

# A 40 year (contextualized) social work journey

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## Abstract

Employing critical autoethnography, this article conveys how over my four decades of social work, I have come to adopt a contextualized social work stance and identifies what emerge as four key areas of contextualized social work. These include attention to race, ethnicity and culture as experienced in the local environment, the local articulation of social conditions and appropriate social work responses, the activation of local knowledge generation and curation, and finally, addressing and resisting expert power. Such theorization of contextualized social work augments previous work that positions contextualized social work as countering dominant conceptualizations of social work and instead centering on a critical interrogation of the local, foregrounding local understandings of social conditions, and privileging local/(i)Indigenous knowledge production and ways of doing and being. This critical understanding of context unsettles dominant notions of context by focusing on power relationships. I hope that my story will add to the growing discussion regarding alternative modes of practice and education that counter dominant Westernized individualized social work perspectives and promote decolonized approaches.

## Keywords

Contextualized social work, autoethnography, critical social work, i(l)Indigenous/local

The credo “Social work is inherently about context” and what this means has guided my 40-year social work journey. I was born in South Africa, but have also lived in Switzerland, the United States, and Canada. My undergraduate and master’s degrees are from

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South Africa while my social work doctorate is from Canada. As a social work practitioner, I have worked with people who live with disabilities and/or illness. I have served persons engaged with the prison and/or child welfare systems, and/or who have been directly impacted by poverty, oppression, and repression. I have also taught social work, primarily in North America. Having been exposed to such diverse contexts, I have during my career consciously and unconsciously explored critical contextualized social work and its meaning for practice, and more recently, its place in social work education.

In this article, I unpack how I have come to understand contextualized social work as critically integrating the scholarly literature's alternatives to harmful dominant Western social work intervention. This troubles conventional notions of context through its attention to power (Schmid and Morgenshtern, 2019). I use a critical social work lens and autoethnography to inspect my journey, with the intention of further theorizing my emergent understanding of a critical understanding of context in social work and its relevance for present-day social work. In my four decades in the profession, particular experiences and events stand out. I use autoethnography, weaving these transformative moments together with relevant literature to develop a reflexive analysis. I conclude that social work must attend to context to offer education and responses that are meaningful on the local level, thus resisting the imposition of dominant social work.

## Conceptual framework

Both a critical social work lens and the construct of contextualized social work guide this autoethnography. Critical social work pays attention to structural, systemic factors that shape the material conditions in which people live. As such, it resists individualized social work interventions that situate issues and intervention primarily within the person, focus on deficits, privilege middle class (White) perspectives, are often intrusive and punitive and that in a neoliberal environment, are concerned with standardization, risk, and individual responsibility (Ferguson, 2001; Gray et al., 2008). Further, critical social work embraces lived experience as diverse, unique, and multi-dimensional (Healy, 2018) and consequently, speaks to a multiplicity of truths. This framework considers power and thus prioritizes emancipation, social justice, and social transformation, and as such uncovers and challenges relationships of oppression and domination as well as social control functions. Moreover, critical social work pays attention to the role of power in the construction of knowledge and aims to elevate silenced and marginalized voices (Ferguson, 2008; Fook, 2003). The social worker as change agent engages in advocacy (Fook, 2003) and counter-storying, which recasts lived experiences through the lens of structural factors (Hulko et al., 2019). Additionally, critical social work assumes that every social work interaction is imbued with power and therefore requires the practitioner to be reflexive—understanding the dynamics of power within the social work encounter while being accountable for any privilege carried into the situation (Healy, 2018; Heron, 2005).

This autoethnography is framed as a counter-story/ies, challenging the dominant understandings of social work I encountered. I am drawn to the use of critical social work because my contextualization journey has led to an awareness of how social work practice

and education are constructed and reflect power, as well as the mechanisms through which professional social work maintains certain power relations (Chapman and Withers, 2019).

In specifically highlighting mechanisms of oppression and empowerment, acknowledging the interplay of the global and local, and valuing diverse individual experience, critical social work avoids the critiques leveled at dominant social work of simply imposing worldviews and practices. Regarding context, critical social work acknowledges that “[i]f practice is truly contextual, there is no longer an opposition between practice and environment” (Campbell and Blaikie, 2012, p.78). Even so, context is somewhat obscured in critical social work by the privileging of individual experience and insufficient problematization of the ways in which power is exercised at the point of the local. To address this gap, I thus also draw on contextualized social work which amplifies notions of the local raised in critical social work.

