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Villadsen, Kaspar

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# Jane Addams's Pragmatist Method Extended: Care Work Between Abstract Rules and Situated Practice.

Kaspar Villadsen

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Corresponding Author: Kaspar Villadsen, Copenhagen Business School, Porcelænshaven 18a, Frederiksberg 2000, Denmark. Email: [k\\_villadsen@yahoo.com](mailto:k_villadsen@yahoo.com)

**Abstract:** Although Jane Addams has long been recognized as a pioneer in North American pragmatism, efforts to develop her thought into a distinct research program have been limited. This article develops Addams's work as a method of sociological inquiry by focusing on her notions of "perplexity," "moral adjustment," and "sympathetic understanding." Emphasizing the essential role of language in moral conflicts and reconstruction, the article incorporates Charles Wright Mills's concept of "vocabularies of motives." Together, these notions offer a framework for exploring the moral dilemmas that care workers experience when responding to the imposition of standardization of their working practices. A case study demonstrates how care workers, while coping creatively with the effects of a service reform, develop motive vocabularies in defense of their professional ethics. Such situated creativity on "the shop floor" of social services remains relatively under-explored and under-theorized.

**Keywords:** Jane Addams, pragmatist theory, vocabularies of motive, care ethics, home care.

## Introduction

Early American sociologist Jane Addams's work is of broader relevance for the study of key sociological issues like inequality, gender, migration, social justice, social conflict, integration, and, more. Nevertheless, attempts to develop her pragmatist approach into research strategies suited for empirical sociological inquiry remain relatively scarce. This is particularly true for leading sociology journals outside of the United States such as *The British Journal of Sociology*, *Sociology*, and *European Journal of Social Theory*, all of which contain only a few references to Addams. Although prominent commentators on pragmatist theory agree that pragmatist theory, including as Addams's work, is ripe for developing an agenda for empirical studies (Emirbayer & Maynard, 2011; Rosiek & Pratt, 2013; Schneiderhan, 2011), efforts to construct analytical strategies on a pragmatist basis are still limited. Mustafa Emirbayer and Douglas W. Maynard (2011) note that pragmatist ideas have yet to generate a distinct empirical research program, which they suggest is possible by combining pragmatism with ethnomethodology. This article takes the premise that research on professional caregiving can benefit from pursuing a key premise in the pragmatist tradition, namely, that "obstacles in experience give rise to efforts at creative problem-solving" (Emirbayer & Maynard, 2011, p. 221). It will be demonstrated that one such obstacle is the disparity that care workers often experience between their professional ethics and the constraints posed by bureaucratic rules and budgetary restrictions. Empirically, the article generates knowledge of the relatively under-explored issue of how care workers respond when their ideals of situated care are challenged.

The article falls into four sections. First, a brief section reviews recent research on the strategies that elderly care workers pursue to negotiate the discordance between abstract rules and situated practice. The second section introduces Jane Addams's thought as relevant to the study of care workers' experience of change, contradiction, and "perplexity" at work. It further situates Addams in relation to early pragmatism, particularly examining her view of social change and the necessary "adjustment" of morals. The third section extends Addams's pragmatist sociological approach with C. Wright Mill's vocabularies of motive. Although Addams certainly gave language importance in her account of moral adjustment, she never theorized the role of language in social life. Here, Mills provides concepts that allow us to develop Addams's pragmatist approach to study how individuals pursue moral questioning and negotiate values through specific vocabularies. The fourth section presents a case study of care workers' reactions to the imposition of standardization of their practices of caregiving. The case demonstrates how creativity became a necessary part of the action framework, as care workers invented the doctrine of "civil disobedience," a vocabulary of motive used to navigate regulations and preserve situated professional judgment.

### **Care Work Between Abstract Rules and Situated Practice**

The problem of discordance between abstract rules and situated work practices is a central theme within research on elderly care. Recent studies from this sector show frustration among care workers because they feel that the space for their discretionary and situated decision-making is being infringed by external factors (Dahl, 2009; Denton et al., 2002; Hjalmarsson, 2009; source redacted). A study on survey data identified several factors that home aides see as constraining their work, including budget cuts, heavier workloads, loss of organizational support, and loss of time to provide the "caring" aspects of homecare (Denton et al., 2002). These aspects of health-care restructuring are reported to have profoundly changed care workers' working conditions, leading to greater job stress and lower job satisfaction. Professionals in elderly care are generally guided by an "ethics of care," which emphasizes the personal, intimate, and unique relationship between care worker and care recipient (Wærness, 1984). The ethics of care requires that the professional recognizes the unique individual with his or her specific needs, for which reason caregiving is defined as an "inter-active relationship" (Brown & Korczynski, 2010, p. 422). This principle means that the content of care is defined continually in the interaction between care worker and care recipient. Influential proponents of care ethics, like Carol Gilligan, have linked it to feminism, arguing that women have a particular capacity for compassion and empathy as opposed to legalistic morality. This capacity to embrace human vulnerability means that women's alleged weaknesses can be redefined as an advantage (Gilligan, 1982). Gilligan (1982) assumes that caring requires deeply relational responsiveness that is irreducible to law, class, gender, and economics: "The logic underlying an ethic of care is a psychological logic of relationships which contrasts the formal logic of fairness that informs the justice approach" (p. 73). In contrast to economic or legalistic categorization of needs, care ethics is a situated moral reasoning, which responds "to others on their own terms" (Sevenhuijsen, 1998, p. 85).

