

Social Work in Light of Jane Addams

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 in bases of thought, understanding and practice of the field. Many have read her texts and written about her, resulting in multiple perspectives. We will highlight some relevant areas ripe to be re-examined in our time.

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. This insight risks being forgotten in today's workplace, governed by theory-based knowledge that results in practice dominated by rules, standards, manuals, top/down organization, goal oriented management, external control checks, etc. Such frameworks override professional knowledge and judgment. It is thus more important than ever that the knowledge demonstrated in practice can both be elaborated on and explored in ways that give insight into acting in unpredictable situations.

Jane Addams demonstrated the value of reflecting on experiences and discussing disciplinary perspectives in developing our judgment. She encouraged discussions where various opinions, backgrounds and perspectives were appreciated. We observe that this type of discussion is being steadily squeezed out and robbed of meaning.

Jane Addams worked in a time rife with heavy migration, great upheaval in the work force, increasing poverty and marginalization. Tens of thousands of Italians and large groups of Russian and Polish Jews lived in her neighborhood, as well as Irish and Canadian immigrants, to name a few. We see similar challenges today with increasing numbers of refugees and asylum seekers from various backgrounds and religious affiliations. People are fleeing from war and hunger. Europe is engaged in high level talks centering around tackling these "problems." Jane Addams' approach was that Americans and immigrants must get to know one another, and she created spaces where these meetings could happen. This demonstrated her concern for immigrants' strengths, resources, identities and history.

Jane Addams rejected the notion of being "*good to people*", preferring the phrase "*with them*," thus informing our discussion on the relationship between helper/client and the boundaries for client influence. She used analogies still recognizable today, such as *host/guest*. She wrote about *reciprocity* in relationships and about *reciprocal learning*. She demonstrated how and why these are valid terms.

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 understanding contemporary problems, understanding ourselves and empathizing with others. Jane Addams' texts are contextualized, and are in that sense local, but simultaneously universal and understandable across time.