Doing good with" means helping people from an inside position as co-operating equals.

"A participant" considers people from an inside perspective, showing genuine interest.

"An observer" is considering others from an outside position as objects.

Reading Jane Addams brought the authors to the Norwegian philosopher Hans Skjervheim (1926-1999) re-reading his book *Deltakar og tilskodar og andre essays* from 1976. This little book had an enormous impact on social workers and other professionals in different disciplines in Norway at that time, in ongoing debates on knowledge in social science and practice in social work.

The authors found a striking similarity between the two authors in their classical texts. There are differences that they do not elaborate; here the authors focus on some core issues that Addams and Skjervheim share in attitude and ways of thinking about different kinds of knowledge and of society in helping people in social work.

One core issue is Skjervheim's concept of "objectifying" other people and behaving towards them as if they are objects. This attitude is of special importance and challenge in all of Europe today, facing migration and marginalization of an increasing amount of refugees escaping war and terror applying for asylum and searching for safety. Even though we want to help these people in great need and misery, they are often observed with suspicion from a distance; objectifying them (Skjervheim 1974; 1976).

Addams expresses the same attitude in her writing about ways of looking at neighbors.

“...wisdom to deal with a man’s difficulties comes only through some knowledge of his values and life as a whole...” (Addams 1910: 96-97, ex. “The Shipping Clark”).

Wisdom and judgement are basic and a prerequisite in dealing with “a man’s difficulties” knowing how different parts of his life in society interact, and listening to his experiences and opinions of what he wants for himself. Only from a participant position showing genuine interest and working “with” can we get some knowledge of what he values as good or bad, right or wrong in the particular culture he feels part of. It can be about rules and codes for behavior and acts in different situations, religious belief, and it can be rituals of ordinary or sacred meaning that have significance of identity down through generations and a sense of belonging to a culture that runs very deep in people’s life.

In every culture, there are things we all take for granted and do not necessarily pay attention to, the preconceptions and prejudices that guide our thinking and acting. Finding ways to understand and “work with” people from different cultures, we need to be aware of our own prejudices as well as being curious and asking to get some ideas of what they take for granted, their preconceptions and prejudices.

Living in the same society and in spite of differences in cultural background, we have more values in common than values that put a distance between us. In a helping process, it is as important to talk about what we share as it is to get reciprocal knowledge of cultural differences.

DEMOCRACY AND SOCIAL ETHICS

Democracy is foundational in Jane Addams’ work. Democracy implies something far more than one’s voice being heard, saying one’s opinion, and giving one’s approval. Addams argued that democracy must

function at a social and economic level for a political democracy to fully exist.

“The cure of the ill of Democracy is more Democracy” (Addams 1902: 9).

“This is the penalty of democracy, —that we are bound to move forward or retrograde together. None of us can stand aside; our feet are mired to the same soil, and our lungs breathe the same air” (Addams 1902).

She was concerned with the meaning that could be found in finding consensus in what is done, plans made; participation by everyone has a larger social meaning than decisions made in solitude. She was also interested in drawing out various experiences and understandings—long and engaged discussions filled Hull-House.

The greatest fear of the settlement was to lose flexibility, one’s quick adjustability or change of methods owing to the demands made by one’s environs. The settlement had to be open for conviction and remain tolerant. It must be hospitable and ready for experiment (Addams 1910: 75). Today consistency in praxis is a goal for many activities where social work is practiced. Increased bureaucracy with top-down leadership makes flexibility difficult—in some cases impossible.

The experience of democracy must be used to decide whether a method, praxis, program, or idea functions well. Which is moral is not tied to principles or rules, but rather to those democratic attitudes and actions we live by. Education must give us an understanding that we are mutually tied and bound to one another, as well as knowledge about our social responsibility.