Reforms aimed at streamlining public elderly care across national contexts have entailed a greater standardization of needs and services that care workers typically conceive of as infringing on their possibility to practice their care ethics. Recent reforms inspired by new public management (NPM) can be described as a "managerial logic of details," which entails the stricter control of time and a more detailed codification of work tasks (Dahl, 2009, p. 641). In contrast, care ethics emphasize the client as a unique individual and the nature of caring as interactive and unpredictable. This means that professionals working according to the

ethics of care will often contradict reform efforts toward standardization, predictability, and managerial control. Research documents that professional care workers are often skeptical about the implementation of new working arrangements (Hjalmarsson, 2009; Villadsen, 2021). A general finding in studies of elderly care is that changes in working arrangements often trigger professionals' concern that important matters concerning needs fulfillment are neglected. Care workers whose working conditions have changed due to new regulations, novel technology, or economic constraints react to those conditions by defending a sense of professional autonomy and dignity. The existence of such "defense strategies" in medicine and care work is well documented (Diamond, 1992; Helleberg & Hauge, 2014; Stacey, 2011; Stone, 2001). In an ethnographic study, Tim Diamond (1992) found that, although nursery workers experience distressing working conditions, they maintain a sense of ownership of their work by collaborating with clients to oppose managerial control. In a qualitative study of home aides, Robyn Stone (2001) described how they pursue their care ethics by spending more time with clients than allotted on paper or personally paying clients' expenses out of pocket. Studying home care, Clare Stacey (2011) emphasized the relational nature of caregiving, noting how employees draw value and identity from their personal ties with clients. This identity occasionally prompts professionals to perform uncompensated caregiving activities and allows them to assign dignity to what is commonly perceived as thankless "dirty work." Finally, Kirsten Mjelde Helleberg and Solveig Hauge (2014) used the metaphor of a "dance" between the patient and the professional to describe the latter's attempt to become more attentive to dementia patients' needs. They observed that health care workers practice "slow nursing" in order to be fully present and adapt their tempo to each patient's situation.

Overall, the findings of elderly care research support the general assumption of tension between abstract rules and procedures and the situated practice of caregiving. This literature bears out that professionals have to preserve a space of discretionary professional judgment to experience their work as meaningful, and a research stream from diverse national contexts describes practices in which care workers seek to defend their discretionary decision-making and care ethics.

This article suggests that the pragmatist tradition, taking Jane Addams as the point of departure, offers resources suited for analyzing care workers' moral dilemmas and deliberations at work. The following exposition pays close attention to Addams's descriptions of how people who experience difficult moral conflicts get struck by "perplexity" and engage in moral deliberations that reconstruct the moral codex. These notions offer a prism through which to observe how care-workers cope with their experience of discordance between their ultimate values and actual working conditions. The main source for this exposition will be Addams's (1902) first major book, *Democracy and Social Ethics*.

### **Addams on "Perplexity" and Moral Change**

Addams is widely known as a turn-of-the-century social critic, settlement house founder, and early feminist. A continuing stream of research has also identified Addams as a pioneer in pragmatist thought and research practice, associating her with thinkers like William James, John Dewey, and George Herbert Mead (Deegan, 1990). In discussing morality, Addams opposed traditions that assigned an intrinsic value to abstract ideas or doctrines, believing instead that convictions about virtue and morality had to prove their value in concrete situations. Hence, Addams wrote in *Democracy* that questions of morality could not be answered through theological debate or abstract philosophical speculation but must be strictly linked to action:

We continually forget that the sphere of morals is the sphere of action, that speculation in regard to morality is but observation and must remain in the sphere of intellectual comment, that a situation does not really become moral until we are confronted with the question of what shall be done in a concrete case. (Addams, 1902, p. 273)

Abstract speculation is associated with doctrine, whereas the adaptive testing of ideas happens in practice or in “experience.” Indeed, experience was a paramount term for the early pragmatists, as Anne Scott (1964) early pointed out with regard to Addams: “When she referred to ‘experience’ in this sense it was, as in the pragmatism of James and Dewey, a corrective to doctrine” (p. xlvii). Affirming the principle of testing moral convictions in lived experience, much of Addams’s writing revolves around the moral dilemmas of social life.

Addams asserted that values should not be set from a position outside or elevated above social contexts and the people affected by the value set. Her work at Hull-House can be described as cooperative experimentalism that tested out values without reliance on doctrine or the need for any ultimate congruity (Schneiderhan, 2011). Addams (1902) wrote: “We realize, too, that social perspective and sanity of judgment come only from contact with social experience; that such contact is the surest corrective of opinions concerning the social order, and concerning efforts, however humble, for its improvement” (p. 7). Assuming a situated view on the temporary setting of values by the community of inquiry, Addams’s thinking resonates with celebrated early pragmatists with whom she had long-lasting friendships and intellectual exchanges, particularly James, Dewey, and Mead.

Addams’s *Democracy and Social Ethics* has been presented as the theoretical epitome paralleling her pragmatic practice (Schneiderhan, 2013; Scott, 1964; Seigfried, 2002). Eric Schneiderhan (2013) views it as a key pragmatic text as it is “increasingly being recognized as part of the pragmatist effervescence of the late 19th and early 20th centuries” (p. 425). *Democracy* is the place where Addams most extensively describes “perplexity” and the ensuing “adjustment” of social morals. The research strategy she pursued in the book is akin to theorizing from the “bottom up” situations, in which individuals face profound moral doubts that consequently change their convictions. These situations expose, as it were, the new moral textures of the emergent industrial society. Addams (1902) asserts: “We are passing from an age of individualism to one of association” (p. 137). She discusses key social institutions—charity, family, education, politics, and industry—showing how social arrangements based on individualism were becoming inadequate for resolving urgent problems in the industrial city.

