



Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association

apa.sagepub.com

Published online before print January 29, 2015, doi: 10.1177/0003065114568723
J Am Psychoanal Assoc February 2015 vol. 63 no. 1 101-136

Jane Addams and the “Devil Baby Tales” The Usefulness of Perplexity in “Sympathetic Understanding,” a Tool in Learning Empathy

Thetis R. Cromie

122 South Michigan Avenue, Suite 1459 Chicago, IL 60603 E-mail: cromie1000@mac.com

Abstract

Jane Addams was a social thinker, a public philosopher, and a leader of the settlement house movement in the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. She developed a method to understand people from backgrounds radically different from her own. This approach, which she called “sympathetic understanding,” involved a dialogic process that included “perplexity” and inquiry. This process resulted in practical actions that resonated with people in the neighborhood surrounding Hull House, the settlement house she founded in Chicago. It also transformed Addams’s own feeling and thinking. The process is illustrated by the “Devil Baby” tales described in Addams’s work. The relationship of her method to empathy with diverse populations and professional empathy in general is discussed.

[self psychology](#) [selfobjects](#) [intersubjectivity](#)

... if the devil himself came riding down Halsted Street with his tail waving out behind him [Jane Addams would say] what a beautiful curve he has in his tail.

—ELLEN GATES STARR

Jane Addams had the capacity to awaken the thwarted needs of the people she worked with. In her many roles as a caregiver she met individuals, families, and communities threatened by faulty and failing cohesion. She was able to mobilize her neighbors’ thwarted needs for the mirroring, strengthening, and self-expanding responses that were missing in their lives. This is not to say that her work was the same as the deep work of psychoanalysis but rather to say that within the context of her work she formulated a method of “perplexity” and inquiry from which psychoanalysts might learn.

She said her decision to found a settlement house in the midst of overcrowded, unsanitary, and impoverished conditions came from a determination to learn firsthand from life experience. One way she learned life’s lessons was to respect the people she hoped to help enough to listen to what they had to say. She reflected on how their insights and memories contributed to a better understanding of the problems that confounded their lives (Seigfried 2002b). She called this process “sympathetic understanding.” What follows is a description of the context in which Addams worked, her method, and its significance for contemporary psychoanalysis.

Jane Addams and Ellen Gates Starr co-founded Hull House on Halsted Street in Chicago in 1889. It was among the first settlement houses in the United States. Under the leadership of Addams, it provided social, educational, and artistic programs for working-class and immigrant populations on the city’s Near West Side. The mission of Hull House was “to provide for a higher civic and social life; to institute and maintain educational and philanthropic enterprises, and to investigate and improve the conditions in the industrial districts of Chicago” (Addams 1910, p. 73).

When Hull House opened its doors in September 1889, the surrounding neighborhood consisted largely of families of Italian, Irish, Greek, German, Russian, and Polish immigrants. Hull House provided services for working mothers, citizenship classes for immigrants, and meeting places for local union groups. In addition, it had a performance theater, a striking library, and an art gallery. Hull House residents established Chicago’s first public playground and bathhouse, engaged in educational and political reforms, and worked for better housing and sanitation. Hull House associates advocated for legal reforms that included child labor laws, women’s suffrage, and immigration policies. They also contributed to the Immigrants Protective League, the Juvenile Protective Association, the Institute for Juvenile Research, and the first juvenile court in the United States.

The Devil Baby Tales

The appearance of the ghost of the Devil Baby in an attic window in Hull House is a Chicago urban legend that attracts curiosity seekers to this day. Guides on a bus tour down Halsted Street point out the famous Hull House, claiming that the Devil Baby myth inspired Ira Levin’s *Rosemary’s Baby*. The reality is that the Devil Baby stories actually did cause an enormous public response in the fall of 1913.

The Devil Baby event was reported in the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, November 1, 1913, in a column, “Think It Over”:

It is the custom in morals to judge a person by the exhibitions of the weakest moments, but there must be a resolute refusal to find a new level of intelligence in the outcropping medievalism which has astounded Miss Addams at Hull House, where report said a “devil child” was in custody. Some rudimentary superstition found oxygen for an instant and led to abnormal action. If this were the level of intelligence of any such considerable number of people as displayed curiosity, Chicago and civilization would shake hands and say “good night” [p. 6].

In *The Long Road of Woman’s Memory*, Addams (1916b) recounts the opening moments of the Devil Baby phenomenon.¹

The knowledge of his existence burst upon the residents of Hull-House one day when three Italian women, with an excited rush through the door, demanded that he be shown to them. No amount of denial convinced them that he was not there, for they knew exactly what he was like with his cloven hoofs, his pointed ears and diminutive tail; the Devil Baby had, moreover, been able to speak as soon as he was born and was most shockingly profane [pp. 7–8].

These three women were the first of many more to come. For a period of six weeks, thousands of visitors from every part of the city, the suburbs, and beyond overwhelmed the everyday activities of the settlement house, many with elaborate stories about “the devil baby.” The Italian version of the story had hundreds of variations. In one version, a pious young Italian woman was married to an atheist man. One day, her enraged husband tore a holy picture from the wall, shouting he would rather have a devil in the house than such a picture. As a result, the devil incarnated himself in the child the young woman was carrying. When the Devil Baby was born, he ran around shaking his finger reproachfully at his father. The father caught the Devil Baby and brought him to Hull House. According to this version of the story, the residents of Hull House overcame their surprise at his appearance and tried to save his soul by having him baptized. However, the Devil Baby fled the shawl in which he was held, evaded the holy water, and was seen to “run lightly over the pews in the church” ([Addams 1916b](#), p. 8). Other versions of the story said the Devil Baby was caught and confined in an upstairs room of Hull House.

In the Jewish version, which also had several variants, the father of six daughters said, before the birth of a seventh child, that he would rather have a devil than another daughter. The Devil Baby immediately appeared ([Addams 1916b](#), p. 8).

For a month and a half the telephone at Hull House rang incessantly with inquiries. Residents could be heard responding to these calls with “No, there is no such baby”; “We didn’t send it anywhere because we never had it”; “There is no use getting up an excursion from Milwaukee, for there isn’t any Devil Baby at Hull-House”; “We can’t give reduced rates, because we are not exhibiting anything”; etc. ([Addams 1916b](#), p. 9).

Addams was utterly confounded by the spectacle, which continued for over a month, and was appalled by the rumor that a “Devil Baby” was on display at Hull House for a fee. Yet there was an exception to this response when she heard the excited voices of older immigrant women, who came alive in their conviction about the importance of the tale. The stories of the Devil Baby stirred their minds and memories, and they seemed to come into their own. Addams said the stories “loosened their tongues” and revealed an inner life that hitherto had gone unarticulated. Gradually Addams realized that the stories, which she at first dismissed as born of superstition and ignorance, served significant purposes in these women’s lives. By being open to these immigrant women, and listening to the visitors who came to view the baby, she came to the insight that the stories they spun had useful meanings.²

In the autobiographical *Twenty Years at Hull-House*, published in 1910, Addams talks about the conflicts she observed between first- and second-generation immigrants, conflicts that contributed to family disintegration, crime, and juvenile delinquency in the tenements of Chicago ([Seigfried 2002b](#), p. xv; [Addams 1910](#)). The Americanized second generation often looked with scorn upon the weaving and sewing skills of the first generation of women ([Seigfried 2002b](#)). Addams noted that first-generation older women often sat idle at home and felt extraneous; younger family members spoke of things quite out of their experience, often in a language they didn’t understand. She quoted several women as saying, “More than half the time I can’t tell what they are talking about” ([Addams 1916b](#), p. 10). Addams described in detail the impact of age on the process of acculturation. Problems included intergenerational conflict creating disunity among family members; dilemmas related to social roles; and loss of status when traditional family roles were lost in the process of acculturation. Addams noted that the Devil Baby tales were experienced by these older immigrant women as a powerful event: a familiar piece of material was put into their hands, one they were accustomed to dealing with. For a long time it was just such cautionary tales that had functioned for them as a tool to establish family discipline, modify violence against them, give them social standing, and maintain their sanity when it was difficult to adapt to a modern industrial city. In addition, the stories of the Devil Baby stimulated an extended conversation among these women around their own memories. They were spurred to tell their stories in the hope that some meaning, retribution, and wisdom might result ([Addams 1916b](#)):

These old women enjoyed a moment of triumph—as if they had made good at last and had come into a region of sanctions and punishments which they understood. Years of living had taught them that recrimination with grown-up children and grandchildren is worse than useless, that punishments are impossible, that domestic instruction is best given through tales and metaphors [p. 10].