The philosopher John Dewey was connected to Chicago University, and was one of Addams’ close conversation partners. They had mutual effect on one another, and common themes of interest are apparent in their texts. Like Addams, Dewey is concerned with the meaning of experience in terms of how we develop our power of judgment, how we evaluate a

situation and act. Both are interested in the notion that we must possess the skill of insight which secures our will to act when we meet challenges. An emotional reaction must take place. Dewey writes that good judgment is inconceivable without such receptivity (Dewey 2000).

Addams writes of sympathetic understanding about our understanding for others and our opportunity to interpret others with understanding and sympathy. This understanding has to do with our ability to imagine which we have developed through experience. Reason is not enough and we must be able to meet the other emotionally. We must acquire knowledge of others' ways of living, their life circumstances.

This is an example of how she understands "sympathetic understanding": "If a poor woman knows that her neighbor next door has no shoes, she is quite willing to lend her own, that her neighbor may go decently to mass, or to work; for she knows the smallest item about the scanty wardrobe, and cheerfully helps out" (Addams 1902: 17).

"The democratic ideal demands of the school that it shall give the child's own experience a social value" (Addams 1902: 81). Jane Addams' texts contain a sharp analysis of how education can be connected with children's experience and culture. Her analyses of how immigrant families' everyday knowledge from their experience becomes invisible and invalid are still relevant. These insights also impact children's situations, where both language and experiential background make it difficult to understand educational instruction as meaningful for oneself. Contempt for physical labor is reflected in the school system in terms of what gets focused on and what is given valid status. For this reason, education has no meaning with regard to how students relate to work in factories or other physical labor as adults—it is rather seen as boring and burdensome, and only pay and freetime have value.

ABOUT THEORY AND PRACTICE AND KNOWLEDGE AND NARRATIVES

The authors understand this as one of her main sentences about knowledge.

"There is no doubt that the deed often reveals when the idea does not, just as art makes us understand and feel what might be incomprehensible in form of an argument..."

And as the artist tests the success of his art when the recipient feels that he knew the thing before, but had not yet been able to express it, so the settlement, when it attempts to reveal and apply knowledge, deems its results practicable, when it has made knowledge available which before was abstract, when through use it has made common that knowledge which was partial before, because it should only be apprehended by the intellect. (Addams in Lasch 1965: 187-188; Addams 1899)

On the one side, she wrote that knowledge does not allow itself to be formulated in words and text, but can be demonstrated and recognized, and therefore be made open to understanding. The experience of art can lead to and is an important entry point into recognition, understanding, and knowledge.

Jane Addams' understanding of knowledge can be tied to newer research on professional knowledge where for example expressions such as tacit knowledge (Polanyi 2000), knowledge in action (Molander 1997), the reflective practitioner (Schön 1995), and so on became meaningful for among others social workers in the late 80s and 90s (Eldøen 2002).

Furthermore, knowledge is a common good which must be shared and not restricted to the fortunate few. It must be common if we are to be certain that it is worth having.

Jane Addams calls the settlement "the third attempt".

She explains that it was not about charity, and it was also not a university. It was not a sociological laboratory as the university wanted. The settlement should therefore research to change and improve, from

an insider's perspective. The university placed itself on the outside.

Jane Addams writes further on:

...settlements have naturally sought the spots where the dearth of this applied knowledge was most obvious, the depressed quarters of great cities. They gravitate to these spots, not with the object of finding clinical material, not to found "sociological laboratories", not indeed, with the analytical motive at all, but rather in a reaction from that motive, with a desire to use synthetically and directly whatever knowledge they, as a group, may possess. To test its validity and to discover the conditions under which this knowledge may be employed. (Addams 1899)

LITERATURE AS SOURCE OF KNOWLEDGE

How can we get the experience and imagination we need and which is required in our time, is a question in Jane Addams' text.

"We have learned as common knowledge that much of the insensibility and hardness of the world is due to the lack of imagination which prevents a realization of the experience of other people" (Addams 1902: 8).