Addams’s basic proposition is that the times demand social ethics that guides people in adjusting their individual interests to encompass the common good. *Democracy* subsequently presents the reader with a series of examples depicting people caught in “perplexing” social situations. One can react to and seek to overcome such situations and their ensuing perplexities in various ways, and rigid adherence to tradition is a crucial issue for Addams (1930), as “the greatest dangers in the existing state of affairs are those which arise from inadaptability” (p. 463). She argues that a fundamental problem is that we fail to see that our environment changes much faster than our conventions: “Many difficulties come from the simple failure of our ideas and conventions, not to mention our prejudices, to keep up with the pace of material change” (Addams, 1930, p. 463).

Addams’s view on social change resonates with the way that pragmatist thinkers at her time conceptualized creativity and action. The basic premise is that when individuals face thorny problems that cannot be resolved within the existing social and moral order, they test out new solutions and ideals. Social

creativity is hence spurred by pressing challenges of practical and moral character, as Whitford (2002) notes: “Only when the life-process is somehow challenged do we survey ourselves for some means of defining and overcoming the problem, hypothesizing possible solution end-states” (p. 340). For Addams, however, individuals are generally bound by entrenched habits and morals that hinder any easy adjustment to new social conditions:

Our conceptions of morality, as all our other ideas, pass through a course of development; the difficulty comes in adjusting our conduct, which has become hardened into customs and habits, to these changing moral conceptions. When this adjustment is not made, we suffer from the strain and indecision of believing one hypothesis and acting upon another. (Addams, 1902, p. 13)

Addams’s writings present multiple examples of people who adopt new social ethics contrary to people who still sustain the old norms. The key institutions of society seem to be in a difficult transition between the old and the new.

For Addams, “perplexity” is a key term for describing this transition process. Emirbayer and Maynard (2011) instructively note: “While Dewey provided perhaps the most fully developed account of perplexity leading to intelligent reconstruction, it was Jane Addams who investigated most deeply the phenomenon of perplexity itself” (p. 228). *Democracy* contains numerous examples of social agents that are struck by “moral perplexity” (Addams, 1902, p. 172) or “all the perplexity of industrial transition” (Addams, 1902, p. 103). The term itself appears at least 8 times (Addams, 1902, p. 51, 62, 63, 64, 68, 84, 103, 172). Perplexity figures as a driver that impels individuals to establish new social conventions, that is, the new social ethics that Addams detects emerging across the industrial city. Perplexity marks a break with habitual thought and action and a move toward nonhabitual solutions and reconstructed reasoning. For Addams, the term signifies the experience of confusion and doubt that strikes people in moments of moral uncertainty, challenging their worldview, and thus leading them to search for new ways of addressing their situations. Encapsulating obstacles in lived experience, situated creativity, and continual moral deliberation, the concept of perplexity evinces key pragmatist assumptions.

Practical reasoning arises from a problematic experience in which actors strive to overcome barriers and begin to seek new values and ends-in-sight. Values are relatively transient as they arise from creative responses to vexing situations and are thus temporary. Pragmatists, explains Hans Joas (1997), recognize “the ultimacy of temporal process and the constitutive function of social praxis” (p. 270). These assumptions resonate in Addams’s writing. The individuals she describes are faced with ruptures in convention, struck by perplexity, and hence forced to adjust their moral values. Addams rejected biological, cultural, and historical determinism, instead of placing her actors in “perplexing” situations, where creative problem-solving is a necessary and constituent part of their action framework.

### **Developing Addams’s Method**

Addams can be viewed as theorizing social evolution (Fischer, 2019), but her sustained focus on individuals in perplexing situations could also be reconstructed as a distinct method of empirical inquiry. Such a research method is pertinent for exploring social contexts that are undergoing moral adjustments. Emirbayer and Douglas W. Maynard (2011) suggest that the pragmatists’ theme of perplexity— especially in Addams’s rendering—could be developed through the use of ethnomethodology. This is a promising integration,

Emirbayer and Maynard (2011) assert, as what Addams “deemed specific troubles of moral adjustment are for ethnomethodology particular instances of a more fundamental problem, that of a chasm between abstract rules, standards, and conventions, on the one hand, and situated practices, on the other” (p. 229). Extending the pragmatism of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century with ethnomethodology should be relatively uncomplicated as both traditions bring the constitutive effects of social interactions to the forefront of inquiry.

Speaking of Addams’s “pragmatist method” might be an overstatement, as Addams never offered a distinct methodology for observing situations of moral conflict and adjustment. She eschewed theory-building, preferring to mainly narrate through illustrative examples (Villadsen, 2022). However, Marilyn Fischer (2019) notes: “Those attuned to scientific theorizing could find her reasoning behind the stories” (p. 121). To develop her approach analytically, Charles Wright Mills is consulted, who took inspiration from Dewey and Mead in arguing that conflicts met in experience provide the basis for social inquiry and theorization. Like Addams, Mills (2000) has been designated an early protagonist for sociology for social justice, as, writes Mary Romero (2000), “he embraced an egalitarian humanist vision and sought a broader audience than other sociologists” (p. 11). His essay *Situated Action and the Vocabulary of Motives* (Mills, 1940) spurred a tradition of empirical inquiry into “motive talk” (Campbell, 1991; Hewitt & Stokes, 1975). In the essay, Mills sidestepped explanations of social action in terms of inner compulsions, drives, or needs, which belong to the domain of psychology, focusing instead on how people talk about their motives in specific contexts. Rejecting that language expresses something prior and inherently subjective, he argued that “motives are, in effect, no more than words used by actors in situations where they need to account for their conduct when questioned by others” (Campbell, 1991, p. 90). Mills thus foregrounds language as a medium of social transformation, arguing that individuals justify their actions to others and to themselves through a shared language.