Narratives that encompass communal values and wisdom are central to many cultures. Barbara Myerhoff’s *Number Our Days* (1978) is a study of elderly Jewish women and men at a senior citizens’ center in Venice, California. She describes how *bobbe-mysehs*, grandmother tales told to others and to oneself, functioned as what Kohut would call cultural selfobjects and what [Galatzer-Levy and Cohler \(1993\)](#) call “essential others.” Kohut (1981) showed how the continuity of the self was experienced “via the eye of the selfobject” (p. 236). In the telling of the Devil Baby tales, immigrant women experienced a continuity of self in the midst of change. Like the senior citizens in Venice, the old immigrant women of Addams’s day treasured tales that provided them an experience of integrity in the midst of adversity.

To understand how Jane Addams discovered a means to attune herself to a way of being so unlike her own, it is useful to examine elements of this remarkable woman’s life.

Jane Addams: History

Laura Jane Addams was born on September 6, 1860, in Cedarville, Illinois, on the eve of the Civil War. Her family valued public service and activism ([Sherrick 1986](#)). She grew up with advantages because her father, John Addams, was a successful businessman and politician. As a politician, he developed a friendship with Abraham Lincoln, whose democratic ideals he greatly admired. He himself was an abolitionist and a supporter of the Underground Railroad. We will see later that this admiration played itself out in Addams’s own ideas at Hull House.

Addams’s mother, Sarah, died in childbirth when Jane was two years old. Sarah was in her mid-forties and pregnant with her ninth child when she responded to a pregnant neighbor’s call for help. Returning home from helping the woman deliver the baby, Jane’s mother took a fall. Several days later, she and her baby died, leaving Jane “to dream nightmares of abandonment” (Mary Addams Linn, letter to Jane Addams, August 26, 1881; Jane Addams papers, Swathmore College). The early death of her mother left Jane’s father as the formative influence in her early life. Addams said that her deep feelings of love were invested in her father, whom she experienced as calm and even-tempered. In *Twenty Years at Hull-House* she observes that all of her early impressions were connected to his dominant influence in her early life. Their relationship was “like a cord upon which were strung” her earliest childhood memories ([Addams 1910](#), p. 1). Although he was not her primary caregiver (she was raised by her older sister Mary, and after the age of seven by her stepmother), he was her primary figure of attachment. She said that she gave her father all the imitation that a little girl would give her mother’s ways and habits ([Diliberto 1999](#)). For example, she spent many days at her father’s mill running ground wheat between her thumb and fingers with the wish to develop the “miller’s thumb” and speckled hands her father acquired after years of rubbing flour between his fingers and dressing millstones ([Diliberto 1999](#)).

Early in childhood, Jane Addams developed Pott’s disease, tuberculosis of the spine. This disease hindered her physical interaction with peers. She felt self-conscious and ugly. As a little girl, she frequently avoided appearing in public with her father, anxious that she might diminish his greatness. He, however, was not at all loath to be seen with her. Realizing this helped her recognize that her worries about her father’s evaluation were unrealistic. It was only in her late adolescence that her father’s actual evaluation of her became a source of psychic pain. He largely held to society’s conventional view with regard to women’s development and viewed their proper place exclusively in the “private spheres.”³

John Addams sent Jane and her older sisters to college at Rockford Seminary for Women. In the 1870s less than one percent of young women went beyond high school. Those few who wanted more education often went to women’s seminaries. Jane, however, very much wanted to attend Smith College, which had opened its doors in the fall of 1872. During her adolescence she had heard about the wonderful college in Massachusetts that was offering women a true bachelor’s degree. But her father did not support her wish to enroll. In *Twenty Years at Hull-House* Addams recalls that her father’s attitude regarding his daughters’ education implied a school close to home. His idea was that his daughters would travel to Europe as a substitute for the wider advantages of attending an Eastern college. [Knight \(2010\)](#) writes in *Spirit in Action* that “her beloved father’s refusal to allow her to pursue her dream to discover the ‘wider

life' was 'a bitter pill'" (p. 21).

Upon graduating from Rockford, she saw few options. What had been a spirited and energetic college experience did not translate into a satisfying career. In the chapter "Filial Relations" [Addams \(1902\)](#) wrote of her experience of being torn between the claim of the family and a larger "social claim":

It is always difficult for the family to regard the daughter otherwise than as a family possession. From her babyhood she has been the charm and grace of the household, and it is hard to think of her as an integral part of the social order, hard to believe that she has duties outside of the family, to the state and society in the larger sense. This assumption that the daughter is solely an inspiration and refinement to the family itself and its own immediate circle, that her delicacy and polish are but outward symbols of her father's protection and prosperity, worked very smoothly for the most part so long as her education was in line with it [pp. 39–40].

Addams said that an experience of perplexity was common for the daughter who returned home from college and found this recognition of a broader role unacceptable to her parents. The parents, even with tender affections, were shocked and resisted the pressure of a new claim. For Addams, as for her college-educated female friends, perplexities arose out of being at odds with conventional wisdom, particularly as it pertained to women's development ([Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2014](#)). Addams, thrust into just such a conflict, describes the struggle that ensued until the unexpected death of her father.

After her father's death in 1881, the year of her graduation, Jane entered an extended period of physical and psychological debilitation. In "Filial Relations" she wrote about this emotional divide:

Her life is full of contradictions. She looks out into the world, longing that some demand be made upon her powers, for they are too untrained to furnish an initiative. When her health gives way under this strain, as it often does, her physician invariably advises a rest. But to be put to bed and fed on milk is not what she requires. What she needs is simple, health-giving activity, which, involving the use of all her faculties, shall be a response to all the claims which she so keenly feels [[Addams 1902](#), p. 87].

In the fall of 1881, Addams moved to Philadelphia with her stepmother and siblings. The good health she had enjoyed throughout college now eluded her. Her stepmother made an appointment for her to see Dr. Silas Weir Mitchell, a prominent American neurologist, who diagnosed her with neurasthenia and employed his famous "rest cure." But, as we see in the quote just above, she found this treatment of rest and milk to be not what she needed.

She took two trips to Europe, hoping to be invigorated. It was on her second trip that she visited Toynbee Hall in London. This was a community of young men committed to helping the poor living around them. Addams was inspired by this idea and engaged a college friend, Ellen Gates Starr, to join her in establishing such an institution in Chicago. In September 1889, Hull House, located near Halsted and Polk, opened its doors. Projects arose out of the settlement house's response to the needs of the neighborhood in which it was embedded. The fact of its being embedded was a statement about how Hull House residents conceptualized the construction of knowledge.

In [1895](#) the residents of Hull House collectively published a consummate sociological study titled *Hull-House Maps and Papers by Residents of Hull-House, A Social Settlement: A Presentation of Nationalities and Wages in a Congested District of Chicago, together with Comments and Essays on Problems Growing out of Social Conditions*. This study profoundly influenced the emerging Chicago School of Sociology at the recently founded University of Chicago (established in 1892). [Deegan \(2005\)](#) states that this study demonstrated the development of Addams's social thought, as well as its intellectual antecedents. It showed the intellectual influence Addams exerted on the men who were emerging as the Chicago School and was groundbreaking in the field of professional sociology.

The study centered on the throes of the urban environment as the city of Chicago was immersed in industrial expansion and a remarkable population explosion. These sociological conditions generated problems in the lives of the people in the Hull House neighborhood and beyond ([Deegan 2005](#)).

The study's extensive investigation established a tradition of studying the city and its residents. Its focus on immigrants, poverty, and occupational structures became the principal interest of Chicago sociologists. The focus on immigrant lives established a tradition that would be of lasting significance to later Chicago sociologists. However, the clear intellectual heritage that began with *Maps and Papers*, followed by other comprehensive studies conducted at Hull House, later faded as sociologists at the University of Chicago characterized the investigations of Hull House as "practical" and "applied," rather than "theoretical" and "academic," and thus as not rising to the level of proper sociological research.

