Jane Addams and Epistemic Agency in Contemporary Social Work

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Abstract

This chapter discusses Addams's views on knowledge and how they resonate with evidence-informed and theory-informed social work today. Addams and her colleagues adopted the pragmatist method in experimenting and observing the consequences. Besides experiential and sympathetic knowledge, they also applied multidisciplinary knowledge. The chapter illustrates through a social workers group intervention model how Addams's perspectives on knowledge application have contemporary applicability in social work.

In the three analyzed groups, the social workers consciously applied the pragmatist method. The participants experienced this supported them to make their interpretations more explicit or to find new ways to operate in clinical work. This can be described as strengthening their personal epistemic agency. At the same time, the shared discussions and active listening within the group enabled epistemic agency at a collective level. To achieve this, having the group as an organizational structure was significant.

Epistemic agency is a metacognitive skill that is at the core of the pragmatist method and is a characteristic of a research-minded practitioner. For contemporary social work, Addams's thoughts on the scientific mindset, the pragmatist attitude, and using multidisciplinary research could provide insights to obtain a wider understanding of evidence-informed and theory-informed social work as a process.

Key words: Epistemic agency, evidence-informed practice, intervention, pragmatism, reflection, theory-informed practice

1 Introduction

Professional social work developed at the same time as the industrialization and urbanization of society at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. The first organizers of modern social work were the Charity Organisation Society and the Settlement House movements in Britain (Shields, 2017a, p. 43; Harrikari & Rauhala, 2019, p. 81). However, the most often named pioneers of modern Western social work are Jane Addams and Mary Richmond, who both lived in the United States and, along with many of their contemporaries, influenced the development of the social work profession (Harrikari & Rauhala, 2019, p. 81).

The views of Jane Addams's role in the development of contemporary social work have varied in history and her role as a social work pioneer has only been fully acknowledged after the 1980s (Puurunen, 2019, p. 47). Since then, Addams has been recognized in social work research, for example, concerning the origin of community work (Healy, 2011, p. 175), glocal social work (Harrikari & Rauhala, 2019, p. 83), and urban social work (Asén et al., 2021). Pragmatist epistemology and Addams's applications of it have also been recognized in practice-based social work research that addresses questions relevant to practice and aims to improve practice (Saurama & Julkunen, 2012; Muurinen & Satka, 2020). In fact, Addams (1899, p. 48) considered that the duty of the research community was "not to study and depict, but to serve."

Addams's views on social work and the concept of social work itself were shaped over many decades and through the experiences she had from living and working in the local community in Chicago and operating in the Settlement movement. Understanding social work as knowledge and action that is focused on individuals, communities, and society, created a significant foundation for her philosophy (Puurunen, 2019, p. 320).

Addams can be described as a pragmatist (Shields, 2017b, p. 19). In Hull-House, Addams was a resident philosopher who considered that one of the aims in settlement was applying and revealing knowledge (Hamington, 2009, p. 34). Thus, Addams's pragmatism concerned questions on how knowledge is created in social work and how to reflect on it in practice (Puurunen, 2019, p. 327). Addams also had the idea that Hull-House would provide educated women with an opportunity to apply their training and collect data to influence society (Addams, 1910/2019, p. 199). For Addams, pragmatism created a foundation for reflecting previous and present knowledge and experiences and for applying this understanding in practice and decision-making (Puurunen, 2019, p. 327).

Today, the idea of applying academic knowledge and forming knowledge is at the core of present-day social work discussion. The epistemological questions and the positivist or interpretivist use of knowledge has been debated in social work, and especially around evidence-based practice, since the 1990s (Payne, 2014, pp. 49–50). Therefore, in this chapter, the focus is on Addams's pragmatism and how her ideas of knowledge and action in social work can contribute to contemporary discussions on evidence-informed and theory-informed social work.

First, we will discuss Addams's views on social work and knowledge. Then we will move to more recent social work discussion on evidence-based practice and how her thinking could resonate with evidence-informed and theory-informed practice without forgetting the perspective of the service user. Finally, we will illustrate through a social workers group intervention model, inspired by pragmatist views, how Addams and her perspectives on knowledge application have contemporary applicability in social work today. In analyzing the experiences of the social workers who participated in the groups, we are interested in how social workers epistemic agency can be supported by consciously applying the pragmatist method and reflecting with others on the practical consequences.