As articulated by Schmid and Morgenshtern (2019), contextualized social work intentionally suggests that the demands of the context are primary, situates an understanding of power in the local and specifically resists professional imperialism. Hence, this critical social work approach aims to make visible the ways in which the exercise of power and governmentality—as managing the conduct of the citizenry through the disciplinary measures of normalization and moralization (Collier, 2009)—are context dependent. Accordingly, contextualized social work foregrounds local/(i)Indigenous ways of knowing, doing, and being and prioritizes parochial means of identifying and conceptualizing social conditions and issues. Local modes of helping are centered, and wholistic responses valued; and while the interaction of local and global factors is considered, local discourses are privileged. Contextualized social work is responsive to the meaning and implications of social work intervention for local communities. It also disrupts dominant constructions of context expressed through the person-in-environment paradigm. The latter centers the individual and expects their adaptation to the systems around them—in contrast to a structural contextualized approach that understands context as acting on the individual, family, or community (Kondrat, 2002). Schmid and Morgenshtern (2019) further argue that contextualized social work is informed by an appreciation of the confluence of historical and contemporary oppressions in shaping local conditions and meaning and therefore addresses systemic issues. The community is seen as the primary, though not exclusive, point of intervention. Accordingly, contextualized social work honors a critical understanding of the local which is essential to progressive social work.

In this article, I crystallize instances that led me to understanding social work through this lens of critical contextualization by reflecting on my experience of context and the operationalization of power in each instance. I aim therefore also to strengthen the relation between meanings of critical theory and context.

In contextualizing myself, as a critical practitioner, educator, and researcher, I specifically articulate how and where I am situated. This is because my social location and the intersection of various personal social markers as well as how I understand my history shape my views and actions/practice (Mandell, 2007). Thus, my own context and associated power have a direct relationship to how, in this instance, I interpret context and its relationship to social work. I realize that as a White privileged South African and immigrant/settler this is a complicated position, in that my self-reflection may simply

emphasize my dominance as a White scholar and practitioner (Wilson et al., 2019) and reinforce claims of innocence (Dumbrill and Yee, 2018). Indeed, it is my Whiteness, middle-class position and associated privilege that have facilitated my movement between countries and allowed me to deconstruct universal notions of social work and pay attention to specific contexts (Gray et al., 2008).

In honoring this conceptual perspective, I recognize that the orthography regarding “indigenous” is context dependent. Here, I use “indigenous,” reflecting the South African convention, conflating this with “the local,” but do use the capital “I” when referring to Indigenous persons in Canada. Before identifying my developing understanding of context, I outline my methodology.

## Methodology

I employ autoethnography as a means of developing a critical analysis of my social work journey regarding contextualized social work. Complementing a critical social work approach, critical autoethnography is a powerful research tool for meaningfully examining one’s own experience (Holman-Jones, 2005) and allowing qualitative insight into how one has constructed this experience (Ellis and Bochner, 2006). It is a vehicle that facilitates the interrogation of one’s subjectivity and the forces that have contributed to such a position (Chang et al., 2012) thus tracing the connections between the personal and the structural (Holman Jones, 2005). Autoethnography has been criticized as a navel-gazing, postmodern project that has little relevance beyond the individual (Walford, 2004). Such critique has been countered with the argument that autoethnography is not simply autobiographical but is first, relational in allowing for the joining up of individual stories (Chang et al., 2012) and second, promotes critical awareness (Ellis et al., 2011). This is particularly valid where there is emerging (subjective) knowledge production. Using autoethnography, I hope to contribute to a developing story regarding the value of contextualized social work.

Autoethnography is especially useful in examining my journey because critical and contextualized social work demand that praxis be continuously reviewed (Mandell, 2007). A recent study on contextualized social work education suggests that in addition to institutional transformation and political prompts, it is personal encounters and lived realities that move educators towards contextualized social work education (Schmid et al., 2021). Also, the data suggests that educator authenticity and clarity around the impact of their social location is an important element in the pedagogy of contextualized social work (Schmid et al., 2021). Thus, only with ongoing reflexivity can I understand the ways in which I contribute to or inhibit the use of contextual responses to the lived realities of individuals, groups, and communities.