A few years earlier, Dewey (1938) had published *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*, in which he argued that language serves as the essential means of conveying and shaping human experience. Language occupies a peculiarly important place in our culture, he wrote, because it is “the agency by which other institutions and acquired habits are transmitted” (Dewey, 1938, p. 45). Although Addams gave language importance in her account of moral adjustment, she never theorized language as such or developed specific concepts to analyze its role in social life. Mills, whose work has been described as “sociologized pragmatism” (Delanty & Strydom, 2003, p. 284), provides a bridge that allows us to develop a pragmatist approach suited for empirical analysis of how individuals articulate moral questioning and negotiate values through language. The following sections combine Addams’s concept of perplexity with ideas from Mills’s *Vocabulary of Motives* to build a framework for such an approach.

Mills outlined the notion of “vocabularies of motives,” taking inspiration from literary critic Kenneth Burke to describe how people express motives for their conduct in terms of shared vocabularies. Mills (1940) wrote: “Men discern situations with particular vocabularies, and it is in terms of some delimited vocabularies that they anticipate consequences of conduct” (p. 906). Congruent with the pragmatists’ situational tenet, Mills (1940) stated that his approach focuses on “explaining specific cases,” which means avoiding abstract theorizing: “To simplify these vocabularies of motive into socially abstracted terminology is to destroy the legitimate use of motive in the explanation of social actions” (p. 913). Mills’s methodological appeal to start from “specific cases” follows from his assumption that individuals provide accounts of their motives in response to specific needs that they experience in social situations. Situations are, in turn, institutionally

anchored, as vocabularies differ profoundly between different professions, between work and family, or between social classes.

Much like Addams, Mills suggested that the existence of a range of “competing” vocabularies and behavioral norms distinguishes industrial society from earlier societies (Campbell, 1991, p. 90). Mills (1940) asserted that “typal vocabularies of motives for different situations are significant determinants of conduct” (p. 908), and he further specified: “What is reason for one man [sic] is rationalization for another. The variable is the accepted vocabularies of motives, the ultimates of discourse, of each man’s dominant group about whose opinion he cares” (Mills, 1940, p. 910). Suggestive in regard to studying professionals’ language use in different sectors, Mills (1940) proposed: “We might, e.g., study motives along stratified or occupational lines” (p. 911). Colin Campbell instructively summarizes key dimensions of Mills’s analytical approach, suggesting that the researcher should

(1) identify situations in which motive imputation and avowal occur, (2) identify the “typal vocabularies” of motives that are articulated in given types of situations, (3) account for why these motives are verbalized rather than others, and (4) explore the functions that these typical vocabularies can be seen to fulfill in relation to systems of action and interaction. (Campbell, 1991, p. 90)

Importantly, Mills (1940) did not assume that different social domains are strictly divided with regard to the use of motive vocabularies, but rather that “shifting and interstitial situations” imbue the use of appropriate motives with uncertainty and questioning (p. 912). Mills (1940) mentioned, for example, that in his contemporary American context, business terminology and hedonistic language were sometimes used in the same situation: “‘Love or Duty?’, ‘Business or Pleasure?’” (p. 906). In this regard, Mills’s approach echoes the general sociological insight that, in modern society, contradictory values and roles often coexist in social settings, thus requiring individuals to perform choices, arbitration, or hypocrisy. Notably, in modern social services, care workers are expected to provide care in response to individual needs while simultaneously complying with standardized requirements. This overlapping of diverse motive vocabularies gives social situations a degree of uncertainty as individuals have to guess which of the competing motives others have invoked.

Mills’s analysis often parallels Addams’s thinking on moral adjustment, but Mills conceptualizes the role of language far more explicitly, especially the social functions of motive vocabularies (Gerth & Mills, 1954). Echoing earlier pragmatism, Mills asserts that accounts are not called for when individuals engage in unproblematic routine conduct. Hence, situations marked by doubt and uncertainty— that resonate with “perplexing” situations described by Addams—induce people to recount the motives underlying their actions. With such uncertainty, wrote Mills (1940), “motives once unquestioned for defined situations are now questioned” (p. 911). This “question” of motive constitutes a “lingual index” of such situations where people’s conduct is somehow questioned and individuals must justify their actions in the face of multiple and potentially conflicting morals (Mills, 1940, p. 905). Hence, just as Addams (1902) would say that people faced with conflicting moral demands become perplexed (p. 172), Mills (1940) stated: “variously situated people are confused” (p. 911). Addams (1902) provided the example (pp. 172–175) of young women who, faced with a choice between traditional family obligations and a desire to serve a greater social good, had to choose between following an archaic morality and adopting the new social ethics. Mills saw such perplexity as ensuing from disparate and overlapping motive vocabularies. Hence, the moral conflict with which the young women had to grapple parallels a conflict in vocabularies of motives.