By means of a thorough collaborative process, a flowering of sociological theory and practice had come about that began with the idea that the world is social in origin and that was committed to social change—Addams's central commitment. In the years that followed, however, the university moved from social reform to what was deemed "scientific" (and thus apolitical) sociology ([Deegan 2005](#), p. 25). Addams's sociology having thus been judged politically unacceptable by the university, a very different perspective on the Near West Side neighborhood emerged. From the so-called position of distance, the community was viewed as "a problem of management" (p. 304).

In 1917 Harry Stack Sullivan, the founder of interpersonal psychology, trained nearby at Chicago Medical School.⁴ Over time he accessed the University of Chicago's sociology department, and thus began his long interest and work in interdisciplinary collaboration between psychiatry and the social sciences.⁵ His concept of the self was heavily influenced by the social psychology of [George Herbert Mead \(1934\)](#). At the same time, pragmatism, with its recognizably American "roots and character," was the ruling philosophy and was dominant among Chicago School sociologists. Sullivan's theories developed in this milieu and were greatly influenced not only by Mead, but also by Charles H. Cooley, Robert E. Park, W. I. Thomas, Edward Sapir, and Addams herself ([Greenberg and Mitchell 1983](#), pp. 81–82). What characterized the social sciences influenced by pragmatism was an orientation toward social reality, the practical, and what can be seen and measured, and away from abstractions. The psychiatrists who influenced Sullivan (Edward Kempf, Adolf Meyer, and William Alanson White) adhered to this point of view, emphasizing the patient's social reality, concrete circumstances, and what the "patient is trying to do" (White, quoted in [Sullivan 1940](#), p. 177). Sullivan's concept of the "participant observer" recognized the significance of the interpersonal field ([Greenberg and Mitchell 1983](#)). Aron's contention ([1996](#)) that one of the most significant developments in contemporary American psychoanalysis is the emergence of a distinctly relational approach makes sense in the context of its origins in the work of Addams and the Chicago pragmatists. Sullivan's application of this approach is evident in the context of his work with schizophrenia. There he developed the basic elements of his interpersonal theory, framed in reaction to Kraepelinian psychiatry ([Greenberg and Mitchell 1983](#)).

In Addams's work, knowledge of the neighborhood was not obtained by a detached, academic sociology, or via a distant caseworker who commuted to meet with clients ([Fischer 2011](#)). The settlement house's location was based on the idea that social knowledge is "socially situated, relational, and warranted by personal experience and gendered" (Ross 1988, quoted in [Fischer 2011](#), p. 488). Knowledge here was gained via sympathetic understanding, an immersion in the psychosocial contexts of the neighbors who lived around Hull House. Addams understood democratic equality in terms of dialogue and reciprocity: all people could simultaneously learn from and teach one another. Through practiced-based collaborative research such as *Hull-House Maps and Papers*, residents of the settlement house charted the societal abuses endured in the daily lives of the immigrant poor of the city's Nineteenth Ward. Hull House residents themselves explored and researched the conditions that blocked immigrants from the mainstream of opportunity and fulfillment and then formulated proposals for public policy and community interventions. In a sense, Addams anticipated Kohut's distinction between experience-near and experience-distant understandings ([Elson 1986](#), p. 246), in that the focus of her attention was on detailed accounts of the experience of phenomena, as opposed to examining how these phenomena could be described using preexisting theories or abstractions based on "dispassionate" observations. Her focus on the intersubjectivity of sympathetic understanding, the importance of dialogue and reciprocity, and the importance of social context presaged Sullivan's two-person theory and his

concepts of participant observation and empathic linkage.⁶

Amid the progressive spirit of the country at that time, Addams drew attention. She was a prolific writer and public speaker who frequently evaluated the activities at Hull House in terms of testing the value of human knowledge by action and realization.

At Hull House Addams, with a group of dedicated women, developed a social science approach to the problems of laissez-faire capitalism in an industrial age, an approach that was cooperative rather than positivistic. On the national and international level, she was a member of the first executive committee of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, a vice president of the National American Woman Suffrage Association, a founder of the American Union against Militarism, from which came the Foreign Policy Association and the American Civil Liberties Union. She was elected president of the Woman's Peace Party in 1915 and in 1919 was the first president of the Woman's International League for Peace and Freedom. She was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1931 ([Hamington 2010](#), pp. 4–5).

Addams's career was characterized by a variety of activity—she was both a neighborhood garbage inspector and a Nobel laureate. Her activities were part of her overarching vision, which was to apply democratic ideals to the ordinary experiences of Americans ([Opdycke 2012](#)). The proof of democracy lay in the familiar transactions of ordinary life. For Addams, these ideals included fair treatment of employees, safe and adequate housing for low-income families, treatment of women as full citizens, trustworthiness in political leaders, and full democratic participation for new immigrants.

Late in her life, at a dinner in her honor, her friend Charles Merriam described her as a significant and even improbable woman of achievement:

More than any other woman in America she has . . . understood how to speak to what Lincoln called the better angels of our nature. If you say it is not possible for anyone to be at once a statesman without a portfolio, a professor without a chair, and a guiding woman in a man's made world, I answer that it is not possible. But . . . here she is! ([Opdycke 2012](#), p. 7).

The Concepts of Empathy and Sympathetic Understanding

Addams's method of perplexity and inquiry may be useful to psychoanalysis. A brief description of empathy and "sympathetic understanding" will clarify this contribution.

[Heinz Kohut \(1959\)](#) states that psychoanalysis is about understanding the subjective experience of the patient. For him, psychoanalysis is a pure psychology, and he maintains that only what is accessible via empathy is the true focus of psychoanalysis:

The inner world cannot be observed with the aid of our sensory organs. Our thoughts, wishes, feelings, and fantasies cannot be seen, smelled, heard, or touched. They have no existence in physical space, and yet they are real, and we can observe them as they occur in time: through introspection in ourselves, and through empathy (i.e., vicarious introspection) in others [p. 459].

Empathic introspection is not only a way to observe, but also a mode of communication by the psychoanalyst. When the analyst makes an effort to understand and the patient feels understood, aspects of the curative process are under way. Empathic understanding evokes feelings of being recognized, known, affirmed, and validated—what Kohut called "mirroring" ([Omstein 2011](#)). Similarity between oneself and another may be an important factor in the experience of empathy toward another. Besides similarities in appearance and group membership, analyst and patient may share common cultural experiences that facilitate sharing affective experiences ([Cheon, Mathur, and Chiao 2010](#)). People have wondered how it is possible to understand the subjective experience of another in the context of cultural diversity. Some suggest that the cultivation of empathy is possible through a process of curiosity about the patient's experience; this in turn engages processes allowing us to understand the patient's perspectives and concerns. [Gurin et al. \(2002\)](#) studied the impact of diversity on college students. Referencing Piaget's theory of intellectual development, they point out that Piaget argued that both children and adolescents can best develop perspective-taking, the capacity to understand the ideas and feeling of others, when they interact with peers who have different points of view.

Let us see how Addams worked with a similar challenge, using "sympathetic understanding" to think about a group of immigrant women in the context of the "strange" Devil Baby event at Hull House in the fall of 1913. For Addams, sympathetic understanding was an intersubjective and dialogic process that includes roles for perplexity, disruptive knowledge, and inquiry.⁷ It was a relational approach that had social as well as psychological dimensions. By way of this process she came to see that the baffling phenomenon of the Devil Baby in fact addressed commonly shared human experiences such as family life, violence, a yearning for companionship, and mortality ([Fischer 2010](#)). For Addams to understand this required that she engage in lively and ongoing reflection on her own familial, class, racial, and cultural makeup, in order to be more aware of the emotional structures through which she experienced others and herself.⁸ For Addams, [Seigfried \(2002a\)](#) states,

"perplexity" refers to someone's personal involvement in a situation that baffles and confuses her, because her usual understanding and responses are inadequate to explain or transform a troubling situation. She can either continue to hold on to her assumptions or begin to call them into question. But in order to resolve the problematic situation in fact and not just subjectively, she must first undergo a painful process of rethinking her presuppositions and values. Addams's choice of the term *perplexity* for the initial stage of inquiry allowed her to bring out its existential conditions. She gives a nuanced account of the interplay of personal feeling and objective conditions; of the difficulties involved in responding to other classes, races, and cultures; and of the choice involved in the ways one responds to challenges to accepted beliefs and familiar values [pp. xxv–xxvi].