In adopting autoethnography as my methodology, I have reflected on my four decades of social work experience to identify personal, professional, and academic meanings of the critical contextualization of social work. The research I refer to above regarding contextualized education prompted the reflections in this autoethnography: I realized that I connected with many of the participants’ observations and needed therefore to unpack how and why this occurred. Over the last two years, my autoethnographic process has

involved intentional review and reflection to identify those experiences which have especially informed my developing understanding of contextualized social work practice. I have with colleagues and friends discussed the (multi-layered) meanings I have drawn out from my review and integrated such conversations into both my description and analysis. I also noted down my insights and in an iterative process (which continues as I write this article), considered how these reflections loop back on themselves and thus deepen (Haynes, 2011). Simply in trying to offer a synthesized narrative in this article, I have sharpened the meaning of each account. I highlight interacting dimensions of contextualization to offer a complex and nuanced construction of context. These themes emerged through iterative content analysis (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000) as I grouped together the meanings derived from the vignettes offered.

My learnings about context are interconnected rather than being discrete, and collectively contribute to my understanding of contextualized social work. I have picked out significant moments but each represents a multiplicity of others and so I may not consistently convey the complexities involved, particularly where personal experiences intersect with professional ones. Where I can, I offer a chronological account for the theme to reflect my developing understanding regarding that aspect of my construction of context. I also aim for these stories to stand largely on their own. In this interpretive tradition of autoethnography, I trust that the reader will feel sufficiently connected to these accounts to draw their own conclusions (Grant et al., 2013) and expand this discourse, using their contextual lenses to ascribe meaning to the experiences I highlight. In relating my story, and in line with the view that autoethnographic methodology does not require ethical clearance as it explores the self (Ellis et al., 2011), I have framed my observations as reflections that speak directly to my experience and do not implicate others.

My purpose is to describe how my awareness of context in social work developed, how power is revealed, and then to link this to a theorizing of contextualized social work. Emergent themes include contextualization as racial/ethnic/cultural positionality as well as attention to the local construction of social conditions, creating space for local knowledges and recognizing expert power in social work.

## **Racial/ethnic/cultural positionality**

My first awareness of the centrality of context related to race, culture, and ethnicity. I was born in 1959 in apartheid South Africa to immigrant Swiss, White, middle-class parents. Apartheid was built on rigid conceptualizations of race, dividing the population into Whites, Indians, “Coloureds” and Africans. Progressives refer to the last three groups collectively as Black. I use these racial signifiers cautiously because these (shifting) terms remain contentious. However, it was cultural rather than racial difference with which I first came to equate context. Family discussions often presented the Swiss reality as infinitely better, and I began consistently reading my local context for what might be acceptable or not. I saw this pattern of cultural hegemony replicated, for example, at school. Attending one of the few dual medium (Afrikaans and English) primary schools, Afrikaans peers and teachers branded the minority English-speaking students of which I was part as “rooinekke” (the label given by Afrikaners to British soldiers) (Lewis, 2016),

while simultaneously requiring reconciliation between us as Whites. I attributed such encounters to language and cultural differences, only later relating this to historically informed, colonizing positionalities that were aimed at maintaining White power in the face of the majority's disenfranchisement. In high school, with predominantly Jewish students, I began learning about Jewish marginalization. While these early experiences allowed me to learn the lifeworld of the "other," I was being inducted by apartheid into recognizing context primarily as cultural difference. Even so, there were ongoing direct and indirect references in my upbringing that taught me about racial signifiers and associated subjectivities (Durrheim et al., 2011). The examples are myriad and include my mother discouraging me from playing with the domestic workers' son, separate entrances to the post office, being taught not to enter and indeed to fear the African "township" just four streets away and supporting White soldiers fighting wars on South Africa's borders.

My understanding of context continued to be mediated through cultural/ethnic/racial lenses as a young adult. Through social work encounters and political engagement, I began learning about the performance of Whiteness (Jeyasingham, 2012), (though this was not the term used). White privilege cannot be clearer than under South African apartheid. I began to be confronted by the mechanisms of advantage associated with the entrenchment of White privilege in South African legislation, my ongoing complicity in the apartheid project, as well as ways to resist the power of racial stratification. Political experiences around Black Consciousness and later non-racialism—both attempts at interrupting colonial constructions of race (Everatt, 2009; Magaziner, 2010)—provided me with a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the arbitrary nature of constructions of race and how these entrenched privilege or disadvantage. This was also played out amongst progressive social workers who during the South African State of Emergency in the 1980s organized themselves in opposition to apartheid. Black social workers held their White counterparts (me) to account for our role in maintaining apartheid and required us to consider how racial oppression could be challenged. Recognizing that Black social workers were considerably more vulnerable than Whites, we together approached power strategically: for example, White social work practitioners and academics often spoke more publicly and made themselves more visible in challenging apartheid practices (Sacco and Hoffman, 2004). I began asking how race and power operated in various situations.