2 Jane Addams and Social Work

Piia Puurunen (2019, p. 323) distinguishes three periods during which Addams's notion of social work was formed. During the early period (1889–1902), social work was problematized in relation to charity work and to traditional philanthropic work, which were the preliminary social work concepts. In her writings, Addams questioned the benevolent charity workers' approach in the unequal helping relationship. Strengthening active and aware individuals and participatory communities and society would, according to Addams, require a social work orientation that is self-critical and reflective as well as ethical and democratic (Puurunen, 2019, pp. 320–321).

During the second period (1902–1914), Addams's conception was built on the relationship between private charity work and public social policy and institutions. In this period, the concept of social work appeared for the first time alongside charity work and Addams described social work as containing many orientations, such as producing knowledge and using it to strengthen social security or pointing out structural discrimination (Puurunen, 2019, p. 323).

In the third period (1914–1935), the concepts of social work and social worker were settled. According to Puurunen (2019, p. 323), during this period social work was legitimized, institutionalized, and established as a profession with academic training. In the third period, Addams also brought up the role of social work in relieving suffering, especially during times of turmoil. She considered that the duty of the profession was to hold on to a humanitarian orientation, and this required professional self-reflection (Puurunen, 2019, p. 323).

Over a hundred years later, the global definition of social work emphasizes practice, social change, human rights, and social justice, and still resonates with Addams's views on social work (Shields, 2017a, p. 46). The global definition of the International Federation of Social Work states that "Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledges, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing." (IFSW, 2014).

Modern social work is described to as having two views of practice and society. According to Mullaly and Dupré (2019, pp. 1–7), the major view is conventional, and it originates from the scientific philanthropy of the Charity Organization Society. The conventional view focuses either on the individual and personal change or at most on the person-in-environment and limited social change.

The second view is progressive or critical and focuses on fundamental social change and the transformation of society. The progressive view has roots in the Settlement House movement in which the focus was on reforming society rather than merely reforming the person (Mullaly & Dupré 2019, 4). In social work practice, the promotion of change is connected to the ideas of macro practice, community work and case advocacy (Payne, 2014, p. 217), and to critical or structural social work which has its theoretical roots in critical theory (Mullaly & Dupré, 2019, p. 200; Payne, 2014, p. 327). According to Mullaly and Dupré (2019, p. 200), the term 'structural' describes how social problems are built in the present social order and, therefore, the focus of change is also on the structures.

Although Addams is not directly referenced in the above discussion on progressive social work or structural social work, the elements are present in her writings. Puurunen (2019, p. 235) describes how Addams recognized social work as having different bases or orientations, such as a structural orientation that was sociological, and it aimed to enhance social reform and develop social welfare with people. Another orientation focused on applying scientific knowledge to improve wellbeing, solving social problems and collecting data to influence society, and therefore meant developing a scientific mindset in practice (Puurunen, 2020, p. 236). Thus, we will next discuss pragmatist views on the role of knowledge in social work practice.

3 Applying knowledge in social work

3.1 Pragmatist epistemology and multidisciplinary knowledge

Firstly, Addams considered pragmatism to be an epistemological framework and a base for professional reflection and knowledge creation (Puurunen, 2019, p. 327). Pragmatist philosophy was developed in the United States at the end of the 19th century. The often-

named founders are Charles S. Peirce and William James, along with philosophers John Dewey and George Herbert Mead (Shields, 2017b, p. 18). Addams worked closely with Dewey and Mead and was in correspondence with James, who respected her work and her writings (Shields, 2017b, p. 18). Although Jane Addams was not recognized as a philosopher by her contemporaries, she contributed to a critical and radical understanding of pragmatism (Hamington, 2009, pp. 32–35).

Pragmatism can be described first and foremost as a method or an attitude which looks at outcomes and consequences (James, 1907/2008, p. 52; Dewey, 1908, p. 86). Observing these consequences requires experimenting in practice (Dewey 1908, p. 8). Whether an experiment is used in science or in developing society, "the great thing is not to avoid mistakes but to have them take place under such conditions that they can be utilized to increase intelligence in the future" (Dewey, 1920/1988, p. 199). It seems that Addams put this into practice.