"...all the misunderstandings we have in life are due to partial experience..." (Addams 1902: 8). "Already there is a connection that we are under a moral obligation in choosing our experiences, since the result of those experiences must ultimately determine our understanding of life" (Addams 1902: 8).

She said to the young people: "Going to the theatre"—meaning that access to others' lives through theater, film, and books expands one's imaginative capacity and provides better future opportunities and a better ability to take control over one's own life (Addams 1902: 28).

Jane Addams used literature to discuss problematic themes during her time. In her essay "A Modern Lear", she analyzes contradictions between individual and social ethics given the grim labor conflicts during the mid-1890s in Chicago. She stages

a meeting between the praxis example and literature, here Shakespeare's *King Lear*, and in so doing, it gives depth to her reflections (Addams 1912; Eldøen 2002).

This approach is recognizable in other contexts more recently as well.

"Without literature reflections become simply superficial", said Göranson in Stockholm. He represents "the third culture", a common meeting place between humanists and natural scientists with the intent being to find out more about the contact points and possibilities for development of forms of human knowledge (Göranson 1990; Ratkic 2002; Eldøen 2002).

Ideas surrounding "the third attempt" and "the third culture" are comparable.

The philosopher Martha Nussbaum and Jane Addams have similar reflections.

Nussbaum (working in Chicago University) quotes Aristotle: Literature shows us "not what has happened, but that which could happen, that is makes us familiar with things that could potentially happen, with wider possibilities and how they affect people's lives" (Nussbaum 2016: 33).

Jane Addams writes that literature increases our ability to creatively imagine, we gain access to all kinds of lives, and we gather experiences we have not gone through ourselves, nor that we have access to.

An example of literature from Jane Addams' time is Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*, which reveals the horrible health and working conditions that immigrants, in the meat packing industry in Chicago, had to face at the turn of the century. He describes one family's meeting with a settlement worker from Hull-House (Sinclair 2006).

The Jungle was also the name of a refugee camp in Calais. In October 2016, French police cleared the camp, following instructions from the government, and removed more than 8,000 migrants/refugees.

The authors find different origins pointing in the

same direction; literature helps us to understand people's lives and situations.

In the time of standardization, it can be difficult to catch a glimpse of the histories and tales belonging to those who seek out social workers.

There needs to be a renaissance towards lifting up and listening to the stories of people's lives.

"THE SHIPPING CLERK" AS A CONSIDERATION

A shipping clerk whom I had known for a long time had lost his place, as so many people had that year, and came to the relief station established at Hull-House four or five times to secure help for his family. I told him one day of the opportunity for work on the drainage canal and intimated that if employment were obtainable, he ought to exhaust that possibility before asking for help. The man replied that he always worked indoors and that he could not endure outside work in winter. I am grateful to remember that I was too uncertain to be severe, although I held to my instructions. He did not come again for relief, but worked for two days digging on the canal, where he contracted pneumonia and died a week later. I have never lost trace on the two little children he left behind him, although I cannot see them without a bitter consciousness that it was at their expense I learned that life cannot be administered by definite rules and regulations; that wisdom to deal with a man's difficulties comes only through some knowledge of his life and habits as a whole; and that to treat an isolated episode is almost sure to invite blundering. (Addams 1910: 96-97)

CONCLUSIONS

In the tension between theory and practice in social work, Jane Addams demonstrates that theory often fails in practice, and that practice cannot be reduced to applied theory, but is its own field of knowledge. Models and theories are just that: models and theories. They do not substitute for the reality of people, feelings, and relations. Therefore, it is worth researching how practice develops and what its characteristics are. Examples from practice make it possible to study aspects of professional experience

that evade formulation. Jane Addams offers such examples in abundance. She performed her studies in order to uncover the need for change in society, contributed to that change, and saw people and the relationships between them. She advocated a new role for literature as an entry point to understand contemporary problems, understand ourselves, and empathize with others. Jane Addams' texts are contextualized, and in that sense local, but simultaneously universal and understandable across time.

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