In a contrasting experience in Switzerland, and consistent with familial experiences, I was required there to demonstrate my "Swissness" and to ignore racial dimensions of (my) positionality. Discussion about (White) privilege was taboo, because in this context race/ism is obscured and psychologized (Cretton, 2018). Colleagues typically ignored my observations that race- and cultural-othering may have intruded into our social work practice, even when engaging directly with, for example, refugees. In Canada, my appreciation of race/culture/ethnicity and their relationship to context deepened as did my understanding of White privilege. Initially this occurred through my work in Toronto, a multicultural city where I interacted with many racialized Canadians and came to recognize that poor, immigrant and/or racialized families were overrepresented in the child welfare system. Social work as a control function also became evident to me (Chapman and Withers, 2019). Later, in Western Canada, I witnessed the resistance of Indigenous

peoples to ongoing marginalization and oppression (including in child protection) and began to grapple with what it means to be an uninvited guest on unceded Indigenous territories and to be an educator, shaped by Western worldviews, on these lands—a journey I still am on.

Uncovering race, ethnicity and culture in context has also involved me being alert to the insider/outsider positions I have had in various cultural environments and the ways in which I am continually discerning how I am positioned and from where I can speak. Noting that each construction of self creates a particular context (for example, [Reicher, 2004](#)), I have become curious about what multiple cultural or national identities mean for others and their contextualization of self.

These experiences suggest to me that constructions of racial/ethnic/cultural positionalities are locally determined by the specific exchanges between the individual/community and their environment. The spaces for discussion around such positionalities are also context dependent. Universal conceptualizations of race become unhelpful because these overlook local dynamics and the multi-layered exercise of race/culture/ethnicity.

## **Contextualization as the local definition of social conditions**

In this section, I reflect on how I became aware that imposed constructions of social conditions limit insight into local meanings of societal issues, and how such imposition also constrains relevant responses. Individuals and communities need, as a process of conscientization, to generate their own themes regarding how they experience social conditions to be able to act meaningfully on their environment ([Freire, 1998](#)).

In South Africa, the rejection of apartheid was effectively the rejection of imposed notions of social conditions. The state used propaganda to define societal issues. For example, in primary school, social justice was raised as an issue, but was narrowly defined as pertaining only to Afrikaans-Anglo relations and was employed towards advancing racial hegemony. Even so, it instilled in me early a responsibility to act for what was “right” and “fair.” I am uncertain how I came to apply this beyond White people, but know I was distressed by the state violence I witnessed as a child, though understanding these incidents as larger apartheid oppressions remained outside of my consciousness. For example, I saw a Black boy being sjambokked (whipped) by the police; watched Black adults being arrested for not carrying their *dompas* (papers for being in urban areas); and was a high school student during the 1976 Soweto uprisings. I entered my social work degree in 1977 with notions of idealism, innocence, and paternalism ([Mandell, 2007](#)).

It might seem in a situation as stark as apartheid that social workers of all races recognized the influence of systemic issues. However, our segregated experience together with our social milieu—including education imbued with state propaganda—largely excluded awareness of the structural and effectively rendered invisible the lived experience of the “other.” Social service delivery also was separated around race, and while social workers designated Indian, “Coloured” or African could articulate the oppressions they and their communities experienced, they did not necessarily see beyond their racial silos ([Turton and Schmid, 2020](#)). Additionally, severe state sanctions discouraged anyone

from potentially speaking to the impact of apartheid governance—exercised through extremes of normalization and moralization—on people’s daily lives and social conditions (Sacco and Hoffman, 2004).

I developed a deeper understanding of South African social conditions as I wandered beyond prescribed silos and was confronted with the material and social challenges faced by disadvantaged communities. In one case, a local principal insisted on exposing us outsider White students to the poverty and vulnerability of the “Coloured” community in which we were doing our school social work practicum. Most of my formal social work education was de-politicized (Chapman and Withers, 2019), though this life-changing opportunity had been created by a risk-taking departmental head. It was, however, primarily the explicit activist interrogation of apartheid that facilitated my understanding of community challenges from a structural rather than simply a humanistic lens (Mandell, 2007).

