

Sociospatial Practices In US Social Work, 1880-1917: Changing Places, Changing People

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Background and Purpose: This paper presents a detailed historical analysis of American social work's "spatial turn" in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Influenced by evolutionary theory, public health, urban sociology, and by growing public awareness of the terrible living conditions in poor urban neighborhoods, Progressive era social workers focused increasingly on environmental factors, which they addressed interventions ranging from home visits and housekeeping advice to residency in poor neighborhoods, exhaustive social survey research, and advocacy for playgrounds, parks, gardens, bathhouses, improved sanitation and garbage disposal, and housing reform. This important strand in social work history has not however been subject to close historical scrutiny. Building on scholarship that addresses Progressive environmentalism more generally (e.g. Boyer, 1976; Bulmer, Bayles & Sklar, 1990; Greenwald & Atkinson, 1996; Ward, 1989), this study aimed to develop a fine-grained, multidimensional analysis of US social work's environmental frameworks and practices in the period before World War I.

Methods: Primary source materials for the study include the Proceedings of the National Conference of Charities and Corrections (later the National Conference of Social Work), archival materials (e.g. the Russell Sage Foundation papers, Rockefeller Foundation archives), contemporary periodicals (e.g. *The Survey*), published writings of leading social workers (both caseworkers and settlement leaders), and relevant contemporary materials (e.g. Mary Beard's landmark study, *Women's Work in Municipalities* (1915)). Study findings are also placed in relation to relevant secondary materials. Analytically the study takes a critically theorized approach, informed by historical scholarship in the spatial sciences (e.g. Craddock, 2000; Hayden, 1995; Sibley, 1995) that directs attention to the recursive relationships between spatial and social arrangements.

Results: US social work's Progressive era environmentalist research and interventions were a welcome corrective to the overtly moralistic, person-centered practice which came before. They made clear the role of social and structural factors in human problems, resulted in important reforms in housing, sanitation, urban space, and public health, and supported more sympathetic assessments of the lives of the poor. Despite their seemingly pragmatic and rational constitution, however, the historical evidence makes clear that these were practices with moral as well as material force, aimed at shaping the living conditions of the immigrant poor – and thus the poor themselves – in conformity with dominant ideals.