

Chapter 2

Jane Addams: Public Philosopher, and Practicing, Feminist Pragmatist

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This chapter examines Jane Addams's contribution to Classical American Pragmatism. In the mid 1990s philosophers began to recover the work of Jane Addams and establish her as a founder of American Pragmatism. Since then she has also been described as a leading public philosopher, a feminist pragmatist, a social feminist, a practicing pragmatist and one of the “great minds of American Philosophy” (Hamington 2009: 10).¹

The chapter begins by placing Addams ideas in historical context by spotlighting the rise of Classical American Pragmatism and key philosophers associated with its founding. Second, a few basic tenets of pragmatism are briefly explained. Finally, Jane Addams's unique feminist pragmatism is explored. Her pioneering contributions such as sympathetic knowledge and lateral progress are highlighted.

2.1 Historical Setting

Pragmatism is considered “America's one original contribution to the world of philosophy” (Diggins 1994: 2). It was born soon after the American Civil War and was something of a reaction to the absolutist thinking that many believed contributed to the conflict (Menand 2001). Darwin's *Origin of Species*, which was published in 1859 at the outset of the Civil War, served as another stimulus. *Origin* challenged existing belief systems and offered evolution and transformational change as an alternative (Menand 2001).

The origin of American pragmatism is commonly attributed to the “Metaphysical Club” an informal group established in Cambridge Massachusetts in 1872. Key members include William James, Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., and Charles Sanders

¹For example, see Elshtain (2002), Shields et al. (2013), Seigfried (1996), Hamington (2009).

Peirce (Menand 2001). In two essays (“The Fixation of Belief” and “How to Make Our Ideas Clear”) Peirce (1877, 1878) initiated a philosophy that embraced doubt and uncertainty and focused attention on practical effects. Several years later, University of Chicago professor John Dewey, a student of Peirce and friend of William James, became noted as a pragmatist philosopher as did his colleague George Herbert Mead.²

In *The Quest for Certainty*, John Dewey argued that traditional philosophies elevated knowledge over making and doing. The quest for knowledge was a quest for certainty or the “absolute and unshakable” truth (Dewey 1929/1988: 5). “Logic provided the patterns to which ultimately real objects conformed” (p. 13) and it belonged to theory or a “higher realm of fixed reality” (p. 14) set apart from an inferior and uncertain realm of practical matters and experience. Pragmatism turns this world on its head. The truth of a theory is found in its application and its success as a tool of practice.

Chicago pragmatists Mead and Dewey had a close and active association with Hull House and worked closely with Jane Addams. Dewey and Addams were particularly close. John Dewey used Addams books in class, was on the board of Hull House and worked with Addams, along with his wife Alice, to make schools less regimented and more democratic. John and Alice Dewey showed their abiding respect for Addams by naming their daughter Jane. “Dewey and Addams were intellectual soul mates from the moment they met in 1892.” Dewey credits “Addams with developing many of his important ideas including his view on education, democracy, and ultimately philosophy itself” (Hamington 2014). It is almost impossible to disentangle the ideas of Dewey and Addams, they influenced each other and for both, something unique emerged (Davis 1973; Farrell 1967; Linn 2000; Seigfried 1996). Addams also had an ongoing correspondence with William James, citing his works frequently. James praised her works calling *Democracy and Social Ethics* “one of the great books of our time” (as cited in Elshtain 2002: 283). “James and Addams both valued experience and among the professional pragmatists his style of writing is closest to Addams in terms of readability and the use of tangible examples” (Hamington 2014).

While there was ongoing exchange between the philosophers of the University of Chicago and Hull House, the university did not offer Addams a place to refine her ideas. Rather, in Hull House, she created an environment where her unique feminist pragmatism would emerge. The settlement house provided a home and springboard for “philosophical endeavors, not merely as a connection to the life of the community but as a place for significant philosophical theory and reflection” (Hamington 2009: 6). It was a milieu where theory and practice merged and where women were encouraged to reflect on their experience as they encountered the community (engaged in making and doing).

²Other important first generation pragmatists include John Fiske, Nicholas St. John Green, F.C.S Schiller and W.E.B. Du Bois.