When I was a novice practitioner in the early 1980s, an activist colleague, Leila Patel, gathered a group of social workers into what later became *Concerned Social Workers* to question our predominantly Anglo-American social work education for its relevance to South African conditions. Through this, and the anti-apartheid movement’s reframing of social conditions as mass concerns rather than as arising out of the behavior of isolated agitators or individual failures (Patel, 2016), we came to interpret family and individual trauma and the breakdown of families and communities as resulting from systemic factors. Despite such reframing, professional imperialism and the continued dominance of White perspectives (Bock, 2018) have perpetuated Western understandings of social issues, even as some social work educators recognize that imposed Eurocentric understandings of issues such as aging or parenting cannot be meaningfully transferred into their context (Schmid et al., 2020).

Although I had come to understand that the local articulation of social conditions mattered, I struggled to transfer such insight. For example, when coming to Canada, because I had developed the idea that structural poverty interacted with Blackness, I viewed any poverty experienced by Whites as of their own making. I had understood the triple burden for Black South African women in terms of race, class, and gender, but could not apply such an intersectional lens to Canadian White poverty. I still was learning how to read context and the local exercise of power.

I was exposed to the oppression of Indigenous persons early on in my Canadian experience and could interpret this through the language of oppression I had acquired in South Africa. However, while our apartheid education taught us about British colonization, the language of de/colonization as relevant also to all South Africans only entered my lexicon post-apartheid through learning about the colonization of Indigenous persons in Canada (Choate et al., 2020). These experiences helped me to see how the mechanisms of settler colonialism operated across context (Veracini, 2010), but also alerted me to the differences in the lived realities of colonialism depending on context. For example, noting the oppressed constitute the South African majority, it is evident that the colonized experience applies to most South Africans. In comparison, for example, in Canada, it is a minority that is affected, perhaps allowing dominant society to largely ignore their plight (Blackstock, 2019).

These experiences together suggest to me that an imposition of the definition of social conditions by a ruling state or through professional imperialism masks structural contributors and directs attention away from the state, leaving communities believing they are responsible for their misfortunes (Collier, 2009). Without developing a critical approach to context, social workers become complicit in such obfuscation.

## **Contextualization as creating space for local knowledge(s)**

Osei-Hwedi (1993) was one of the first African scholars to resist the imposition of imported, dominant theories and practices and to instead suggest the centering of local knowledges. It was through the attention progressive social workers in the 1980s paid to prioritizing indigenous ways of knowing, doing and being that I learnt about this aspect of contextualization. To develop alternative, liberating practice during a time of extreme state repression, we (*“Concerned Social Workers”*) lifted out natural helping strategies (Patel, 1987) and the ways in which these could be supported, collaborating with community-based, civic organizations. For example, we offered customized support to ex-detainees (recognizing detainees’ need for once-off supports and general lack of familiarity with dominant therapeutic interventions). An alliance of organizations hosted “Children’s Days” which brought traumatized children together into a safe space where they could interact around their lived experiences, receive social work support, and simply have fun. For those who had relatives in detention, we created a social space and thereby also circumvented the ban against a gathering of more than three persons, by holding “Tea Parties” rather than political meetings. We offered group work interventions at holiday camps and facilitated networking in minibuses as we transported loved ones to visit (political) prisoners on Death Row. Through these activities we created the environment for people to access ways that matched their local modes of helping.

This could not occur without integrating local knowledges. In partnership with allied community-based organizations we printed children’s workbooks that addressed community traumas, published locally representative stories in place of Western fairy tales, platformed the narration of oral histories, created educational pamphlets that were accessible in many languages and reading levels, and theorized community experiences at conferences and in publications (for example, regarding the experiences of children (Patel and Schmid, 1989)). Another area of knowledge that was developed pertained to community organizing. Knowledge was transferred and capacity built through the training of volunteers and social workers, especially through train-the-trainer programs. Involvement in these activities showed me how to decenter Western perspectives and instead source and platform local knowledges in an accessible and contextualized manner.