A key tenet in Addams's pragmatism is reflection. For Addams (Puurunen, 2019, p. 327), in social work knowledge is never only the result of theoretical analysis but is always experiential because social workers face contradictions that require reflection on the situation in relation to previous knowledge and experiences. Besides reflection on helping relationships in clinical work, reflection also enables social work knowledge production and using that knowledge to have an impact on society and enhance welfare (Puurunen, 2019, p. 327).

In order to understand Addams's ideas of pragmatism and knowledge creation, the concept of 'sympathetic knowledge' may also be useful. Sympathetic knowledge is based on knowing other people with some degree of depth, which awakens empathetic caring and leads to action on behalf of others (Hamington, 2009, pp. 71–72). Thus, encounters and reciprocal exchanging of experiences are required to obtain such significant knowledge as well as a greater understanding of the problem-solving process in social work practice.

Secondly, for Addams the social work knowledge base was multidisciplinary and eclectic as it combined, as well as influenced, psychology, medicine, economics, sociology, statistics, philosophy, and educational science (Puurunen, 2019, p. 325). Puurunen (2019, p. 325) describes how Addams considered that social work required special expertise and its approach to people's situations and social problems was holistic, unlike in some other professional fields. A key notion was that in social work knowledge, experience, and skills are built upon and are bound to operating in practice. However, Addams also considered that besides utilizing experiential knowledge, social work should also be guided by multidisciplinary research knowledge on human life.

Addams recognized the difficulties universities had in applying their findings to social life and how a settlement as part of the community could operate in knowledge acquisition, organization, and dissemination (Hamington, 2009, p. 6). Puurunen (2019, p. 127) writes how these epistemological aspects complement Addams's views on the role that knowledge and especially the conscious application of knowledge has in social work methods and in the helping relationship (also Addams, 1899, p. 35). Addams considered that valid knowledge

would be practical, and the settlement could test its validity for the local community and find ways to disseminate knowledge (Puurunen, 2019, pp.128–129).

In Hull-House, Addams and her colleagues adopted the instrumentalist and fallibilistic pragmatist attitude or method in experimenting and reflection. The pragmatist method meant that they used experiments in changing practice, testing new ways with the community to help the community, and observing the consequences (Gross, 2009). Besides experiential and sympathetic knowledge, they also reflected on and applied research-based knowledge, as the following three examples of the Jane Club, the social method of shared breakfasts, and the Coffee House demonstrate.

3.2 Three examples of applying research knowledge in Hull-House

The first example is the start of a housing cooperative called the "Jane Club". The working women would bring up their difficulties in paying rent in times of need or when attending strikes. Addams described how they "read aloud together Beatrice Potter's little book on 'Cooperation,' and discussed all the difficulties and fascinations of such an undertaking, and on the first of May, 1891, two comfortable apartments near Hull-House were rented and furnished" (Addams, 1910/2019, pp. 214–215). Thus, utilizing the writings of Potter, who was herself an English social reformer and researcher, provides an example of how research-informed practice and how a small experiment started and led to the establishment of the Jane Club.

The second example of how research knowledge was applied, was through what Addams (1899, p. 49) called "a social method." Addams described shared breakfasts organized for Italian migrant women to be a social method for change because these informal meetings led to modeling a more nutritious diet. Thus, changes were gradually made by group activities and through informal meetings (Hamington, 2004, p.118). Eventually, these women had an impact on their neighborhood by forming "a little centre for the intelligent care of children" (Addams, 1899, p. 49), which allowed nutritional knowledge to be disseminated to the community.

The third example demonstrates how Addams also recognized the value of failed practical experiments for learning (Shields, 2017b, p. 22). Another experiment to spread the latest knowledge on nutrition to the neighborhood through a Coffee House failed because it was based on preconceived ideas of people's needs and lacked dialogue with the community (Hamington, 2009, p. 113). However, despite this failure, the residents were then able to rearrange the Coffee House to meet the needs of the community (Hamington, 2009, p. 113).

As discussed above, Addams considered it important in social work to apply multidisciplinary knowledge and the pragmatist method or attitude. The attitude was present in Hull-House, where readiness to experiment was a requirement (Addams, 1910/2019, p. 212). Also, according to Addams (1910/2019, p. 212), applying and creating knowledge required from

the residents' scientific patience in the accumulation of facts, steady holding of their sympathies, readiness to interpret the public opinion of their neighbors, and putting aside their own opinions or self-assertation. Next, we will continue with topical discussion on evidence-based and evidence-informed social work and how Addams's ideas inform it.