When Addams died she was recognized as a beloved founder of Hull House, a progressive reformer and peace activist. Her contributions to philosophy were masked and nearly invisible. At the time, no one outside academia was recognized as a philosopher—much less a non-academic woman. Her intellectual legacy suffered as a result (Hamington 2009). Addams contribution to philosophy began its path to the light in the 1990s when women philosophers, most notably Seigfried (1996) with *Pragmatism and Feminism*, made the persuasive case for Jane Addams as an often radical, feminist, first generation, American pragmatist.

2.2 Basic Definitions of Pragmatism

According to the *Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, pragmatism “is a philosophy that stresses the relation of theory to praxis and takes the continuity of experience and nature as revealed through the outcome of directed action as the starting point for reflection. Experience is the ongoing transaction of organism and environment.... Since the reality of objects cannot be known prior to experience, truth claims can be justified only as the fulfillment of conditions that are experimentally determined, i.e., the outcome of inquiry” (Audi 1995: 730). Inquiry is a focal point, which is inclusive of a “community of inquirers” (Shields 2003).

“Pragmatism asks you not to commit yourself to a single version of truth, nor even to a single position. It asks you to judge a theory by its consequences, by the way it lives in the minds of those who embrace it” (Brendel 2006: xv). The basic tenets of pragmatism can be summarized using four key terms—practical, pluralism, participatory and provisional—hereafter the 4 ps. The four ‘p’s’ offer an easy to remember and apply way to summarize pragmatism. Thus, pragmatic inquiry focuses on *practical* problems and their resolution through action. It is *pluralistic* in that it takes into account multiple points of view as it considers practical problems. The *participatory* nature of pragmatism incorporates the community of inquiry. Everyone with a stake in the problem is encouraged to participate. Finally, it is *provisional*, which takes into account the fallible nature of experimentation and human inquiry (Brendel 2006: 29–32). “Truths are beliefs confirmed in the course of experience and are therefore subject to revision” (Seigfried 1996: 7).

Addams is known as a practicing pragmatist. Although she wrote many books and articles, she emphasized the making and doing. She was engaged in resolving the compelling problems in and around Hull House (practical). She involved the community intensively and widely (participatory) and welcomed multiple perspectives (pluralism). The ‘experimental’ nature of the settlement movement makes clear she had an ongoing willingness to admit mistakes and try new approaches (provisional).

Jane Addams grew her philosophy in Chicago, a city without a colonial heritage widely regarded as the first truly American city. Her American pragmatism is distinguished because she drew so clearly from a new source—women’s experience (Hamington 2010).

2.3 Jane Addams Unique Contributions

Jane Addams took experience and ideas of pragmatism and ran the ideas through settlement life of Chicago at the turn of the 20th century. She sought ‘progress’ or a goal of improving the lives of the neighborhood people. To do this, she and the residents of Hull House became part of the community and learned from the situation. She radicalized pragmatism “by applying a stronger egalitarian approach to social issues, one that was keenly tuned to the impact of class, race, and gender” (Hamington 2009: 43).

The next section examines some of the defining elements of Adams’s pragmatism. It should be noted that the order and specification of these key concepts is somewhat arbitrary. Addams herself was leery of classification. Categories obliterated connections and the distinctiveness of experience. Categories may aid in making useful distinctions but they can also trap thinking and perhaps progress. So, dear reader, keep in mind that these categories are a device to move her ideas forward. They are very much interconnected and like experience messy. We next examine a few key tenets of her philosophy beginning with avoidance of rigid moralisms and then move on to sympathetic knowledge, progressive inquiry, democracy, lateral progress, feminist pragmatism, and the civic household.

2.4 Avoid Rigid Moralisms

We distrust the human impulse as well as the teachings of our own experience, and in their stead substitute dogmatic rules for conduct (Addams 1902: 67).

As we saw earlier with Charles Sanders Pierce’s first article, pragmatism was a response to fixated belief systems. Addams continued this tradition. Early on Addams confronted what seemed like a binding private sphere that morally bound women to the narrow world of the home. Her life in a sense was a pushback away from this rigid, paternalism toward a world where women could stretch boundaries, contribute beyond the family sphere and engage others in solving compelling, practical, community problems.