I also witnessed how initial knowledge building led to further knowledge generation. For example, Patel captured the responses of civil society to develop a model of critical social work for South Africa (Patel, 1987) and used these to shape the 1997 White Paper which formalized developmental social welfare as national policy (Patel, 2016). This knowledge development was part of the extensive critical thinking and theorizing that occurred in the political movement (Vale and Marè, 2020) that also included issues such as non-racialism (Everatt, 2009), the triple oppression of Black women (Beall

et al., 1989), and psycho-social impacts of low intensity political conflict and trauma. I foreground this knowledge generation, not only to affirm this history and to underline the value of contextualized knowledge, but to challenge the global North's positioning of itself as the source of social work knowledge and to challenge professional imperialism, ethnocentricity and assumptions of universalism that largely ignore our knowledge/s (Sewpaul, 2016). (I note the tension here between my White privilege and being a person from the South).

Another step towards learning about the value of local knowledge/s was in Toronto, where arriving in 1996, I worked in child protection, first as a frontline worker and then for a decade as a Family Group Conferencing coordinator. Through my South African experience of questioning dominant practice, I realized that Anglophone child protection systems were ineffective and broken, disproportionately acting against racialized and Indigenous children and their families. Family Group Conferencing (FGC) offered an alternative that emphasized the collective voice and wisdom of family networks (Fox, 2018), centering the family's cultural, socio-economic, religious, and ethnic contexts and recognizing family members as experts of their own situations. While my FGC experience highlighted the ways in which structural power perpetuates systems of dominance and the immense challenges inherent in resisting such systems, FGC deepened my appreciation of context and its relationship to local knowledge: In this approach, valuing the family circle's expertise around the issues confronting them was vital to finding a meaningful, sustainable way forward.

More recently living in western Canada where the presence of Indigenous persons is strongly asserted, I have been learning about the importance of other ways of knowing, doing and being. Calls coming from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and Indigenous scholars (Choate et al., 2020) as well as possibilities for exploring such topics at my university have alerted me to the ways in which Western knowledge might be decentered in the classroom so that students can relate to the curriculum and know how to connect appropriately to local communities.

It also became apparent to me, however, that acknowledging local practices and knowledges cannot be done uncritically. As such, my doctoral research (which focused on child welfare discourses in South Africa), suggested that contextualization means understanding both emancipatory and oppressive aspects of local culture. For example, South African village women communicated that cultural practices were sometimes used to silence them, ignore abuse, and maintain patriarchal power. Local helping strategies as well as local conceptualizations of social conditions have therefore to be understood in their complexity and interpreted in terms of the local exercise of power (Sewpaul, Kreitzer and Raniga, 2021). Recently, the height of the Black Lives Matter movement reminded me (and our institution) that racialized and immigrant groups' lived realities are generally marginalized. And from my perspective, perhaps relegated to a less important position than Indigenous experience in this region. How and why this is so here needs to be deconstructed and signals the importance of understanding emancipatory and inhibitory aspects of context for critical social work practice.

As noted, critical social work identifies that power operates through the creation and curation of knowledge. Contextualized social work amplifies this concern, suggesting that

social workers should ensure the foregrounding of local knowledges and ways of being and doing while simultaneously interrogating context for the ways in which empowerment or oppression occurs. Activating local knowledge is thus complicated.

## Contextualized social work as recognizing social work power

A fourth area that has consolidated for me is that the expert power social workers carry must be understood in context. This includes how expert power is understood and exercised. Resistance similarly takes place within the environment of the local.

My anti-apartheid engagement along with Marxist theorizing had me conceptualize power as structural and binary. Therefore, my understanding of professional power initially was framed as social workers perpetuating apartheid practices, for example, through maintaining and sometimes enforcing segregated practice or through their silence regarding apartheid injustice (Sacco and Hoffman, 2004). Later, when I worked in Canadian child protection, I problematized social work power as one of imposed expertise, still adhering to the notion of unidirectional power. And then, as I began my doctorate in 2004—which through a history of the present explored governmentality in South African child welfare discourses—I adopted a Foucauldian notion of power as fluid (Rabinow, 1984), and recognized the diffuse ways in which discipline is wielded (Collier, 2009). In reviewing not just the child protection role where social work power is largely explicit, I started seeing professional power as associated with social work's middle-class, patriarchal and gender-normative worldviews, decision-making ambit, and access to resources in the social work encounter (Chapman and Withers, 2019; Turton and Van Breda, 2019). I also noticed that expert power is not only exercised through individual practice, education and research but is related to international social work which imposes agendas on the local (Schmid, 2010). For example, I met a non-South African social worker who, despite the identified lack of a technological network was promoting the establishment of a South African child protection registry; and I observed that international aid organizations prioritized funding child trafficking initiatives at a time when the impact of HIV and AIDs was in the foreground locally. Such exposures conveyed to me the importance of identifying the unique flow of power and governmentality in each context.