3.3 Evidence-informed and theory-informed social work

Evidence-based practice (EBP) has two approaches. According to Payne (2014, p. 53), the first is a "top-down" approach in which the effectiveness of practice is evaluated, and the best practices are agreed. In this approach, systematic reviews and practice guidelines or protocols are collected. The second approach defines EBP as a practice and a process in which practitioners and clients together evaluate the methods or interventions (Payne, 2014, p. 54). The often-cited process, borrowed from evidence-based medicine, begins with defining an answerable question to which the best available evidence is located and critically appraised, clients are informed, and the intervention is evaluated (e.g., Gambrill, 2001). The process always requires professional reflection and experiential knowledge as well as discussing the views of the client.

In social work, evidence-based practice has been much debated, especially when the focus has been in narrowly finding and evaluating evidence-based practices (EBPs) based preferably only on the golden standard of RCTs, which are difficult to conduct (Payne, 2014, p. 55). Other main arguments against EBP concern its positivist paradigm, practical difficulties in evaluating complex interventions (EBPs), its politics in accepting the present social order, and interest in changing individuals or communities instead of society (Payne, 2014, p. 55). It would seem that the positivist and narrow idea of EBP is difficult to reconcile with the progressive view of social work.

In reflecting how social work research findings, whether empirical or theoretical, could be applied in practice, we were inspired by pragmatism and also by Addams. The pragmatist approach does not have a methodological hierarchy; it recognizes scientific knowledge but also the experiential knowledge of different actors, and most importantly relies on reflection on the practical consequences and on participatory knowledge production (Muurinen & Satka, 2020, pp. 129–130). Thus, pragmatism can bypass the ontological and methodological concerns of the narrow and positivist form of EBP.

Pragmatism also provides ideas of how to proceed with applying research findings in a reflective and participatory manner. These ideas relate to the pragmatist attitude, scientific mindset and to the applied science orientation discussed by Addams. These are similar to curiosity, critical reflection, and critical thinking, which are named by Austin et al. (2012) as the requirements of research-informed social work practitioners today.

In this chapter, we use the term *evidence-informed practice* (EIP) and *theory-informed practice* of which the first is more common in the US and the latter in Europe (Austin, 2020, p. 26). We consider evidence-informed practice to be first and foremost a process that

includes a wide range of research, not only evaluation studies of EBPs. To emphasize the less discussed role of theoretical research, we include the term 'theory-informed practice' alongside EIP.

In social work, theories include perspectives, frameworks, models, and explanatory theories. These can be helpful for understanding 1) what social work is and 2) how to do it or 3) theories that may concern the client's world (Payne, 2014, pp. 5–6). These different types of theories are intertwined and can be used together with evidence-based findings on interventions, but also when such evidence is not available (Payne, 2014, p. 10). As a part of the problem-solving process, theories, perspectives, frameworks, and research on client populations can also inform a social worker regarding the needs and experiences of service users and can help in forming answerable questions.

To conclude, the above description on evidence-informed and theory-informed social work as a process resonates with Addams's thoughts on the scientific mindset, and the pragmatist attitude of observing and reflecting on the consequences of using multidisciplinary research. Addams also considered social work to be doing good with people, not for them, and questioned the actor-object position (Puurunen, 2019, p. 324). In evidence-informed social work as a participatory process, clients are not considered objects, but the process emphasizes discussion with clients on their views and values and allows them to make decisions based on the existing knowledge. Shared reflection of theoretical concepts or knowledge may also lead to awareness raising concerning structural problems. Finally, the role of shared reflection is closely connected to Addams's idea of sympathetic knowledge, which is created in discussing the perspectives and experiences of clients (Hamington, 2009) and is therefore a significant part of the EIP process and the knowledge created within it.

4 Applying pragmatist attitude in the Practice and Theory groups

As discussed above, in social work evidence-based or evidence-informed practice is defined as a problem-solving process where knowledge is acquired, created, tested, and evaluated (Gambrill, 2001). However, research has shown that social workers' difficulties in interpreting research and their lack of access and time to read research have been identified as obstacles for evidence-informed social work (Beddoe, 2011; Gray et al., 2013; Nutley et al., 2007, pp. 81–83; Muurinen & Kääriäinen, 2020).