What primed her to be able to do this?

Jane Addams's Late Adolescence and the Emergence of Perplexity

Jane Addams, in many significant aspects of her personality, exemplifies the "unmirrored self." While she idealized her father, and turned to him for recognition and affirmation, she did not consistently enjoy "the subjective glow of worthwhileness" ([Tolpin 1997b](#), p. 30) in relation to him. This was particularly true with regard to her mature wish to realize her talents and skills.⁹ Indeed, it seems that particularly in her adolescence and young adulthood such mirroring experiences happened for her not at home, but at Rockford Women's Seminary, during her trip to Toynbee Hall, and when she co-founded Hull House. She might have surrendered her own young woman's needs to be a center of her own initiative, to pursue her own ambitions and goals, use her skills and talents, and instead organize herself around her father's desires, had it not been for the young women and faculty at her school. Without them, the leading edge of her developmental needs may have withered away from nonresponse.

When she graduated at the top of her class, she feared her ambitions would be suppressed in favor of what she called her "family's claim." She expressed this view at her graduation in her salutatorian's address, with her father sitting in the audience. Her topic was the Greek mythological figure of Cassandra, whom she described as a brilliant woman whose talents were wasted. Addams's theme was that a woman can be destroyed when her potential is crushed ([Diliberto 1999](#)). Her thoughts about Cassandra reflected her fear of losing the empathic milieu of the women's seminary, one that had kept her self psychologically alive ([Kohut 1982](#), p. 397). In her address she drew a parallel between the tragic fate of Cassandra and her lack of public authority, and the same possible fate for Addams's female classmates, as well as herself.

Her father, as noted, had in general been an adequate selfobject in Jane's early years. As she reached late adolescence, however, this function failed. She described the perplexity a young woman experienced when she returned home after college graduation, only to find parents who did not support her ambitions to establish a career in the world outside the home. She first responded to her father's empathic failure by becoming ill, with diminished self-esteem and

capacity to function. But she later recognized that the experience of perplexity could induce in her an opportunity to use the experience of discomfort and tension as a context for critical reflection.¹⁰

When Jane Addams returned to Cedarville after graduation, to live as a "dutiful daughter" with her father and stepmother, she was back in the developmentally restrictive milieu of her family (Tolpin 2000). While her father was respected, even revered, in his community and by Jane herself, she experienced him as unable to see her having her own independent and legitimate needs. This perception of her father is given disguised expression in her famous analysis of the Pullman Strike of 1894,¹¹ where she compares George Pullman and the striking workers to King Lear and his daughter Cordelia (Addams 1896). The strike had been emotionally painful to Pullman, who had set up a largely benign "company town" with high-quality housing and facilities for workers. He found it incomprehensible that the workers might have demands exceeding his paternalistic benevolence. Addams wrote that for Lear it was impossible to conceive his daughter's being moved by something outside of himself. While Cordelia had developed a larger concept of duty, Lear could not see this claim as anything but a personal slight, an expression of his daughter's ingratitude. Pullman had been a model employer, and Pullman, Illinois, was a model town. But in the midst of the economic upheaval of the 1893 panic, he had reduced his workers' wages several times. What followed were riots, strikes, and the intervention of federal troops. Addams argued that Pullman believed he knew the needs of his workers better than they did themselves, and he denied them the right to organize as a labor union. To her mind, Lear, Pullman, and her father had lost sight of the developmental needs of others.

That a man should be so absorbed in his own indignation as to fail to apprehend his child's thought, that he should lose his affection in his anger, simply reveals the fact that his own emotions are dearer to him than his sense of paternal obligation [Addams 1902, p. 47].

An unrecognized or inadequately recognized self is a prevalent problem that can derail adolescent development. It stunts the development and consolidation of ambitions and goals (Tolpin 1993). This was the case with Jane Addams. However, after an illness that lasted almost a decade, she took a constructive step forward, embarking on a second trip to Europe, to London's Toynbee Hall in particular. Once again connected with her network of friends, other educated and determined women, who provided mirroring, idealizing, and twinship experiences, Jane was able to construct a life plan.¹² The realization of this plan was Hull House, where with Ellen Gates Starr and other women like herself she engaged her long-thwarted capacities and reanimated her development.¹³

Addams's Cultural Selfobject Experiences of Democracy and Pragmatism

The story of Addams' early life reveals how democracy as an idea and as a practice reshaped her ambitions and gave her a new understanding of herself as a citizen.

—LOUISE KNIGHT (2005, p. 412)

When Jane Addams entered Rockford Female Seminary she was searching for a frame of reference that would anchor her and allow her to freely use her talents and skills.¹⁴ She combined Judeo-Christian values (particularly as expressed in the Social Gospel Movement of her day) and a faith in democracy expressed in her father's ideals, the work of Thomas Carlyle and John Ruskin,¹⁵ and later in the ideas of the pragmatists Dewey and Mead at the University of Chicago.

Charles Sanders Peirce and William James are credited with beginning the American school of philosophy known as pragmatism. Their work, begun in the late nineteenth century, was elaborated in Chicago by Dewey, Mead, and Addams herself. W.E.B. Du Bois was another significant figure in this movement.

Pragmatism begins with experience, understood as an ongoing transaction between organism and environment. Its goal is to transform situations for the better. Knowledge, fundamentally instrumental, is a crucial tool for organizing experience. As can be seen in Addams's work, the values of pragmatism are social, naturalistic, pluralistic, developmental, and experimental (Seigfried 2007). Pragmatism was particularly well-suited for Addams because she was interested in theory dealing with on-the-ground realities.¹⁶ Like Darwinian evolutionary thinking, pragmatism stressed process and context. Through collaborations with Dewey and Mead, she integrated pragmatism into her view of democracy. Dewey (1939), for example, credited Addams with initiating a paradigm shift from thinking of democracy as a political system to thinking of it as a "way of life":

Democracy is a way of life controlled by a working faith in the possibility of human life. Belief in the Common Man is a familiar article in the democratic creed. That belief . . . means faith in the potentialities of human nature as that nature is exhibited in every human being irrespective of race, color, sex, birth and family, of material or cultural wealth [p. 226].

Like Dewey, Addams used a pragmatist educational model of developmental child psychology. She was particularly interested in the concrete conditions of human growth and development within the diverse world of newly arrived immigrants in Chicago (Seigfried 1996, p. 75; see also Seigfried 2002a, p. xxxv).

In the context of Hull House and her interaction with the surrounding immigrant communities, Addams reconstructed her own subjective experience via the road of perplexity and inquiry, a process discussed below. Through this process she became more aware of her own unconscious racism and of class and cultural prejudices that were intrapsychically and interpersonally embedded in the societal norms of her day (Layton 2006). An interesting illustration of this reconstruction occurred around her failed effort to create a "Yankee kitchen" to serve her immigrant neighbors.

The lunchroom that Addams sponsored was initially patterned after the New England kitchen Ellen Sloane Richards had created in Boston. Richards was one of the first professional nutritionists to advocate the idea of collective community kitchens. Such kitchens provided nutritious food and showed women how to cook for their large families. The food included cheap cuts of meat and simple vegetables subjected to a "slow and thorough process of cooking." The idea was to make such nutritious food attractive (Addams 1910). Addams's neighbors, however, were not particularly responsive to Yankee food:

We did not reckon . . . with the wide diversity in nationality and inherited tastes, and while we sold a certain amount of the carefully prepared soups and stews in the neighboring factories—a sale which has steadily increased through the years—and were also patronized by a few households, perhaps the neighborhood estimate was summed up by the woman who frankly confessed that the food was certainly nutritious, but she didn't like to eat what was nutritious, that she liked to eat "what she'd ruther" [p. 87].

Addams abandoned the idea of a kitchen and established a coffeehouse and a gymnasium under one roof. The rationale for establishing such facilities at Hull House was that the only place to socialize in the neighborhood was the "saloon," and Hull House could provide an alternative: a community living room for families and individuals who did not have room in their own homes.¹⁷ Both facilities were greatly appreciated.