The rigid moralisms she was concerned with carried with them the weight of “right and wrong,” or a singular point of view. Her perspective was very much in contrast with prevailing view that people’s problems are due to their lack of effort or some moral failing. This view also held that the prosperous had a kind of moral superiority, which led to an inability to see that the environment/industrial conditions were often responsible for problems like poverty and prostitution (Elshatin 2002). This sense of a superior belief system often made “little or no provision for human weakness.” Further, it squeezed out space for forgiveness and passion (Elshtain 2002: 80).

But life itself teaches us nothing more inevitable than that right and wrong are most confusedly mixed: That the blackest wrong is by our side and within our own motives; that

right does not dazzle our eyes with its radiant shining, but has to be found by exerting patience, discrimination and impartiality. We cease to listen for the bugle note of victory our childish imagination anticipated and fear that our finest victories are attained in the midst of self-distrust, and the waving banner of triumph is sooner or later trailed to the dust by the weight of self-righteousness (Addams 1895a: 199)

Narrow adherence to fixed principles could miss the big picture and shift, dismiss or exacerbate life-threatening problems of women and children. The principle that bound a woman to the home had the potential to blind both father and daughter to ways practical problems of health like inadequate sewer systems could be resolved. Success in eliminating this disease carrier rested on engaging the world outside the limited family sphere, which constrained wives and daughters. The principle that gave business the right to pursue profit without government interference blinded industrialists to the many injured children who worked with dangerous factory machines.

2.5 Sympathetic Knowledge

He forgets that it is necessary to know of the lives of our contemporaries, not only to believe in their integrity, which is after all but the beginning of social morality, but in order to attain any mental or moral integrity for ourselves or any hope for society (Addams 1902/2002: 177).

Addams offered an alternative to rigid belief systems or moral certainty—sympathetic knowledge. Sympathetic knowledge is a willingness to suspend judgment and listen and “at least see the size of one another’s burden” (Addams 1902: 6). It is “a determination to enter into lives that were not one’s own, without falling into the arrogant pretence that one understood the lives of others better than they did” (Elshtain 2002: 122). “When we sympathetically and affectively understand the plight of others, we are more likely to care and act in their behalf” (Hamington 2009: 74). Addams wants us to incorporate our emotions into our sense of knowledge. In doing so we are able to bring emotional kindness and imagination to encounters with others. Sympathetic knowledge practiced at Hull House aided in conflict resolution among its neighbors by bridging dualisms such as Europe/American old/young, employee/employer, catholic/protestant, father/daughter, and male/female.

Sympathetic Knowledge rests on four interconnected assertions. First, “human existence is ontologically defined by social interconnection funded by an ability to find common cause.” Second, “if individuals take the time and effort to obtain a deep understanding of others, that knowledge has the potential to disrupt their lives with the possibility of empathetic caring.” Third, “empathy leads to action” people will act on behalf of people they care about. Finally, “an effective democratic society depends on caring responses ... Socializing care is emphasized over the applications of moral systems such as right-based ethics that locate morality in individual agency” (Hamington 2009: 71–72). Sympathetic knowledge opens the way for diversity of experience and widespread participation in inquiry.

2.6 Progressive Inquiry

The Residents of Hull-House offer these maps and papers to the public, not as exhaustive treatises, but as recorded observations which may possibly be of value, because they are immediate and the result of long acquaintance (Addams 1895b: vii).

Inquiry is a key component of pragmatism. Addams systematically used something akin to scientific inquiry as a way to change the dreadful conditions among her neighbors. Even the definition of a settlement contained inquiry at its heart. “The Settlement, then is an *experimental effort* to aid in the solution of the social and industrial problems which are engendered by the modern conditions of life in a great city...” (Addams 1910: 125) (Italics added). She recognized that fixed belief systems would stifle inquiry. She was “resolutely empirical,” for example, in the 1890s she gave 1000 speeches against child labor and sweatshops. Her speeches emphasized questions/answers like “What is the situation we face? What is the evidence? (Elshtain 2002: 140).

Addams and the Hull-House residents demonstrated a commitment to a scientific approach by emphasizing data collection. Little would be accomplished if sympathetic knowledge worked in the absence of an organized effort to reason out the problem and empirically verify circumstances. Their data was subsequently shared with the larger community and often used to promote better *living* conditions (Shields 2006).