To overcome these obstacles and to bridge the gap between theory and practice, we were inspired by the example of Jane Addams and especially the idea of the pragmatist philosopher John Dewey (1920/1988, pp. 163, 169), who considered that theories, notions, and conceptions should be used as tools in reflecting on and analyzing situations and in searching for practical solutions. In 2015, we designed a Practice and Theory pilot group intervention to support social workers in applying theoretical and qualitative research and strengthening evidence-informed, and more concretely theory-informed practice, in Finland (Kääriäinen & Muurinen, 2019; Muurinen & Kääriäinen, 2020; 2022).

The goal of the Practice and Theory group was to connect research-based, qualitative or theoretical knowledge to social workers' practical skills and practical wisdom (Smeeton, 2015, p. 18). The group was based on the idea of pragmatist inquiry and doing reflective experiments in one's own work. The group met five to six times and in each session the group chose a one-sheet-long research summary prepared by the group facilitator. The research for the group was selected by considering its relevance, applicability, width, and familiarity and included social work research but also more widely research from the field of social sciences and philosophy (Muurinen & Kääriäinen, 2022).

The group discussed various social work practice theories (e.g., narrative practice). Also, social science theories, such as Goffman's (1955/2016) concept of 'face,' which describes how a positive self-image is created, maintained and guarded in interaction with others, or Lonne et al.'s (2016) recommendations for six steps of ethical decision-making principles in child protection, were discussed. Two examples of the summaries used are available online (Kääriäinen & Muurinen, 2019).

In between the group meetings, each participant applied the chosen research concept or summary to their practice by considering the practical consequences or by doing small practical experiments (Peirce, 1878/1934; Dewey, 1916, p. 8). Thus, the group allowed the participants to try out some of the things they had been taught and put truth to "the ultimate test of the conduct it dictates or inspires," as Jane Addams (1910/2019, p. 199) wrote about the residents in Hull-House over a hundred years ago. The participants' practical experiences were then shared and reflected on within the group in a dialogical manner (Buber, 1923/2008), by applying the method of narrative collaboration (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997) as well as turn-taking in speaking and listening (Morgan, 2000). A more detailed description of the group is available as a guidebook (see Kääriäinen & Muurinen, 2019).

The qualitative research of the Practice and Theory pilot group intervention is based on data from three different groups. The data is collected in 2015–2017 and consists of reflective group interviews during the last group meetings (total 16 participants) and of follow-up interviews held three to six months later (total 14 participants). Thus, the results concern mostly short-term and to some extent intermediate outcomes that were identified by the participants. The intermediate and especially the long-term outcomes call for further research (Muurinen & Kääriäinen, 2022).

Next, we will describe the participants' experiences of the group. We were especially interested in how the participants' epistemic agency emerged. Agency can be considered epistemic when knowledge has been applied or has been used to obtain more knowledge or to create new knowledge (Damsa & Andriessen, 2012, p. 204). Thus, epistemic agency refers to the metacognitive skills (Scardamalia, 2002) that social workers need, use, and develop when they reflect on practical situations, apply experiential and scientific knowledge, and make interpretations.

Because epistemic agency has been analyzed as a feature that is constructed at an individual level (e.g., Scardamalia, 2002) and at a collective level (e.g., Fairweather & Montemayor, 2017), we will discuss the participants' experiences of the Practice and Theory group on these two levels. The data excerpts have been translated from Finnish into English and to maintain confidentiality, we do not identify from which group each data extract is from.

5 Practice and Theory groups and epistemic agency

5.1 Strengthening personal epistemic agency

After the Practice and Theory groups, the participants stated that the groups had helped them to understand how empirical research and theories are and can be connected to social work practice. Although evidence-informed practice has been discussed for decades, the participants experienced several obstacles in integrating research findings into their practical work. Many participants also mentioned that they had previously felt frustration, guilt or shame for connecting research to their work so tenuously. In order to understand how research is connected to practice, it was important that this epistemological connection was explained but also demonstrated in the groups' reflective discussions.

In the groups, the most significant activity was the conscious reflection on practice and theory, application of knowledge in practice, and observation of the consequences. This idea of putting the truth to "the ultimate test of the conduct it dictates or inspires," was a key tenet in Addams's (1910/2019, p. 199) pragmatism. In the group, this reflective process concerned especially the social workers' own knowledge, attitudes, and actions. For personal reflection, participants felt that the research summaries worked as tools in analyzing their actions in different situations. The participants stated that the theories and research helped them to distance themselves from their work, to examine it in a new light, and recognize and explain their own actions.

