
A Study on the Social Impact of Jane Addams

The field of Social Work, you will find, is one that is graciously underappreciated in nearly every developed country around the world. It is hard, emotional, low-paying work, and those that do it work with some of the most damaged people you will ever meet-wither it be physically, mentally or socially. Yet there are very few positions that are considered just as rewarding as Social work. The satisfaction that you are making a difference in individual lives by helping people gain access to resources and better themselves is often enough to carry you through the more difficult moments in this line of work.

This is precisely what Jane Addams, the recognized 'founder' of the occupation, was looking for throughout her life. Despite coming from a wealthy family of respectable politicians, Jane had dreams of attending college and becoming a doctor. As the eighth of nine children growing up in a family without a mother, Jane looked to her father to stand as her role model throughout her childhood and young adulthood. This attachment to her father (who was a friend of Abraham Lincoln and had a reputation for doing what was right, no matter the cost) ultimately shaped her conscious.

Despite her ambition of going to the at-that-time prestigious Smith College of Northampton, Jane's father had her placed in Rockford Female Seminary- insisting that though he wanted her educated, women belonged in the home. Another problem was her already degrading health. Jane was diagnosed at a young age with congenital spinal defect- a condition that made walking and basic physical movements very difficult. This forced her to frequently miss her classes throughout high school, despite her love of learning. This, along with his traditional viewpoints, caused him to refuse to send his daughter to any kind of college. This disagreement caused young Jane to postpone college until after her father's death.

Eventually, however, Jane found medical school far too taxing on both her physical and mental health, and, after receiving an extensive back surgery, decided to spend a few years traveling abroad with a few close friends and her stepmother. This trip, it would seem, was the one that finally set Jane's path into stone. During her travels, Jane caught a handful of glimpses at life outside her own. What she saw was both heart breaking and infuriating- the treatment of the working class and employees awakened her dormant mental compass.

Copying the London Toynbee Hall settlement house, Addams returned to the United States with a vision- build a similar structure that would help low income families and immigrant workers access resources that would better their lives. This project came to fruition in the form of The Hull House. Here, Addams formed an army of like-minded people to help the poverty stricken working class in Chicago. During its height, the Hull house had a day-care, a gym, a food bank style kitchen and several classrooms that served to provide college classes to those who worked and lived there. In addition, the Hull house also provided young Social Workers with training and experience.

Generational Impact

Jane's incredibly selfless lifestyle did not end with her death in 1935- in fact, it had a rippling

affect. Those who knew Jane spread her reputation until she was known worldwide as a Samaritan and a hero. Her friends and employees of the Hull house went on to further expand the field that she had created-without even knowing what they were accomplishing. They only knew that, more than anything, they wanted to continue Addams's legacy, and continue helping others in whatever way they could. This profession has had a profound impact on every generation since its creation-enabling the children of immigrants and low income families to rise out of poverty through the use of the resources that Social Workers provide.

A good example of such services exists within the Head Start program. Head Start is an early education program designed to give the children of low income families a leg-up in their education, and thus better prepare them for their futures. Hundreds of diverse families apply for this program, but only a handful are selected to participate. This is where the Social Worker's task begins. He or She is responsible for helping each family (family, not individual child; head start is designed to help the families of those in its program, not just the children directly involved) achieve their financial and educational goals. The social worker puts them in touch with others who can help them achieve these goals, and stands by their side through every step of the process, offering advice and a sort of 'guiding light', no matter what difficult situation a family might find itself in.

The work of these dedicated individuals does not stop, however, with families and young children. Quite the opposite, actually- a great number of teenagers and young adults look to Social Workers to help them work through problems in their everyday lives, particularly if they have led a difficult childhood. For many, the Social worker, (who in many of these circumstances might take on the role of Case Manager) is a responsible adult outside the

That said, Social Workers do not generally limit themselves to one particular age group, though some do choose to specialize in a particular field. Jane Addams certainly didn't- and that's probably why she was able to continue in the service as long as she did. Indeed, some find that the job's high burnout rate can be compensated for when one merely shifts the population that they are working with. For example, a Social Worker who has found working with teens extremely taxing might find the same amount of satisfaction in a nursing home, or within a family counseling center. The level of diversity offered in this position is truly like-no-other, which is why one might find it to be an appealing career.