Finally, Mills and Addams can be brought into dialogue around the theme of ethics and self-formation. Addams saw social life as an inherently moral experience, emphasizing that individuals' enactment of substantive values has great consequences both for the individual and for society at large. When individuals break free from the archaic morality of individualism and begin deliberations guided by "the new social ethics," they change into persons of "fellowship." Such individuals will direct their attention "outside of themselves," away from narrow goals and toward how their conduct realize higher values. For Mills (1940), accounting for one's motives performs a broadly similar function, insofar as others' questioning prompts individuals to state their motive and thus to reflect on what they are doing and who they become by doing so (p. 115). For both Addams and Mills, when individuals make choices of values or motives, they are simultaneously choosing a particular conception of themselves—a character to be. For example, Campbell (1991) observes, in the 19th century some young women had to decide which role, daughter or lover, was their higher priority, and "in answering this question they were, in effect, both confirming and creating their own character" (p. 93). Deciding to use a motive vocabulary hence means choosing a particular character for oneself, and for Mills (2000), the study of motive vocabularies can examine how personal troubles (individual challenges) relate to public issues (larger social challenges). Notably, then, vocabularies of motive do not simply rationalize reality but are constitutive of both social reality and subjectivities.

In summary, an analytical framework where Mills supplements Addams affords several analytical possibilities. First, one can study how individuals faced with moral perplexity and others' questioning must choose distinct motive vocabularies. Second, by describing social situations in terms of overlapping and perhaps competing motive vocabularies, we can highlight the dilemmas that arise from these conditions. Third, one can consider how individuals create self-conceptions or idealized characters when they employ motive vocabularies. Fourth, one may observe how individuals' justifications (and hence self-perceptions) converge or diverge, perhaps leading to negotiation or social conflict. Fifth, one can focus on the creativity that individuals exert in reconstructing morals and elaborating new motive vocabularies.

### **Reinventing Care Ethics**

We now make a transition from pragmatist sociology of the first half of the 20th century to health care provision in the late 21st century. At issue in the following case study of a health care reform is the experience of "perplexity," in Addams's sense, as well as the use of "motive vocabularies," introduced by Mills. The case study focuses on home aides' reactions to how their working conditions changed after a service reform instituted stricter resource allocation and standardization of home care services. The findings come from a study of the home care services in a typical Danish mid-size municipality named Toender. The study offers a window into an institution undergoing a process of "moral adjustment" resembling the ones Addams described. It documents the different strategies by which home aides negotiate a work context that they perceive as ridden with conflicting demands, thus generating "perplexity." Both in terms of practice and language use, they responded in reconstructive ways to such frustration by defending and reinventing their care ethics.

Danish social laws stipulate universal access, and all senior and disabled citizens are therefore equally entitled to assistance. Traditionally, home aides have enjoyed considerable autonomy at work, as they have not been closely supervised in their daily working practices. Yet, in the years preceding the study, programs inspired by NPM have targeted elderly care nationwide. The programs aim to increase efficiency and

transparency with respect to costs and outcomes by implementing systematic measurement, service contracts, and explicitly defined quality standards (Dahl, 2009).

Using detailed observations and qualitative interviews over a 7-month period from March to October 2018, we conducted a study to explore how frontline managers and aides in residential elderly care respond to moral challenges at work. The study is based on observations at eight staff meetings and workshops, interviews with six frontline managers, and interviews with two union representatives and two working environment representatives from the home care unit. Each interview lasted 45 min, while each meeting took around 2 hr. In addition, we studied textual sources on the delivery of home care, including the municipality's brochure entitled *Quality Standards for Personal Care and Practical Assistance* (Toender Kommunes Social- og Sundhedsforvaltning, 2011) and protocols used to determine which care services a senior citizen should receive. In all cases, we carried out our observations after receiving informed consent from our informants, and all statements made during interviews or at collective gatherings have been anonymized. However, the formal title of the speaker is indicated (i.e., home aide, frontline manager, union representative or working environment representative). To situate our findings in a broader context, we consulted key documents on recent national policy initiatives in elderly care.

From interviews with the home aides and their frontline managers, we found diverse responses to the new working conditions—responses that will be understood as testing out differing vocabularies of motive. Most care workers expressed that the new, detailed service definitions of care were counterproductive to the provision of proper residential care. Particular criticism was voiced against the new assessment protocols, called “service packages,” to be used for determining the types of care and visit lengths allocated to senior citizens. The service package was an instrument designed to determine the types of care assigned to each recipient and the minutes allocated for different work tasks. The idea was to make each visit predictable in terms of its frequency and content. A “package” could, for example, include personal hygiene (20 min), cleaning (18 min), preparation of food (6 min), medication (2 min), and conversation with the recipient (5 minutes).

Home aides pointed out the paradox that the legal requirements intended to guarantee citizens' adequate assistance were, in reality, so rigid as to undermine the possibilities of providing individualized care. Sparked by this experience of perplexity, discussions abounded regarding how to navigate the schism between formal rules and the ideals for proper caregiving. The standardization of care work entailed in the service packages was felt to be immediately at odds with the ethics of care, which has long influenced health care professionals. As already mentioned, care ethics emphasizes responsiveness to individual needs, which contradicts standardization of care by numbers, prespecified tasks, and anonymized service delivery.

As might be expected, the schism between service standardization and the principles of care ethics spurred moral questioning at the home care unit. The fundamental question was raised as to whether to follow the new regulations or to pursue creative actions that could preserve the ethics of care in some form. Many care workers experienced difficulties in justifying their working practices under the new standardization of caregiving. In Mills's (1940) terminology, questions of motive come up when conduct is somehow frustrated, and the presence of these questions is a verbal indication of such conditions (p. 905).