This belief in the necessity of depending upon factual data for scientific inquiry led the Hull House residents to develop innovative research designs and cartographic techniques. In the early 1890s, Jane Addams and fellow resident Florence Kelley supervised the writing and production of *Hull-House Maps and Papers*, which began by developing base line information through neighborhood maps that graphically illustrated where the 18 nationality groups lived as well as the residents’ wages, occupations and housing conditions (See Fig. 1.1). *Maps and Papers* also contained chapters that delved into some of the most important problems facing the immediate community such as dangerous working conditions in the garment industry and enforcement of child labor laws (Residents of Hull House 1895).

This commitment to inquiry also involved a willingness to see and learn from experimental failures (provisional). “There was room for discouragement in the many unsuccessful experiments in cooperation which were carried on in Chicago during the early [eighteen] nineties” (Addams 1910: 141). And, “in spite of failures, cooperative schemes went on, some of the same men appearing in one after another with irrepressible optimism” (Addams 1910: 142).

One of the key insights that Addams and the members of Hull House understood was that progressive inquiry needed to be carried out by a “Community of inquiry.” Any analysis and subsequent actions to resolve the practical problems of Chicago’s poor immigrant communities needed to incorporate the insights and experiences of the community. Here is where both pluralism and the participatory characteristics of pragmatism come to play and where they support her notion of democracy (Shields 2003).

2.7 Democracy

Social morality results perforce in the temper if not the practice of the democratic spirit, for it implies that diversified human experience and resultant sympathy which are the foundations and guarantee of Democracy (Addams 1902/2002: 7).

Addams ideas of democracy were refined between 1889 and 1920 a time before women had the right to vote. While she worked to gain women the franchise she also conceived a kind of democracy inclusive of the disenfranchised, particularly women and poor immigrants. She imagined democracy to be a “process of breaking down artificial barriers between people” facilitating a path for people to realize their full potential. She attempted to socialize democracy (Elshtain 2002: 94).

Traditional conceptions of democracy stress political participation through voting and the rule of law. Democracy is viewed as a form of government (Shields 2006). Addams and Dewey move outside these notions. They develop a conceptualization of democracy that stresses ‘moral and spiritual association.’ The participatory democracy envisioned by Dewey and Addams, was both wide and radical (Westbrook 1991: xiv).

Their democracy is one of ideal and practice. There is no claim of an eventual utopia. Nevertheless, these ideals can help us understand and perhaps improve the practical, lived world (Shields 2006). Their ideas have a down to earth quality and apply to daily conversations and associations. Clearly Dewey and Addams were preoccupied with social problems and their resolution (Hildebrand 2008). Their work, however, always incorporated the lived world and daily conversations, experiences and associations (Dewey 1938/1998).

Addams had faith in her expansive, idealized democracy because she witnessed democracy at work in the streets, homes and meeting rooms of Hull House. Here humans could experience conflict and work out social claims aided by sympathetic understanding of the other. Sympathetic knowledge is the foundation of her larger, ethical, social democracy; it helps people to comprehend the experiences of others and thus facilitates heartfelt communication and social transformation (Hamington 2009: 76).

Addams (1902/2002) illustrates these concepts through the example of a business man/philanthropist relationship with his workers who are unhappy with a reduction in their benefits. The employer owner’s steadfast inflexible belief system has no room for sympathetic understanding. He felt betrayed by their demands (which eventually led to a violent strike) and was unwilling to consider his worker’s perspective.. The industrialist in her story is confident he knows what is best for the worker. Unfortunately, this mindset often cuts him off from

the social ethics developing in regard to our larger social relationships, and from the great moral life springing from our common experiences. This is sure to happen when he is good ‘to’ people rather than ‘with’ them, when he allows himself to decide what is best for them instead of consulting them. He thus misses the rectifying influence of that fellowship which is so big that it leaves no room for sensitiveness or gratitude. Without this fellowship we may never know how great the divergence between ourselves and others may become, nor how cruel the misunderstandings (pp. 154–155).

Addams believed in a larger human solidarity that rested on the assumption “that certain experiences are shared on a deep level by all human beings” (Elshtain 2002: 122). She believed that if people could open themselves to their different cultures, generations, types of childhoods etc., they could find common ground. Thus “democracy by infusing a normative claim into the political concept” was equated with a social ethic and key to that social ethic was care for the vulnerable (Hamington 2009: 78).