The group provided a space in which the participants could orientate themselves towards their own actions and experiences, and to talk about these to others. Emphasizing this was important, because the discussions could easily turn to general descriptions of situations or merely to talking about how demanding client cases can be. In fact, the participants often mentioned that they had not usually discussed with their colleagues how they act themselves or if they could act differently, as one participant describes:

> *In peer reports we have previously focused on what could be done [in the client situation] and what could work. Not so much how you act yourself.*

Also, in evidence-based clinical work, the focus can often be on decision-making, choosing interventions and evaluating the consequences. However, through the entire problem-solving process, the understanding and the interpretations of the situation as well as the relationship

between the social worker and client are essential. Thus, a mechanical application of techniques rarely works, for evidence-based practice requires personal and critical reflection or, as Addams describes it, the scientific mindset and an applied scientific orientation founded on pragmatism.

According to the participants, analyzing one's own work was important because it enabled them to recognize their own expertise but also the limitations of their knowledge. Addams pointed out the advice given to her by her father (1910/2019, p. 176) "that it was very important not to pretend to understand what you didn't understand, and you must always be honest with yourself inside, whatever happened." This self-understanding that the participants developed and the fallibilist attitude they practiced when doing reflective, small experiments in their work, is a significant part of evidence-informed and theory-informed practice in which it is necessary to acknowledge the limits of professional and personal knowledge.

While the participants brought up the importance of knowing what one does not know, they also observed that qualitative or theoretical research findings could inform their practice. For individual work, reflecting on theoretical constructions offered both informational perspectives and possible interpretations for clients' situations, and also challenged the workers to consider the client's experiences and put themselves in their client's shoes, which is characteristic for Addams's idea of sympathetic knowledge (Hamington, 2009). The following excerpt describes how not only research on EBPs, but also qualitative or theoretical research can help one to understand and reflect on clients' experiences:

> *[theories] increase understanding in client work. It is sometimes so difficult to understand where they are coming from, what their experience of everything is, and in a good way these [theories] bring in the background or its meaning, and everything that has happened in that life, how they affect why the client has come here, that is important to understand.*

Participants also discussed the social structures and how understanding the social function of social work helps in understanding the limits and possibilities of one's activities. Thus, besides providing insights and tools for working with individuals, reflecting on theories also increased the participants' understanding of the importance of social work at the macro level, and the more sociological and structural orientation Addams had already described. Thus, the reflection of theory and practice increased the awareness of societal consequences, as one social worker described it: "*I can reflect in a completely different way why social work is done or why one makes decisions or what effects an activity has.*"

The participants experienced that reflecting on their own actions, client cases, and macro practice in the light of research had several positive consequences for them. For example, familiarizing oneself with research helped to explain to other human service professionals what social work and a social worker's expertise entails, as well as describing the interpretations of client situations. The small practical experiments to apply the research knowledge in one's own work and reflecting on these experiences led to a new appreciation of personal skills, supported developing new working methods, enabled professional

empowerment, and increased the feeling of being inspired in one's work. We interpret this as a *strengthening of personal epistemic agency.*

The ability to apply knowledge as well as to make professional knowledge and reasoning explicit are significant characteristics of epistemic agency (Damsa & Andriessen, 2012, p. 204). Epistemic agency as a metacognitive skill (Scardamalia, 2002) is at the core of pragmatism as a method and an attitude, and can be strengthened through conscious and reflective inquiring into one's practice. Addams recognized this in her own writings on social work in which knowledge creation is always connected to practice and requires reflection on multidisciplinary and experiential knowledge (Puurunen 2019, p. 235–236; Addams 1912, pp. 65–66).