A second illustration of this reconstruction of experience, her capacity to tolerate and learn from perplexity, is described in her account of the corrupt alderman John Powers of the Nineteenth Ward and her two failed attempts to unseat him in elections. Addams was part of a reform effort to address corruption in the city. After much unsuccessful effort, she concluded that voters in the neighborhood were less concerned with Powers's corruption than with having him as a friend who took a lively interest in their personal affairs, and who found them work and a paycheck (Knight 2005). Once she would have thought the voters misguided and considered it her duty to enlighten them. That Victorian idea was worn away as she decided to seek common ground that Powers's supporters and she could share. She decided to embrace what she called Abraham Lincoln's "generous humanity." To her mind, Lincoln never forgot his identification with the "working man." Addams, born into a different class, admired Lincoln's capacity to stay connected with how the "cracker of Kentucky" and the "Illinois backwoodsman" thought and felt (Knight 2005). Knight notes that Addams's new practice was a significant departure from her father's attitudes. John Addams

had been called “the king-gentleman of Stephenson County.” But his daughter had turned the corner and no longer thought of her colleagues and herself as the educated elite of the neighborhood. Perhaps, more accurately, she shed the Victorian idea that well-educated women lived with the poor in order to share their knowledge and good character (Fischer 2011). Addams came to think of this perspective as profoundly antidemocratic. Now she acknowledged that her neighbors were impacting her middle-class moral absolutism. As she said at a conference for charity visitors in 1897, a year after Powers’s reelection, “It is impossible that you should live in a neighborhood and constantly meet people with certain ideas and notions without modifying your own” (Knight 2005, p. 367).

Thus Addams’s development was stimulated by encounters with different worldviews and perspectives emerging from her neighbors’ distinct backgrounds and lived experience in an unequal society. Her more collaborative work with people was the result of her person-to-person encounters in natural settings. A forward-edge perspective is evident in her changing view of what actually constituted the “helping situation,” especially as she paid far more attention to the goals, aspirations, strengths, and perspectives of her immigrant neighbors.

Dewey remarked, at a celebration in honor of his seventieth birthday, that he had learned many things from Addams. Significantly, she taught him the importance of recognizing and penetrating prejudice and convention, in order to be better able to participate in “the more unfamiliar and alien ranges of the possibilities of human life and experience” (Seigfried 1996, p. 75).

In pragmatism and socialized democracy¹⁸ Addams found models that gave pride of place to people’s experience, self-determination, dignity, and worth. For her, democracy was “associated living.” It modeled a way to live in solidarity with diverse others, attuned to both physical and emotional needs, and aimed at human flourishing (Fischer 2006). These perspectives are evident in her reflections on the Devil Baby tales as she relates them in *The Long Journey of Woman’s Memory* (Addams 1916b). Addams wrote the book after the travails of a long illness, and during a time when she felt personally assaulted by the growing criticism of her peace efforts during World War I. She placed the violence of the war and Greek tragedy alongside the violence her immigrant neighbors experienced, and elevated the issue of domestic violence, as well as the dignity of its victims (Fischer 2010). She examined the memories of ordinary women, especially the poor and working-class, whom she encountered in her day-to-day work. She was a competent dialogical partner. In these women’s stories she discerned a dynamic factor in memory. Memory was not passive; it was a way to make sense of painful experiences, as well as to contribute to a radical change of fundamental beliefs. Women used their memories and reflections on their past to change their attitudes and consider new social values (Seigfried 2002b). She came to believe that one function of memory in the Devil Baby tales was to “transmute” tragic life experiences into something of value (Seigfried 2002b). She found a veritable surplus of meaning in these tales that contrasted with the more conventional interpretations of the dominant culture.

Sympathetic Understanding and Useful Perplexities

We are learning that a standard of social ethics is not attained by traveling a sequestered byway, but by mixing on the thronged and common road where all must turn out for one another, and at least see the size of one another’s burdens.

—JANE ADDAMS (1902, p. 6)

Dewey held that understanding another person’s point of view is always an interactive process (Seigfried 1996). Addams found that “perplexity” played an important role in better understanding. Indeed, perplexing situations had a value of their own.

The use of perplexity to understand the perspectives of others is a major theme of *Democracy and Social Ethics*, considered by some to be the most mature demonstration of her interpretive method. In this text, Fischer (2011) writes, Addams navigates among “multiple constituencies,” taking in the “textures of the daily life” of her immigrant neighbors (p. 483). Her dialogical acumen is evident in how she effectively relays these perceptions to the affluent middle class of her day. Her goal was to enable immigrants and middle-class people to work collaboratively toward democratic reform.

As Seigfried (2002a) points out in her introduction to the book, “perplexity” is a pivotal focus in every chapter. For example, in “Filial Relations,” Addams analyzes the relation between parents and their grown-up daughters, as young women try to achieve a more active role in community life. In the chapters “Household Adjustments” and “Charitable Effort,” relationships between home owners and housekeepers and between charitable visitors and charity recipients provide the contexts for ruptures in conventional attitudes, beliefs, and practices. Like her colleague Dewey, Addams noted that experiences of shock, strangeness, and the unexpected are valuable instigators of inquiry, challenging us to question our assumptions (Seigfried 2002a, pp. xxv–xxvi). Addams’s analysis of the Devil Baby tales illustrates the dialogic approach by means of which she worked through divergent perspectives, seeking connection and respecting pluralism (Fischer 2010).

Addams’s Neighborhood Conversations about the Devil Baby Tales

On the Near West Side, where Hull House was located, immigrant working-class people tried to eke out a living amid the urban noise and pollution. Members of the immigrant communities were usually considered inferior by mainstream society. Native-born citizens often looked down their noses at those of foreign origin, who were Catholic and Jewish and whose language, food, and customs were unfamiliar. Attitudes based on unquestioned, absolutist values held by the educated and well-off, or by those whose foreign roots were further in the past, often resulted in entrenched views. These prejudices, whether unrecognized or avowed, led to friction and hostility between “the working poor and the middle classes” (Seigfried 2007, p. 84). Addams’s “sympathetic understanding” recognized the problem of overcoming biases by listening to others who were differently situated. She found that taking seriously what were deemed “alien” practices and puzzling points of views expanded her horizons and could contribute to overcoming complex problems.

So fervently did Addams believe in the heuristic value of perplexity that she claimed we are responsible for choosing our experiences. She held that it is important for people to actively seek experiences that enlarge the depth and scope of their understanding. Human beings need to reach beyond their zone of comfort to take into account those who are situated differently. She held that those who avoid perplexity by implementing only what they already know have failed to grasp the “principle of growth” (Seigfried 2002b, p. xxix). And if they cannot, they will not accurately understand the motivations of others and so will misjudge them (Seigfried 2007).¹⁹ “We are under a moral obligation in choosing our experiences,” she wrote, “since the result of those experiences must ultimately determine our understanding of life”; and where we circumscribe our lives, we “narrow the scope of our ethics” (Addams 1902, p. 8).

Addams’s perplexity surrounding the Devil Baby tales guided her into inquiry, and to an expansion of her understanding and knowledge of older immigrant women. In *The Long Road of Woman’s Memory* she relates the many conversations she had with these women, and how those conversations contributed to her understanding of the personal and sociocultural contexts in which they lived. While she was clear that there was no such baby at Hull House, she valued the meanings embedded in the tales for the immigrants and used the stories to frame the problems that became visible during the course of the episode. She describes these women much as self psychologists today might describe “unmirrored selves.” Addams of course was quite familiar with that experience, having struggled for her own affirmation and confirmation in late adolescence and young adulthood. Here were women who felt unknown on a cultural level, particularly in a society that devalued their immigrant circumstances. They were unknown, too, on a personal level, by a younger immigrant generation who disparaged their traditions and did not recognize their contributions.

Many foreign-born women who came to Chicago’s West Side were suddenly subjected to the complicated and changing scenarios of urban life. For many of these women, the tales of the Devil Baby, with their direct connection between cause and effect, wrongdoing and punishment, brought soothing relief, as well

as a confidence that things could be made right, even in the strange and confounding world in which they now lived. [Addams \(1916b\)](#) understood that they used the Devil Baby tales as a valuable tool in “the business of living” (p. 17). She understood that the tales concretely represented values that informed and organized a sense of self among these women.