## Competing Vocabularies of Motive

One way that professionals responded to the experience of discordance between their care ethics and the conditions for pursuing them was to overemphasize the new regulations. At service unit meetings, home aides voiced concerns about “over-interpretation” or slavish adherence to rules and regulations. A number of interviewees gave accounts of home aides who interpreted the service packages so strictly that they refrained from performing actions not explicitly stipulated in the instructions. At times, home aides restricted their own actions because of “myths” about rules for service delivery. The interviews and meetings made it evident that these myths or misconceptions had become integral to the meaning shared among a subset of home aides. On several occasions, these aides stated: “We are limited by rules!” or “We are not allowed to!”

An illustrative example of this abidance by mythical rules comes from a home aide convinced that she was not permitted to boil an egg for a person in her care. The issue came up at a meeting where a frontline manager asked the aide why she thought such an action was prohibited, to which she responded that she had made this presumption because home aides no longer cooked for their clients. A catering company now delivered the meals, which the home aides only needed to heat up. She reasoned that as cooking was no longer included in the work tasks, she was prohibited from using cookware. For some home aides, avowing to work strictly by the book served as a shield against the uncertainty as to prioritizing work tasks that resulted from the introduction of “the packages.” Recall here that Mills (1940) defined motives as “imputed or avowed answers to questions concerning conduct” (p. 905). Furthermore, the use of motive vocabularies serves as a means of acting in situations marked by uncertainty and questioning. According to Mills (1940), individuals often anticipate the potential need to justify their actions prior to engaging in them and, accordingly, might refrain from acting if they are unable to come up with an acceptable motive in advance (p. 907).

The fact that home aides at meetings made statements like “We are not allowed to!” astonished frontline managers, which led them to exclaim: “But it doesn’t say anywhere that you cannot!” Similarly, at an interview, a working environment representative reported that she had asked a home aide: “Why do you say you are not allowed to do that? Because you are!” From an analytical perspective, it is perhaps unsurprising that home aides embraced the rules (including imaginary ones) as a means of reducing ambiguity and justifying their actions in a perplexing work context. At a moment when good caregiving was being redefined, some employees sought to escape the ambiguity by resorting to the simplicity of the binary code of the law, justifying their practice through the motive vocabulary of permitted versus not permitted. This resolution to the problematic situation clearly had an experimental component as care workers quickly recognized that it had detrimental effects on caregiving.

Home aides reported that the strategy of rule-compliance had the negative effect of “over-caring” for service recipients. According to some home aides, this effect ensued from the fear that relatives might complain about faulty services delivery. These employees reasoned: “If I do everything on the checklist, no one can come after me.” This practice of self-protection came up at a meeting, but some home aides immediately criticized it, arguing that the practice placed the service recipients in an unnecessarily passive or “clientized” position. The problem was that a subset of home aides, fearing a failure to comply with the packages, were too quick to assist recipients with tasks they might well have managed on their own. A union representative commented: “I was assisting a citizen who had just had a bath. Automatically, I helped him put on his shirt. He dryly commented that he could do that himself.” Another home aide reported how some of the service provided ended up impairing the recipient’s own initiative: “Once I asked a citizen, ‘What would

you like for breakfast?' He replied, 'Why are you asking ask me that? Your colleague has written it in the blue book.'" This debate on the risks involved in working strictly "by the book" and hence "over-caring" for the clients connect to a long-standing debate on the risks of "hospitalization" and "clientization" in social services (Karlsen & Villadsen, 2008).

The pragmatist emphasis on the provisional nature of problem-solving means that a resolution to perplexity is tried and then assessed. On this backdrop, we note how care-workers assessed their provisional experimentation with strict rule-abidance and found it inadequate. The reactions observed here fall within the register of possible responses to "shifting and interstitial situations," to use Mills's (1940) terms (p. 912). According to pragmatist theory, problematic situations provoke responses meant somehow to address these conditions—reactions that can be characterized as automatic, nonreflexive and dysfunctional, or, alternatively, reflexive and morally courageous (Addams, 1907, p. 221). The latter category of responses entails finding creative solutions to obstacles in experience, putting one's morality to the test and engaging in creative reconstruction.

Some home aides responded to their perplexity with practical inventiveness and moral courage. They reported about practices developed "on the floor" during daily working routines, aimed at defending caregiving quality in the face of time restrictions, diminishing resources and rigid standardization that the packages were perceived to entail. For example, a local union representative voiced a grievance that the new time restrictions impeded proper care, saying: "We lack time with the citizen. We don't feel that we get things done properly, because we only have 15 minutes to do them." A home aide complained: "There isn't any time for the weakest clients. There is no time for care. We dare not ask how the citizen is doing, because we don't have time to deal with it if the citizen starts to cry." Work practices not performed entirely by the rules, they argued, do not always warrant the terms "unprofessional" and "illegal." As a caregiver one can do something that stretches the rules but is ethically and morally absolutely justifiable.

A working environment representative used the term "legitimate illegality" to describe how home aides would take as much or as little time as they found necessary, thereby ignoring the dictates of the packages. She explained that they sometimes took minutes from one client and used them to care for another viewed to be in greater need: "The stupid thing about the [service] packages is that there is a jump from 32 to 120 minutes, which forces us to play Robin Hood and take a little time here and there." Apart from negotiating the issue of strict time limits, practicing "legitimate illegality" was used to designate the insistence on approaching the client as a unique individual with specific needs. A home aide said: "We should have more influence based on our personal evaluation of the citizen's particular situation." This view reflects the general premise of care ethics that service recipients should be viewed not as "cases" but as "real people." Some employees explained that the dictates of "the packages" necessitated noncompliance and "bottom-up" resistance to make their work practices acceptable and ensure the proper care of their clients. Here, one might suggest that social service professionals must be expected to carry with them a motive vocabulary comprising terms like "individual needs," "situated care," "interaction with the client" and "people not cases."