5.2 Enabling the collective level of epistemic agency

The participants in the Practice and Theory groups considered that not only their personal endeavours to apply knowledge and observe the consequences but also the shared reflection on work was significant. Shared discussions and open deliberation about the demanding nature of social work and complex situations – without choosing a wrong or right solution – helped the participants to broaden their perspectives and provided new options for acting. The participants considered the shared discussions improved the quality of their work, increased their professional abilities, and helped to find new operating models, as stated in the following excerpt:

> *Why this group was good is that I have the energy to make fresh interpretations and not just act through habit. I feel that everyday work encourages you to just act through habit.*

As Addams wrote, sharing experiences and memories is important for learning and for shared knowledge creation (Addams, 1902/2019, p. 61). In general, gaining new perspectives and work practices from others was valued and considered important in the groups. Also, concrete changes in participants' work methods were made because of the group, as explained in the following excerpt:

> *When I've been thinking about a case, I've somehow woken up or I've got these ideas, and finally in one client case, I made a breakthrough after being stuck for a year because of that one [group] meeting.*

Understanding work and talking about work had become more positive than before, based on the feedback from other participants. Finding new options for actions removed professional cynicism and encouraged participants to make new interpretations of client situations. Thinking alone was not felt to be as productive as discussions in groups:

> *It is difficult to get yourself going, to take the time, and this is also a lot more productive. We probably think about a lot of things on our own, but it is different when you can talk to someone else and share things.*

The groups' participants explained that their demanding work gave them little or no time for reading about research findings, even though they may have been interested in it. However, the participants stated that participation in the group lowered the threshold to read more and have discussions about theories that guide their work. Even when some participants in the groups had not always found the time to consciously apply the research and reflect on it in their work, they were still able to internalize the theoretical perspective that was discussed and learn from others.

Besides sharing personal experiences, the participants explained that they had gained new knowledge and methods while listening to others and their experiences. While working at Hull-House, Addams emphasized active listening and considered it an essential habit of embodied care (Hammington 2004, p. 108). In the Practice and Theory groups, the active listening was significant for dialogical interaction, recognizing different perspectives and viewpoints, and forming a shared understanding.

When thinking about the consequences of the groups, the participants compared the Practice and Theory groups to training sessions. The participants said that information gained in training is not adapted to work or the work community in the same way as the discussions held collectively in a group, when new information and practices are discussed and evaluated together. The groups strove to foster a positive and confidential atmosphere so that the participants would be encouraged to speak about their personal working life experiences. In the feedback, a positive atmosphere was also felt to support learning. For example, one of the participants described how "*the group had a positive vibe and we got along together and learnt.*"

The Practice and Theory groups supported and increased shared intentional processes (Damsa & Andriessen, 2012), consisting of reflecting in groups, examining one's own work habits, and collegial listening, which increased self-knowledge and activated shared actions. Combining theory and practice does not necessarily always result in an extensive change of action or a research project, but rather in continuous knowledge creation, as happens in everyday life. Meanwhile, the participants said that information gained in training is not adapted to work or the work community in the same way as the discussions held collectively in the groups, where the new information and practices were discussed and evaluated together.

We interpret the group discussions, active listening and the group structure itself as *enabling the collective level of epistemic agency.* As discussed previously, personal epistemic agency is a core skill used in the pragmatist method when knowledge is applied, and consequences are observed. But in pragmatism, knowledge creation is not only an individual process but a collective learning process that takes place with the community and in interaction with the environment. Addams also understood the collective aspect of epistemic agency in Hull-House, which was an active learning community (Hamington 2009, p. 165). Addams also understood the significance of shared learning processes and collective epistemic agency within the community. For example, she realized that to reduce high infant mortality, the local

women had to be involved in developing community waste disposal (Addams, 1910/2019, pp. 260–262).

Similarly, to tackle the barriers and obstacles of EIP and to avoid burdening individual social workers, collective reflection and knowledge production must be supported. Thus, collective reflection and organizational structures that allow social workers time and space to reflect, can enhance evidence-informed and theory-informed practice in the work community as well as support individual practitioners, as the social worker in the following excerpt describes:

> *This has been very good for me. That I have come here, had the peace to come and think. I always have articles or books on my desk, but I never have a moment when I would have the time to read them. I haven't even had the opportunity to leave and come to a different place. This has been very good.*

To conclude, the interaction between the individual's work and the collective learning community supported the development of epistemic agency (see Fairweather & Montemayor, 2017, p. 364) and increased the group participants' wellbeing at work. The development of shared epistemic agency requires collective motivation for investigating complex situations (Fairweather & Montemayor, 2017, p. 169). Practicing this shared inquiry and reflection may lead to the implementation of EBPs but also to a wider epistemological understanding, the utilization of different kinds of research knowledge to inform practice, as well as to continuous workplace learning and innovation.