2.8 Lateral Progress

To touch to vibrating response the noble fibre in each man, to pull these many fibres, fragile, impalpable and constantly breaking, as they are, into one impulse, to develop that mere impulse though its feeble and tentative stages into action, is no easy task, but lateral progress is impossible without it (Addams 1912/2002: 176).

Human progress is often marked by the achievement of elites. We cheer when humans run faster or climb higher. We follow the exploits of elite athletes and successful entrepreneurs. Addams shifted attention toward the other end of spectrum. She focused efforts on improving the lives of the most vulnerable. Hull House’s successful war on ‘flies’ and “street littering garbage” reduced the infant mortality rate, improving the lot of babies. Concern for lateral progress is one way she radicalized pragmatism (Hamington 2009: 47).

Hamington isolates four characteristics of lateral progress. First, “widespread progress is preferred over individual progress.... The solidarity of lateral progress [is] necessary for effective social philosophy.” Second, “lateral progress assumes *circumstances* to be the major difference between the haves and have-nots” and posits an optimistic “human ontology that suggests there are not bad people, circumstances lead to bad situations” (Hamington 2009: 44). Third, “experiences of one another lead to greater understanding, which in turn leads to mechanisms, such as policy change,” that elevate conditions of the vulnerable. Finally, “lateral progress assumes the possibility that social reforms can create widespread improvement” (Hamington 2009: 45). She focused attention on reform that advanced women’s status, lives and experiences; all of which brought lateral progress.

2.9 Feminist Pragmatism

Certain it is that woman has gained new confidence in her possibilities, and a fresher hope in her steady progress (Addams 1880/2002: 8).

As is clear from her junior oration speech at the Rockford Female Seminary, Jane Addams focused her energies on the changing and expanding role of women. She adopted a feminine standpoint in her public position and ideas at a young age.

Standpoint theory posits that the “standpoint or context of the knower affects the known. No one can escape to an independent objective position of knowledge” (Hamington 2009: 53). Addams explicitly took into account feminine experience as a way to expand knowledge. Clearly most women of her generation were engaged in the care of children. Women’s experience included special knowledge of children who touched their lives daily and were an intimate part of their feminine experience. Addams feminist pragmatism is noted for its focus on children (Hamington 2009). So along with radicalizing pragmatism through the notion of lateral progress she pioneered the feminine standpoint. It should be noted, Addams is not saying women are better than men. There is no inherent superiority but there are aspects of women’s experience like closeness to children, to which women are more sensitive than men (Hamington 2009: 49).

“The pragmatist goal of philosophical discourse, which is shared understanding and communal problem solving rather than rationally forced conclusions, is more feminine than masculine, as it is valuing of inclusiveness and community over exaggerated claims of autonomy and detachment” (Seigried 1996: 3). Hence, given its focus on inquiry, pragmatism was a natural home for feminist research and analysis. Seigfried (1996: 37) notes three features that characterize feminist research. First it “begins with women’s experience as the basis for social analysis.” Second, its goal is to benefit women. Finally, it claims this “research is not a neutral observer, but rather is on the same critical plane as the subject matter” (Seigfried 1996: 37). All three of these conditions are present in Addam’s work.

Her feminist perspective is captured in a hilarious, tongue-in-cheek essay where she imagines a world where women contemplated granting men the right to vote. A few excerpts follow:

Our most valid objection to extending the franchise to you is that you are so fond of fighting—you always have been since you were little boys. You would very likely forget that the real object of the State is to nurture and protect life.... We [women] have carefully built up a code of factory legislation for the protection of workers in modern industry; we know that you men have always been careless about the house, perfectly indifferent to the necessity for sweeping and cleaning; if you were made responsible for factory legislation it is quite probable that you would let the workers in the textile mills contract tuberculosis through needless breathing the metal filings (Addams 1913/2002: 229–230).

2.10 Civic Household

A city is in many respects a great business corporation, but in other respects it is enlarged housekeeping. ... may we not say that city housekeeping has failed partly because women, the traditional housekeepers, have not been consulted as to its multiform activities? (Addams 1913).

Historian Flanagan (1990) contrasted two reform models of Chicago city governance during the early 20th century. These gender based models were built and articulated through the works of two reform clubs—the ‘business’ and all male City Club of Chicago and the “health and welfare” oriented Women’s City Club of Chicago. The elites of Chicago filled the membership rolls of each club. The Women’s club also included Jane Addams and many settlement workers.