A group of home aides had developed a justification of their practices that appeared to be the diametric opposite of strict rule adherence, as it implied adapting to the situation and the immediate needs of the client. This vocabulary of motive revolved around a creative re-articulation of the notion of "civil disobedience." A subset of employees used this term to designate work practices guided by sound, professional judgment instead of the dictates of standardized service protocols. These home aides viewed

the stronger legal codification and standardization of caregiving as foreign to the values of their profession. They used the concept of civil disobedience to describe working practices that broke with limitations set by the packages or directly violated rules but which were defensible because they safeguarded the ethics of care. The home aides used the notion of civil disobedience to designate the acts of being creative and of using their discretionary judgment according to the competency acquired through their training. The finding that frontline personnel in welfare services practice strategies of resistance to defend their professional values is not unique to this study, as other studies on professional caregiving have encountered similar strategies. A common issue is how to weigh time restrictions against caring commitments. Hence, Marie Hjalmarsson (2009) notes: "It is hard to delimit time to care, help and comfort recipients and this can result in ways of working that conflict with rules and regulations due to the caring ambitions and sense of responsibility of the front-line workers" (p. 4). The above finding of disobedient working also resonates with the practice of "slow nursing," which encompasses health professionals' strategy of slowing their work down work to be attentive to each patient's situation (Helleberg & Hauge, 2014).

Studies of workplace disobedience and resistance typically find that employees practice resistance at work in opposition to their managers. However, in this case, managers at the home care unit were mainly supportive of their disobedient employees. Frontline managers in social services are supposed to ensure that work practices follow formal regulations, but we found that most of the managers were aware of the "civil disobedience doctrine," and some even condoned it. At meetings and interviews, managers expressed an understanding of and sympathy for the defense of professionalism that their employees were undertaking. The managers largely agreed with the home aides' definition of "defending professionalism" as using one's informed judgment according to the competency acquired during their caregiver training. A frontline manager aptly expressed the justificatory link between professionalism and the practice of civil disobedience:

I feel good about my employees being a little disobedient. For example, if they take their work vehicle to go buy a bottle of milk [to the service recipient]. They should be allowed to think for themselves and to use their professional competences. However, I like to know when they do so I can back them up if someone phones me to say that they have seen a home helper out shopping while wearing their uniform. If I can give reasons for why we do what we do, then nobody can come after us.

This is not to say that some frontline managers wished to do completely away with the law as a premise for social services. Rather, in their view, actions that bend or break the rules could be justified as a defense of the individualized care guaranteed to senior citizens by law. As such, the managers and employees in this study did not exclude legality from the civil disobedience doctrine, as they, in fact, invoked law-governed social rights as an ultimate value in care provision. Or, one might say that their vocabulary of motive articulated the universal-legal principles of equal access to "proper care" as a justification for breaching the specific stipulations of the service packages.

Notably, home aides' use of the term "civil disobedience" was a re-articulation of the popular celebratory use of the term during World War II in Denmark, when it designated ordinary citizens' courageous and illegal acts of resistance to the German occupying forces. Civil disobedience indeed denoted "little people" who acted in the name of a greater cause against overwhelming power, against the rules and at the risk of losing their lives. The creative invocation of this long-standing term constituted a strong vocabulary of motives that clearly played a key role in rallying home aides around a defense of autonomous work routines and decision-making. This mobilizing effect of articulating practices of resistance around a key justificatory notion can be understood from Mills's (1940) assumption that verbalization is an act in itself: "We need not

treat action as discrepant from “its” verbalization, for in many cases, the verbalization is a new act” (p. 907). By responding to the question of how to provide care with the civil disobedience doctrine, the home aides were able not only to make practical decisions but also to “produce an appropriate verbal justification in terms of an ideal of character” (Campbell, 1991, p. 95). Hence, to tackle perplexing situations, home aides invoked the notion of an “ideal caregiver” who daringly insists on the ethics of care, whatever the risks, thus constructing an ideal person whom they can identify with or would like to emulate; a caregiver who respects the unique client and justifies this approach with the original intentions of the social service law. We note that pragmatism’s focus on the “problematic situation” may address a very broad problem, including a conceptual problem such as the implications of the law.

In this case study, we were thus able to identify two subsets of home aides who reacted to the service packages by using very different vocabularies of motives. One group reacted by articulating legality in a rigid fashion so that their essential motive for their work practices was to comply with all written stipulations. This working conduct resonates with the generalized type of care worker that Dahl (2009) terms “the manual worker,” who carries out all tasks of caregiving exactly by the book but stays silent on emotional or problematic work aspects (p. 642). By contrast, another group of home aides coped with the service packages by invoking the doctrine of civil disobedience as a motive for stretching or violating service regulations. Although this group drew a direct connection between service standardization and less time for “proper care,” they approached the new conditions as an impetus for developing a shared vocabulary underpinning their practices. This response resonates with the pragmatist assumption that breakdowns in habitual understanding and action generate perplexity, which in turn may spur creative ways of overcoming such breakdowns. In this case, the home aides kept sight of their ultimate ideals while re-articulating individualized caregiving and one might suggest, inspired by Mills, that these care-workers became more acutely aware of their care ethics once it was questioned.