She soon discovered that the tales of the Devil Baby also awakened many tragic reminiscences. These older women shared with her their own stories of premature births, physical abuse, tragic accidents involving children left unsupervised while their parents worked, and the deaths of children because there was no money for medicine. Addams spoke with one woman who said, “I didn’t have a devil baby myself, but I bore a poor ‘innocent’ who made me fight devils for twenty-three years” ([1916b](#), p. 22). This woman told her about her mentally disabled son who was frequently duped and exploited by boys and men, whom she often had to physically fight.

Another old immigrant woman shared the following: “My face has had this queer tilt for now nearly sixty years. I was ten when it got this way, the night after I saw my father do my mother to death with his knife” ([Addams 1916b](#), p. 11). And yet another recounted this:

You might say it’s a disgrace to have your son beat you up for the sake of a bit of money you earned by scrubbing. Your own man is different—but I haven’t the heart to blame the boy for doing what he’s seen all his life, his father forever went wild when the drink was in him and struck me to the very day of his death. The ugliness was born in the boy as the marks of the Devil was born in the poor child upstairs [a reference to the Devil Baby presumed to be upstairs in Hull House] ([Addams 1916b](#), p. 11).

Addams understood that these tales of the Devil Baby evoked the demonic quality that pervaded these women’s experience of poverty and brutality, and they could put that experience into words in a way they had never done before.

In some women, the Devil Baby tales resulted in a reappraisal of old beliefs and a challenge to the conventions by which they lived. One woman, pressed by personal circumstance, called into question her own rigid moral judgments. Addams described a widow whose husband had been killed in disreputable circumstances. The woman realized that her own extreme moral standards had contributed to her only son’s suicide; he had killed himself when he believed he had fathered a child out of wedlock. The old woman had taken in the mother and child, only to have her leave, gone back to her “old ways,” and learned that the child was in fact not her son’s. She came to realize that to reproach the woman and condemn her as a moral failure did not take into account the complexity of the situation, and could result in a repetition of the tragic events in the next generation. She decided that “a new view of reality” and justice was required ([Seigfried 2002b](#), p. xxiii).

Addams observed that the relating of the Devil Baby tales created an interactive field within which the thwarted developmental longings of these old immigrant women were remobilized. For example, she recounted the story of an old woman who traveled from the poorhouse to Hull House to see the Devil Baby. Addams was aware that the trip was a difficult one for this penniless woman, who had had to escape from the institution to make it. She borrowed ten cents from a young “barkeep” who worked in the saloon across the road. Only because he lent her the money, Addams writes, was the woman able to leave “in a street car like a lady, with money to pay her own fare” ([Addams 1916b](#), p. 12).

Although the trip was difficult, the woman said she would consider herself repaid once she had a clear look at the Devil Baby. When she had such a glimpse she could return to the poorhouse, where inmates on her own ward, as well as the other wards in the institution, would be animated and enlivened, forced by the veracity of the tale to “sit up.” It would “liven them all up a bit,” and she imagined she would have much to say at least a dozen times a day.

It was difficult for Addams to tell women like this that no such baby existed at Hull House. She said that the traveler had come from a far place and she observed her misshapen hands trembling with excitement on her lap. The sight of the Devil Baby would confirm her family’s faith in such matters. Addams smarted herself from the disappointment she knew her visitor from the poorhouse must have felt.

The recollection of this woman’s disappointment accompanied Addams the next day when she was called to visit a sick and bedridden old woman who refused to believe there was no Devil Baby at Hull House. Addams recounts that she was tempted to regale her with a full description of the baby, which by this time she knew in all its many versions. To herself Addams marshaled arguments why she should not disturb the woman’s belief in the story. She knew the woman lived alone with her grandson. Because he went to work early each day, she spent long monotonous hours by herself. Addams understood that the stories of the Devil Baby would be a veritable “lodestone,” attracting neighbors near and far to her home. Again she would experience the status she had enjoyed for twenty-four years as the proprietor of a very successful second-hand store on a street brimming with them. (Her success had declined when, “owing to the drink,” her husband and sons ruined the business.) The woman probably had only months to live. What harm would it do, Addams thought, to give her this interesting story that could transform her “sordid and unsatisfying surroundings”? ([Addams 1916b](#), p. 14).

Addams argued with herself as she stood on the threshold of the woman’s small room. She said she hesitated briefly, noting the “indomitable gleam” in the woman’s eyes, seeming to dare Addams to deny the veracity of the Devil Baby story ([Addams 1916b](#), p. 15). However, the hesitation was long enough. The gleam left the woman’s eyes and her shoulders sagged. Addams comments that the old woman had accepted another disappointment in a life full of them: “that larger life she had anticipated so eagerly was as suddenly shut away from her as if a door had been slammed in her face” (p. 15). Importantly, Addams not only understood the depth of the woman’s disappointment; she could also imagine that “larger life.” Her awareness of this infuses her description of these women. Fischer points out that in describing the conditions under which older immigrant women managed their families, Addams borrows from Gilbert Murray’s translation of Euripides’ *Medea*: their faces had gone “deep, written all their days with care.” They struggled with tragedy and brutality, and horror had “full scope in their lives.” Their faces were “worn and scarred by harsh living.” However, around these brutal realities Addams constructed a nimbus of sympathetic understanding, giving these women in fullest measure the dignity and humanity of Euripides’ Trojan women.²⁰ For a brief period of time these older women’s faces shone. They experienced themselves as valuable and relevant. In the bewilderment of living with a younger generation who did not listen to them, instead embracing the strange ways of a new country, there was a moment of being valued and having personal importance.

Discussion

Jane Addams said “sympathetic understanding” is a social affair comprising a plurality of perspectives brought to bear on a situation. She was well aware of the clash of meanings and interpretations that emerged from class, race, and gender differences. The charity visitor, typifying customary middle-class social norms, would often be perplexed by the lack of gratitude expressed by the charity recipient. But once the charity visitor became immersed in the life of the immigrant family, she could learn via sympathetic understanding how her own values and prescriptions for the family might be insensitive to the family needs.²¹

Similarly, Addams initially thought the Devil Baby tales were born of superstition and ignorance. However, through a process of perplexity and inquiry, her neighbors’ experience became useful in her own self-critical reflection. She developed a hermeneutic of suspicion directed at her own conclusions. Her inquiry led her into the novel contexts of the diverse immigrants who made up the neighborhood.

Hull House provided opportunities for cultural exchange and services responsive to the needs of the immigrant populations of Chicago. However, in a larger sense, Hull House provided an important interpretive function, particularly in terms of how the dominant culture understood immigrants (at the time, Chicago’s population was two-thirds immigrant). Her own approach was akin to a rhetorical broadening of space, a widening of the room ([McMillan 2002](#)). She imagined this widening taking place through reciprocity and dialogue. Sympathetic understanding was reciprocated, even constituted, by her neighbors, whose stories widened, deepened, and reconstructed her own knowledge and that of her various audiences ([Fischer 2010](#)). This is illustrated in a speech titled “Immigrant Woman as She Adjusts Herself to American Life,” delivered by Addams in June 1914 to the biennial convention of the General Federation of Women’s Clubs.

In that speech Addams interpreted the Devil Baby episode to upper- and middle-class Americans, not as evidence of superstitions held by ignorant folk, but as a kind of moral instruction that had evolved through lengthy historical development. She presented such tales, along with art and music, as significant contributions by immigrants to the larger society²² (Fischer 2010). Addams defined the social settlement house function in terms of interpretation, and described Hull House as an "information and interpretation bureau" (Addams 1910, p. 111).

This interpretive function preceded the Devil Baby episode. For example, five years earlier, on March 2, 1908, Lazarus Averbuch, a young Russian Jewish immigrant, was shot and killed by Chicago's police chief, George Shippy. Shippy maintained that Averbuch was an anarchist who wanted to assassinate him, and that the killing was therefore defensible. Both the public and the press responded, in the wake of the Haymarket Square riot (1886) and President McKinley's assassination, with xenophobic panic. Addams and Hull House entered the fray to defend the Russian Jewish community from public recrimination and to demand a full investigation. Not only did Addams interpret new immigrant customs and experiences to established Americans; she also made American institutions accessible and more transparent to new immigrants (Addams 1908). Her view was that the Russian Jewish community was filled with dark forboding, as the police ransacked their businesses and private homes in search of anarchist activity. She understood that such heavy-handedness was reminiscent of Russian methods the immigrants had fled during the pogroms of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Eastern Europe. In her view, the Averbuch affair was an opportunity to demonstrate the robustness of American democratic institutions to an immigrant community, and thus to give a lesson in citizenship and the constitutional basis of self-governance (Addams 1910). Fischer points out that it was precisely Addams's immersion in "multiple, interacting streams" of local activity, her ear for "variegated voices," and her reflection on her own experience that were important components of her capacity for sympathetic understanding (Fischer 2011, p. 484).