This was important because although expert power is always present, it might be resisted. Such resistance and possible mitigation of expert power is context dependent. For example, resistance both to expert power as well as state power under apartheid was through, as alluded to earlier, strategic power sharing as well as coalitions and collaborations. With the intensification of the apartheid state's repression, social workers informed by a social justice and human rights ethic recognized that we had to actively resist and oppose oppression and (state) wrongdoing (Patel, 1987). We formalized ourselves into *Concerned Social Workers*, allowing us, as part of the national anti-apartheid coalition, to speak out publicly and to resist apartheid through a series of legal and extralegal activities (Sacco and Schmid, 2015; Schmid and Sacco, 2012). In being responsive to the political context, we used our professional voice (which offered some safety) to identify the ways in which apartheid policies and practices resulted in psychological and social

harms to families and specifically, children. We held conferences, distributed press releases, and contributed to policy development around these issues. We saw ourselves as claiming back power from the state/structural power (Pease, 2002). It was only through collective action that an organization I was employed in could decline state subsidies so that our work was not controlled, *inter alia*, around the racial designation of those accepted into the program; or that in another agency, we could deploy social workers to various communities in defiance of race-based service. In other contexts, such resistance, for example, regarding neoliberal, technocratic approaches, might be seen as operating through the relational (Fenton, 2019), though creating meaningful relationships with communities as encapsulated in notions of “ubuntu” in the South African context and “all my relations” in the Canadian Indigenous context has general relevance to contextualized social work. Therefore, making social work applicable to the local context requires the addressing of expert power. Resistance should be informed by a recognition of the diffuse ways in which power operates and is strengthened through collaborative and relational processes and solidarity.

### **My learning over 40 years of contextualizing social work**

Critical social work offers me a framework through which to apply my social justice values and to engage in social work education and practice in a way that promotes anti-oppressive practice. I have though felt that critical social work has not foregrounded context adequately and realized that I have been grappling with context and its meaning since beginning in social work. My professional identity was firmly shaped by my South African social work experiences (Schmid and Sacco, 2012) which also have laid the foundation of a contextualized view of practice and education I carry. Being exposed to a range of social work settings and having worked in diverse national and international contexts has been an ongoing process of conscientization and deepened my understanding of contextualized practice.

A recent review of the literature on alternatives to mainstream social work emphasized the need for addressing context for effective, meaningful social work, noting that social work practice emerging from Anglophone, Western roots is not universal or neutral; social work practice cannot and should not simply be imposed on other contexts; and local conditions as well as i/Indigenous practices must be understood and honored (Schmid et al., 2020). Hence, being critically responsive to context is fundamental to meaningful social work in its interruption of professional imperialism, colonization, and associated harms. These principles emerge also when I reflect on my own journey regarding a developing understanding of contextualized social work and its value. In pulling out seminal events, my understanding of what contextualized social work is has coalesced around four central ideas. First, social workers need to understand how race, ethnicity and culture are experienced in the local environment. Second, social workers need to pay attention to how social conditions are articulated locally, and what these interpretations might mean for appropriate intervention. Supporting local knowledge generation and curation constitutes a third area. Finally, social workers need to understand their expert power and the impact this will have on engaging with individuals and communities. The

social worker in each of these four areas is attending to power and the way in which it is being exercised at the point of the local and uncovering narratives that are created to obscure enactment of power. Contextualized social work creates the space for understanding how power is exercised at the local level and learning how to interrupt oppressive forms of governmentality. Contextualization is thus a multi-level, nuanced and critical endeavor that aims to promote social justice through attention to the voice and ways of knowing, doing and being on the local level.

I am aware that being able to effectively offer contextualized practice, research and education is a lifelong journey—one that indeed does not end. This includes a responsibility to counter the resistance of our profession to attend critically to context and to challenge our ongoing attachment to our expert power and positions of privilege (Chapman and Withers, 2019).

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