Another part of its uniqueness (and perhaps equally as appealing) is the ability to make your own schedule based on your lifestyle. Full time social workers might have a full schedule-driving here and there providing resources to their clients or taking their phone calls. On the other hand, many part-time Social Workers work only 4 days a week, designing their schedule around less emotionally demanding job, or just spending time with family and friends.

It is worth noting, however, that this job is not for the faint of heart or those who are motivated by monetary income. Social workers generally receive around forty thousand dollars per year-not nearly enough to support a family on. Others choose not to enter the field find that they cannot tolerate the difficulties or heartbreak that this career can cause, even when weighed against the happy endings and other job benefits. Those who are strong enough to help others carry the weight of their problems, however, will find Social Work a rewarding career, as Addams and her followers did.

Professional Impact

The broad field of Social Work breaks off very quickly into 2 separate sectors. The first are known commonly as direct-service workers. These are the ones that are more focused on connecting people with resources and helping them meet basic needs- which can be everything from helping them receive proper medical care to finding a lawyer help them end a custody dispute to helping them apply for food stamps. Direct Service workers are typically full time employees, and, even when off the clock, are available by phone (or on-call) so that their clients can contact them should the need arise.

Clinical social workers are very different- particularly when noting how many options they have. Whereas direct Service social workers generally work for the government or for nonprofit agencies, Clinical Social Workers have the ability to freelance, operating their services like a business, or work out of a hospital or private practice. Clinical Social Workers serve as counselors for those who work alongside psychiatrists to diagnose and treat various issues- usually classified as mental, behavioral, social or emotional. They assess their past and present circumstances to determine the steps towards a better treatment of the illness in the future- whether it is through therapy, medication or a combination of the two. Both branches, however, stem from one group of people-compassionate individuals with a commitment towards those facing hardship.

Social Work's humble beginnings are in no way reflected in the amount of training and preparation that it takes to become a Social Worker. The entry level education requirements are almost always at a minimum of a bachelor's degree, sometimes more depending on the position. Others require certain amounts of involvement in similar programs- such as an internship or work as a Social Work Assistant. Clinical Social Workers must have at least master's degree (with no exceptions). In addition, each individual state has criteria for licensing those practicing within its boundaries.

Global Impact

The London Toynbee Hall settlement house and Jane's Hull house laid the foundation for similar buildings all around the world. Jane's work inspired many to build off of the concept of a shelter for lower income personal. One of the very best examples of this is seen in Boston's St. Francis House. St. Francis House is dedicated to helping homeless men and women climb out of the most impossible situations. The services and support that they provide give the people they serve a leg up in getting back on their feet. Their mission is one that Jane Addams would have agreed with wholeheartedly: the belief that each and every human being deserves respect and dignity.

Jane Addam's hull house also inspired people to form organizations with the needs of specific groups of people in mind. A good example exists right here in Loudoun county, at LAWS (the Loudoun Abused Women's Shelter). This shelter is designed with the needs of abused women and their children in mind- everything from medical care and housing to basic needs. Each one of them receives counseling for the difficulties that they've sustained- yet another part of the social work industry that Jane Addams did not leave unaffected.

She set the standards for counseling, providing her patients with care with the understanding of

confidentiality between both parties. This practice is used widely by social workers and other service professionals, as it provides the client with a sense of security. It can insure that one can receive the help needed without alerting those who do not need to know and avoiding the spread of negative gossip.

Jane Addams was not only a profound influence on the world's poverty relief agencies, but also one of the recognized founders of a field that attracts many people that find it in their hearts to put others first. Social Work offers a unique to chance to connect with the less fortunate on a more personal level, rather than giving through anonymous donations and it takes a special kind of person to be able to handle the various emotions that come with this job. Indeed, the deeper you dive into the world of this incredible profession, the more engrossed you become in it- which has its ups and downs. One thing is certain: Jane Addams become so engrossed that she dedicated her entire life to her newly created field, and though I don't expect to do so myself, I hope to make many more contributions to the same field.

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