Daphne Spain (2001) has written of the construction of open physical places in late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century urban environments that welcomed people who "knew they were strangers" (Metzger 2009, p. 59). Spain writes that such places emerged "as sites where significant issues of the day were actively negotiated." In the Chicago of that period, Addams contributed to the development of many of these places, including parks, playgrounds, coffeehouses, bathhouses, and settlement houses like Hull House, where people could come together in a homelike atmosphere. Addams not only worked to create physical places welcoming to strangers and immigrants²³; she also created psychic space as well. And making it required a significant change in her internal world.

By puzzling about the differences posed by elderly immigrant women's thoughts, emotions, and actions, Addams recognized some of her own prejudices and habits. As a pragmatist she did not reduce these immigrants' experiences to a kind of psychological pathology, what her pragmatist colleague William James (1890) called a "psychologist's fallacy." Such a fallacy could not hold the plenitude of experience or the overflow of meaning ascribed to experiences.²⁴ Such a fallacy reduces multiplicity of meaning to something that did not adequately account for all of the experience as it was experienced by a person or a group of people. Addams realized the necessity to sit with these women and listen in a dialogic and self-reflective way.

The power of transformation was not one-sided. A counterclaim emerged from her dialogue with the older immigrant women. They nudged her constantly. Through the process of her perplexity, disrupted knowledge, and inquiry, she changed her perspective regarding the meanings of the Devil Baby tales. What was important to her "sympathetic understanding" was the "bite of a question" (Dewey 1910–1911, p. 238). Her colleague Dewey (1902) began his essay "The Child and the Curriculum" with a comment on how differently theories deal with conflicting elements in problematic situations. Solutions may not be immediately evident but may be found by changing one's point of view. It is easier, however, to surrender to known "facts" and "received opinions than to engage in the painful reconstruction of new patterns of thought" (Seigfried 2002b, p. xv). Addams found that the process of perplexity and inquiry resulted in the capacity to use others' lives for self-critique and self-enlargement. These actions were important steps along the way to understanding the older immigrant women.

These women experienced the Devil Baby tales as what Kohut describes as a cultural selfobject and what Galatzer-Levy and Cohler (1993) call an "essential other." The latter assert that it is through "essential others" that people maintain meaning, personal integrity, and morale. The "essential other" is "our experience of other people, and entities in the environment, that supports the sense of a coherent and vigorous self and its development" (p. 3). They point out, for example, that Anne Frank's diary functioned as an "essential other": "Anne Frank used her diary to maintain her courage and capacity to face each day . . ." (p. 337). Addams came to see that the Devil Baby tales served important functions in the "business of living" for the elderly immigrant women of the neighborhood.

Addams's ear for "variegated voices" came by way of her being embedded in the experiences of people who were different from her. Their perspectives provided a critique of her own assumptions, and stimulated her to revise her views. She understood that without exposure to people from different backgrounds, other people were understood primarily on the basis of stereotypes.

Through the process of perplexity and inquiry Addams came to understand how the Devil Baby stories functioned for the immigrant women of her neighborhood. Her recollection of these women suggests that the telling of the tales was motivated, to a great extent, by the need to experience a sense of competence, self-strengthening, enlivening, continuity, and soothing. The stories represented, among other things, the women's strivings for health, a metaphorical "beautiful curve" in the devil's tale.

Conclusion

It is hard to see how empathy is possible through imagining what it would be like to be in someone else's shoes when we are dealing with people who have experiences very different from our own. Jane Addams teaches us that sympathetic understanding comes by way of the disruption of what we know; the resultant perplexity can lead us to inquire into our assumptions, and to a broadening of our understanding of what it is to be human. She did not think problems were best understood when the psychological was separated from the social. She recognized the social embeddedness of both "helper" and helped. She maintained that a less authoritarian and more relational perspective allows a better apprehension of meanings.

Addams's capacity to use perplexity, to explore the value of what others have said to her despite the discomfort it may have caused her, and to operate from the assumption that the people with whom she has spoken were speaking of something of value and with meaning was therapeutic, not only for these immigrant women who felt strengthened, invigorated, understood, and respected, and thereby better able to engage the problems that were partly addressed through the Devil Baby stories, but also for Addams, whose own search for meaning and significance was enriched through the engagement.

Notes

- Faculty, Chicago Institute for Psychoanalysis; adjunct faculty, Loyola University Graduate School of Social Work.
- ¹The Devil Baby incident may have been triggered by a baby born with birth defects in the neighborhood around that time (see Fischer 2010, p. 82). Addams also wrote about the Devil Baby in the October 1916 issue of *Atlantic Monthly* (Addams 1916a), in a June 1914 speech, "Immigrant Woman as She Adjusts Herself to American Life" (Addams 1914a), in the July 1914 issue of the *American Journal of Sociology* (Addams 1914b), and in *The Second Twenty Years at Hull-House* (Addams 1930).
- ²It would be interesting to explore the Devil Baby tales in terms of Freud's "The 'Uncanny'" (1919). The psychological challenge of the old country and new country formations of the immigrant self could be understood in terms of Freud's concepts of *heimlich* and *unheimlich*. This project would be quite rewarding, but extends far beyond my focus here.
- ³Hamington (2009) describes Jane Addams as a "father-identified" child. Her strong identification with her father was advantageous for her

in the sense that she was able to pursue possibilities for her that many other women never considered. However, while her father contributed to her intellectual development, she departed from several of his ideas to pursue her own ideals (p. 19). [Sherrick \(1986\)](#) also describes this complex identification.