6 Discussion

In this chapter, the focus has been on how pragmatism and Addams's writings contribute to contemporary discussions on evidence-informed and theory-informed social work. Addams considered it important in social work to adopt the pragmatist attitude and to apply multidisciplinary knowledge. The pragmatist attitude and an applied science orientation were present in Hull-House, where readiness to experiment was a requirement (Addams, 1910/2019, p. 212) and where research knowledge could be disseminated and tested for its validity for the local community (Hamington, 2009, p. 6; Puurunen, 2019, pp.128–129).

We consider that Addams's ideas and the examples of how Hull-House operated can inspire discussions on the variety of research, including theories, that can inform practice instead of the narrow and top-down views of EBP. We believe that Addams would advise social workers today to avoid objectifying the client and instead, alongside the application of scientific knowledge, to focus on sympathetic understanding and on reflecting on evidence and theories with service users. Addams would also no doubt encourage us to establish Practice and Theory groups or similar learning communities not only for social workers but also for service users.

While it seems that the narrow idea of EBP focused on reforming the individual is difficult to reconcile with the progressive view of social work that Addams had, the applied science

orientation and the sociological orientation Addams described can be combined and can support each other. Reflecting and experimenting especially with theoretical knowledge may lead to awareness raising concerning structural problems, as the participants in the Practice and Theory groups described, and eventually to collecting data for developing the practice or for doing macro social work. In Hull-House, the residents were, according to Addams (1910/2019, p. 212) "bound to see the needs of their neighbors as a whole, to furnish data for legislation, and use their influence to secure it."

Hull-House as a learning community can provide examples and inspiration to show how collective structures can support research application and dissemination, like the Practice and Theory groups analyzed in this chapter. These kinds of organizational structures and emphasis on collective activities and the importance of learning communities could strengthen evidence-informed and theory-informed practice and help to tackle some of the obstacles research has described. Previous research has also emphasized the importance of interactive group processes and supportive organizational structures for promoting EIP (Austin et al., 2012; Austin & Carnochan, 2020; Carnochan et al., 2017; Nilsen et al., 2012).

In this chapter, we have analyzed the experiences of participants in the Practice and Theory groups. In the groups, the social workers consciously applied the pragmatist method of observing and reflecting with others on practical consequences. This required, demonstrated, and strengthened their epistemic agency. Epistemic agency is at the core of the pragmatist method, and it is also at the heart of evidence-informed practice and is characteristic of a research-minded practitioner.

Epistemic agency is based on collective communication, which makes it possible to adjust one's behavior in complex situations containing moral and ethical questions (Fairweather & Montemayor, 2017, p. 177). The group participants explained that the shared discussions on research increased their ability to analyze their own actions and increased their opportunities to find new ways of operating in demanding client work. The participants also felt that analyzing their own practice improved their ability to explain their viewpoints and decisions. Thus, the interaction between individual and collective work supported the development of epistemic agency (Fairweather & Montemayor, 2017, p. 364).

The development of epistemic agency requires collective motivation for investigating complex situations (Fairweather & Montemayor, 2017, p. 169), which was also recognized by Addams, who motivated people to join different Hull-House clubs to learn and to have an impact on society. In the Practice and Theory groups, reflecting together, examining one's own work habits, and collegial listening increased self-knowledge and participants' wellbeing at work; it also motivated them to participate the group.

For evidence-informed and theory-informed practice, a significant observation was that participation in the groups and doing small practical experiments lowered the threshold to apply knowledge and carry out inquiries in the participants' own work. Thus, the Practice and Theory groups supported and increased shared intentional processes (Damsa & Andriessen,

2012). Combining theory and practice does not necessarily always result in an extensive change of action or a research project, but rather in continuous knowledge creation that happens in everyday life, as in the different clubs at Hull-House over a hundred years ago.

To conclude, in research, analyzing professionals' actions through the concepts of *personal and shared epistemic agency* increases an understanding of the connections between knowledge, action, and different types of agencies. The societal consequences of epistemic agency (Reider, 2016) are significant because human agents can choose the type of information their actions are based on. In contemporary social work, following the footsteps of Addams, becoming aware of one's own knowing, knowing together, and evaluating actions together, as well as changing operating practices, is productive when it is done in a group. In this way, shared reflection on multidisciplinary knowledge, experiential knowledge, and sympathetic knowledge can improve the quality of work and services.

Bio

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