Notably, the law was articulated in both vocabularies of motive, although in very different ways. The home aides that worked strictly “by the book” invoked the rules as a means of protecting themselves and of reducing the uncertainty of caregiving that resulted from the reorganization of their services. In this way, the rules relieved them from making difficult decisions and having to prioritize the situated needs of each client. By contrast, the home aides and managers supporting the civil disobedience doctrine believed that there is a discrepancy between the universal social rights defined by the law and the rigid service packages. This discordance prompted them to undertake actions aimed to preserve and reinstitute the ethics of care. Hence, the perceived contradiction between the restrictions of the packages and the legal promise of fulfilling individual needs became a justificatory motive for the “disobedient” group. According to pragmatist thinking, perplexity helps individuals to see that a seeming dichotomy does not make sense and undertake creative reconstruction from there. In our case, we noted how care-workers challenged the dichotomy between the law and individualized care through their reflective responses. Moral adjustment in care provision could occur between the experience of perplexity and the testing of differing solutions.

## **Conclusion**

This article offers a revised framework for pragmatist analysis that supplements Addams’s notion of the experience of perplexity with Mills’s vocabularies of motive. This framework was applied in a study of care workers’ articulated responses to a service reform, which spurred their articulation of motives with reference

to care ethics and the universality of the law. As such, the article responds to recent calls to develop the pragmatist tradition into distinct strategies for sociological inquiry, and to put these strategies to work in empirical research. The strategy of inquiry proposed here integrates assumptions from classic and more recent pragmatist thought. This integration helped us in detailing professionals' responses to their shared experience of perplexity as well as their situated construction of competing vocabularies of motives. The above case study did not attempt to grasp the "objective" reality of structural changes to rules and service standards, since it brought these factors into view solely as they were articulated by individuals from their situated viewpoints. In terms of future research on professional caregiving and welfare provision, more broadly, the approach offered empirical insights into the contextualized construction of motive vocabularies.

The study demonstrates that care workers may use the normative order of their everyday lives to develop new principles and working solutions "on the shop floor." Such scarcely documented practices at the frontline of social services may provide a resource for problem-solving and service innovation. The pragmatist idea of knowledge generation offers an alternative to the widespread positivistic scientific notion of truth and its reliance on "evidence based knowledge," which often serves to justify service reforms (Silverman & Gubrium, 1994, p. 194). Further studies on pragmatist basis might engage more with scholarly debates over evidence-based practice paradigms in social services, as well as inquire into the presence or absence of ethical decision-making in the implementation of evidence-based practices. These issues can be related to Addams's own pragmatist and sociological program at Hull-House, which at the time was largely dismissed by The Men of the Chicago School, who insisted that Hull-House research was not "objective" or even sociological, because of its applied and social justice focus (Romero, 2020, p. 5). It could be further discussed to what extent Addams's "cooperative experimentalism" and social justice emphasis challenge the contemporary, evidence-based practice movement in welfare provision.

In contrast to evidence-based scientificity, the above mentioned case study was guided by the pragmatist principle that researchers must take justifications arising from the common sense of ordinary people seriously. Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot (2006) extensively criticized the social sciences' general disregard for the common competence that people practice in everyday life: "[L]ike scientists, ordinary people never stop suspecting, wondering, and submitting the world to tests" (p. 54). Our case study demonstrates this need to recognize that innovation can be integral to working practices when employees develop solutions and negotiate different justifications "on the shop floor." Such negotiation can be temporarily closed, but the vocabularies of motive used to justify divergent working practices will remain available for new moral challenges and argumentations.

These pragmatist assumptions proved helpful in elucidating home aides' expressed frustration with service reorganization, their internal arguments, and their strategies for coping with constraints on their discretionary power. The case demonstrated how creativity became a necessary part of the action framework, as home aides invented creative resolutions that involved moral courage. Most striking was the doctrine of civil disobedience, a vocabulary of motive that was used to defend practices of individualized care and situated professional judgment. In this defense, these care workers voiced justificatory principles and working solutions developed "on the shop floor" and based on the normative orders of their everyday lives. Such creativity at the frontline of social services remains relatively under-explored and under-theorized, but pragmatist research foregrounds the competence of ordinary people to conceptualize and create knowledge in their daily lives. Social service professionals' localized practices of problem-solving and knowledge production constitute a neglected alternative to the regime of "evidence-based knowledge" that today

typically underpins major service reforms. Perhaps most critically, the study showed that the question of justifying one's actions at work is not merely a game of words, but more essentially a matter of the character one becomes as a social service professional.

The revised pragmatist framework proposed here can be used to produce accounts of broad cultural and social dynamics, understood and analyzed from localized situations. It might be particularly pertinent in contexts like nursing, medicine, social counseling, and education—in other words, fields where professionals find their ethics fundamentally challenged by administrative and economic constraints. The framework could be applied to explore how people in organizations deal with dilemmas, but it is pertinent to any social situation where people must arbitrate conflicting morals or navigate between abstract values and their lived experiences.

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### **Author Biography**

Kaspar Villadsen is a professor at the Department of Management, Politics, and Philosophy, Copenhagen Business School. Villadsen has published the book *State Phobia and Civil Society: The Political Legacy of Michel Foucault*, 2016, Stanford University Press (with Mitchell Dean). He is also the author of *Power and Welfare: Understanding Citizens' Encounters with State Welfare*, 2013, Routledge (with Nanna Mik-Meyer). Villadsen's work has appeared in journals like *Economy and Society*; *The American Sociologist*, *Organization Studies*, and *Human Relations*