- [4](#) According to his biographer, [Helen Swick Perry \(1982\)](#), Sullivan came to know the Chicago sociologists in the mid-1920s. Initially he arrived in Chicago as a poor nineteen-year-old, unfamiliar with the urban environment and quite alone. She writes: "His nineteen-year-old fears that he was not mentally competent, his confused fascination with the strange excitements and dislocations of the inner city, the loneliness that threatened to engulf him—all this was of the stuff that the Chicago sociologists had studied . . ." (pp. 252–253). According to Perry, when he could later engage the Chicago sociologists he was able to "digest" his earlier experiences in the city. In the Chicago School he discovered an "intellectual environment that fit his needs" (p. 260).
- [5](#) Like Jane Addams and other pragmatists, Sullivan valued the perspectives and contributions of diverse groups. This is evident in the journal *Psychiatry*, when under his direction an interdisciplinary approach was established ([Conci 2010](#)). The pragmatist emphasis on the dialogic is evident in the journal, as well as in his explanation of his "detailed interview," in which collaboration between therapist and patient is essential.
- [6](#) [Bacal and Newman \(1990\)](#) devote a chapter to Sullivan in *Theories of Object Relations: Bridges to Self Psychology*. They discuss his pioneering role in contemporary psychoanalysis, and as a "precursor" to Kohut's perspective. They argue that much of what is taken for granted now in developmental theory, and of how psychoanalysts think today about the patient-therapist relationship, comes from Sullivan. But while Sullivan and Kohut both maintained that the "matrix of psychological experience, motivation and structural development and arrest" ([Bacal and Newman 1990](#), p. 43) is located in the two-person system, [Bromberg \(1989\)](#), in "Interpersonal Psychoanalysis and Self Psychology: A Clinical Comparison," maintains that the interpersonal approach is based on the field concept and its application to two people, while Kohut's theory remains one-person.
- [7](#) Addams saw value in paying attention to her subjective experience of perplexity and how the inquiry that followed reconstructed her perception of the other. [Kohut \(1977\)](#) maintained an emphasis on a one-person psychology. In contrast to Addams, he deemed the subjectivity of the analyst irrelevant to the process of the analysis. He wrote that the patient's transferences are "preanalytically established internal factors in the analysand's personality structure" (p. 217). The role of the analyst in the analytic process was to make correct interpretations, and this was the basis of empathy. As [Goldberg \(1986\)](#) has observed, "Self psychology struggles hard not to be an interpersonal psychology because it wishes to minimize the input of the analyst into the mix. . . . [Self psychology] is based on the idea of a developmental program . . . that will reconstitute itself under certain conditions" (p. 387). Although self psychology has developed in many directions, with some thinking about intersubjectivity and others about the bidirectionality in disruption and repair, self psychology has largely not engaged Addams's concept of "sympathetic understanding" or the important role played by "perplexity" and inquiry in reconstructing the observer's subjective experience. A thorough consideration of the idea of empathy as vicarious introspection, as distinct from perplexity and inquiry, would be an interesting exploration.
- [8](#) Addams saw the importance of both the psychological and the social/cultural aspects of relationality. As [Seigfried \(2002a\)](#) notes in her introduction to *Democracy and Social Ethics*, perplexity was the hub around which Addams developed her analyses of social issues. It accentuates the importance of paying attention to the diverse sexual, class, ethnic, and "other cultural relations that constitute disparities of power operative in the resolution of moral dilemmas" (p. xxx). It also acknowledges the deeply personal aspects of a change in attitudes and practices, not simply the transformation of problematic situations. Both of these are salient features of a pragmatist ethic. The Chicago School and pragmatism impacted Sullivan's later interest in the influence of the sociocultural milieu on mental illness. This is apparent not only in his early work with schizophrenics at Sheppard-Pratt Hospital, but also later, in his collaborative work on the influence of racial prejudice on psychological experience (see [Frei 2014](#), p. 381).
- [9](#) [Tolpin \(1997b\)](#) makes the point that Anna Freud did not enjoy the "glow of worthwhileness" in relation to her father or his colleagues (p. 30). She talks about the "twinship bond" Anna Freud had with Dorothy Burlingham, from which emerged compensatory structure that revitalized her ([Tolpin 1997a](#), p. 4).
- [10](#) [Beauboeuf-Lafontant \(2014\)](#) maintains that Addams kept company with a number of "perplexed daughters," including her circle of friends and the literary figures of Cassandra and Cordelia. Whether real or fictional, all of them shared the experience of feeling misaligned with their society's conventions and challenged them. As Beauboeuf-Lafontant points out, Addams, throughout her near decade-long depression, reconciled her "private thoughts with public action" by way of "deconstruction of the college woman's perplexities" (pp. 68–69). Her view of a socialized democracy was rooted in her experiences of being a daughter and young woman who struggled against the restrictive conventions of her day.
- [11](#) The Pullman Strike began with a walkout by the Pullman Palace Car Company factory workers after negotiations for higher wages failed. The workers appealed to the American Railway Union, which was unsuccessful in its efforts for arbitration. The boycott, which centered in Chicago, affected the railroad system nationally. Several months after the boycott's inception, the federal government sent troops to get the trains going again. (See [Schneirov, Stromquist, and Salvatore 1999](#).)
- [12](#) In her autobiography ([Addams 1910](#)) she states that her illness lasted "from the time I left Rockford in the summer of 1881 until Hull House was opened in the autumn of 1889 . . ." (p. 59).
- [13](#) Not all the residents of Hull House were women, though women were in the majority. The women there included several who would rise to prominence. Julia Lathrop, a social reformer in the area of education, social policy, and child welfare, served as director of the United States Children's Bureau from 1912 to 1922. Alice Hamilton became the first woman appointed to the faculty of Harvard and a leader in the field of occupational health. Florence Kelley was a social and political reformer who opposed sweatshops, advocated a minimum wage, eight-hour work days, and children's rights and became the first general secretary of the National Consumers League. The sisters Grace and Edith Abbott worked in education and social work, Edith becoming the first dean of the School of Social Service Administration at the University of Chicago and an advisor to the International Office of the League of Nations. Grace directed the Immigrants Protective League, and was appointed by President Warren Harding to head the Children's Bureau in the Department of Labor. She was instrumental in the passage of the Sheppard-Towner Act, which coordinated federal and state aid for mothers and children. Another of these women, Sophonisba Breckinridge, was an early editor of the scholarly journal *Social Service Review* and a dean in the College of Arts, Literature, and Science at the University of Chicago.
- [14](#) [Heinz Kohut \(1984\)](#) states that the essence of a psychoanalytic cure is located in the patient's newly acquired ability to identify and seek out appropriate selfobjects (mirroring and idealizable). Cultural selfobjects can support the cohesion, vigor, and harmony of the adult, and may increase a sense of support during crisis situations. An aspect of Addams's health is evident in her ability to find personal and cultural selfobjects at college, later at Toynbee Hall, and in the project of Hull House and the extraordinary adult relationships she maintained. Indeed Hull House may be viewed as an expression of her "cure."

- [15](#) It was Ruskin's and Carlyle's idea to espouse the vision of August Comte, a "religion of humanity." Those embracing this perspective were committed to serving humanity based on the idea that people, regardless of class or wealth, have both the capacity and the duty to "evolve" into their greatest potential ([Diliberto 1999](#), p. 129).
- [16](#) Addams maintained, for example, that actual justice results from a trained intelligence and a capacity for broadened sympathies toward other people. As [Seigfreid \(1996\)](#) remarks, "It is not merely a grandiose abstract concept but a practical day-to-day affair of small steps" (p. 75).
- [17](#) The typical tenement housed many families under one roof. Overcrowding was a big issue for immigrants, most of whom could not afford houses with adequate space to raise their families. See Daphne Spain interview on PBS: "The First Measured Century," December 20, 2000, www.pbs.org/fmc/interviews/1seq3.htm
- [18](#) For Addams, democracy was rooted in conversation and sympathetic understanding. When Addams said she wanted to "socialize" democracy, she meant that Americans of every ethnic, class, race, and gender group should be able to share common places that welcomed them: clubhouses, libraries, galleries, etc. Hull House was not simply a social service agency to immigrants. It provided opportunities for cultural exchange, political debate, and ordinary social interaction (see [Elshtain 2002](#)).
- [19](#) Claude Steele's *Whistling Vivaldi and Other Clues to How Stereotypes Affect Us* (2010) describes these phenomena as they occur in twenty-first-century America. Addams worked assiduously to overcome what Steele calls "stereotype threats." The Trayvon Martin case illustrates the powerful stereotype of young African American men in hoodies as "dangerous." We see a similar situation in Addams's day. After the Haymarket Square riot in 1886 and the assassination of President McKinley in 1901, the Chicago public was primed to see the swarthy Russian Jewish immigrant Lazarus Averbuch as a dangerous anarchist, and his killing justified. This case is discussed later in this paper.
- [20](#) Addams frequently used Greek tragedies in her writings and speeches. [Fischer \(2010\)](#) hypothesizes that using these tragedies was a way of communicating with an educated audience who would recognize the sources of Addams's borrowing. Fischer writes beautifully of Addams' use of Murray's translation of *Medea* to describe the conditions under which immigrant women raised their children. [Elshtain \(2002\)](#) maintains that the telling of Greek tragedies was an acceptable way for educated women of the time to speak in public arenas.
- [21](#) Addams's analysis of the charity visitor is in the context of her more comprehensive understanding of the need for institutional reform in workplaces, education, public health, children's services, etc. "She held that the well-intentioned charity visitor did not understand that the rules of the charity organization often demeaned their clients and undermined their efforts to be generous and helpful" ([Fischer 2006](#), pp. 81–82).
- [22](#) Addams and Dewey worked collaboratively to form the Labor Museum. This creation was intended to demonstrate to immigrants the continuity of their culture and experience in their countries of origin with their new home. Addams made use of Dewey's concept of a "continuing reconstruction of experience" to articulate this experience. The Labor Museum was a source of pride for immigrants, and it brought together homesick older immigrants with the young, who often were uncomprehending of their elders ([Deegan 2005](#)).
- [23](#) At the time, single women coming to urban areas in search of work, the emigration of African Americans from the south, and an influx of Eastern Europeans made up the largest group of "strangers" and "others."
- [24](#) "Another variety of the psychologist's fallacy is the assumption that the mental state studied must be conscious of itself as the psychologist is conscious of it" ([James 1890](#), p. 197). It is as though James used a hermeneutic of suspicion when it came to the psychologist's interpretation of another person's experience.

Received February 25, 2014.

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