The ‘Club’ men viewed the City as a source of business profit. The women dismissed ‘profit’ as an appropriate position. They were concerned with the health and welfare of Chicago’s citizens. The differences between the approaches can be seen in how they viewed the garbage collection problem.

Both clubs agreed that the existing private contractors were leaving the streets filthy. Change was needed. The men’s group focused on Chicago as a source of business profits. Garbage collection responsibilities must stay in business hands. The contract should be renegotiated. In contrast, the women’s club emphasized the “healthiness of the urban environment” and did extensive research including comparisons with systems in the US and Europe (Flanagan 1990: 1038). They concluded that the city should assume responsibility for garbage collection.

In the process of tackling this and other urban problems the women’s club began to develop an alternative model for city government—*municipal housekeeping*. They saw the city as an extension of the home. It did this through food inspection, factory safety, birth registrations etc. (Flanagan 1990: 1048).

Jane Addams took this widely held position and turned it into a radical—and ahead of its time—philosophical argument for diversity. Philosopher Haslanger (2016), examines Addams’ arguments in what she calls an undiscovered ‘classic’ of philosophy—a 740 word broadside poster “Women and Public Housekeeping,” written by Addams and distributed in 1913 to promote women’s suffrage.

Addams argues that a well-governed city no longer needs to protect itself from invading armies. Further, cities are not quite like business enterprises; rather, it is a space where civic life should be managed with “a sense of obligation for the health and welfare of young children, and responsibility for the cleanliness and comfort of other people” (Addams 1913). She points out that most of the organizational divisions within city government can be traced to household functions traditionally delegated to women. Woman’s responsibility as household manager has taught her how to juggle these “multiform activities” and to “attend to the complex demands of others to whom she often has special obligations due to their dependency. Men’s breadwinning and military responsibilities do not typically provide them with these skills and sensitivities, at least to the same degree. Therefore, the failure of cities to provide adequately for their citizens could be remedied by including women in public life, e.g., by allowing them to vote, to hold public office, etc. Moreover, women’s lives could be further enriched by such civic participation” (Haslanger 2016: 155).

Addams is not claiming, “that women, simply by virtue of their sex, have a special way of knowing or a special kind of knowledge that men lack. Rather, her point is that women have traditionally played the role of housekeeper and so have learned skills and sensitivities that men, on the whole, have not” (Haslanger 2016:

157). Banning women produces three problems. First, it denies them their traditional role and responsibility as community caregiver. Second, the men in charge undervalue or ignore these functions and instead debate questions about national tariffs or the navy. This lack of attention opens the doors to corruption. Third, banning women's formal participation denies women's wisdom, gained by experience, which would benefit the management and functioning of the city. Current practice (no right to vote or hold office) blocks women's potential to contribute. Expanding or making the pool of participants more diverse would draw from this experience and serve the citizens of Chicago and the US generally.

This short broadside captures many of Addams contributions to philosophy. It tackles a practical down to earth topic. It incorporates and clarifies a feminine standpoint. If effective it should help others walk in women's shoes—enhancing sympathetic knowledge. It calls for greater participation, and pluralism in resolving the problems of the city. It focuses on problems whose resolution would result in lateral progress. As a broadside arguing for women's suffrage it is a tool to widen democratic participation.

2.11 Conclusion

Addams status as a first generation, founder of Classical American Pragmatism has been secured only recently. She neither wanted to be a traditional university philosopher nor was the university ready to include her ideas within the rubric of philosophy. Even books like *Democracy and Social Ethics* and *Newer Ideals of Peace*, which contain obvious philosophical content, were written to appeal to a popular audience. They were “PUBLIC philosophy” filled with insights into contemporary problems and thought provoking stories. We are indebted to the many philosophers who have recovered Addams' feminist pragmatism in her books, magazine articles and even broadsides that were tacked onto billboards around Chicago.

This chapter focused on philosophy developed in her formative years as a settlement worker. Ideas such as sympathetic knowledge, lateral progress and feminist pragmatism laid the groundwork for her ideas of peace. The next chapter focuses on the interplay between her years as a peace activist and her conceptualization of peace summed up in the term *peaceweaving* (Shields/Soeters [forthcoming](#)).

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