

Contextual– transformational social work in superdiverse contexts: An evaluative perspective by clients and social workers

Bea Van Robaeys

Department of Social Work, Karel de Grote University College,
Antwerp, Belgium

Peter Raeymaeckers

Faculty of Social Science, Department of Sociology,
OASeS—University of Antwerp, Antwerp Belgium

Hans van Ewijk

University of Humanistic Studies, Utrecht, The Netherlands

Abstract

In this article, we uncover the perspectives of the stakeholders of a particular social work organization regarding outcomes and working principles in a contextual–transformational practice with vulnerable people in superdiverse contexts. Our study demonstrates how the main tasks of social workers in a contextual–transformational vision of social work, namely, improving the self-reliance of people and the conditions for societal participation and social cohesion, can be combined. By adopting a practice-oriented approach to evaluation, we succeeded in expressing the type of evidence that shows the outcomes of a contextualized transformational social work practice engaged with expanding the freedoms and agency of clients. Clients and social workers emphasize the following outcomes: a sense of belonging, increased practical competences, and feelings of confidence and empowerment. To achieve these outcomes, the social workers combine different practice principles. The principle of installing an “open house” in a divers sensitive and complex way is in the perspective of clients and social workers utterly effective. In superdiverse contexts and communities, social work practices must be recognizable for their clients and emit respect for cultural differences.

Corresponding author:

Bea Van Robaey, Karel de Grote-Hogeschool Antwerpen, Brusselstraat 23, Antwerpen 2018, Belgium.

Email: bea.vanrobaeys@kdg.be

The investment in effective relationship building with clients shows also to be crucial. Finally, juridical, informational, and practical support is essential for helping clients to acquire their (social) rights. Social workers' crucial competence here in doing a "good" job, is their capacity to "set the problem," "provide information", and to look for improvement in the specific context.

Keywords

Contextual–transformative practice, practice research, cultural competence, superdiversity, qualitative research

Introduction

One of the most important contemporary transformations of our societies concerns the emergent demographic complexity driven by worldwide migration. This process, which was labeled superdiversity by Vertovec (2007), refers to "movements of people reflecting more ethnicities, languages and countries of origin" and to "a multiplication of significant variables that affect where, how and with whom people live" (Vertovec, 2007: 1025).

Superdiversity induces higher rates of social vulnerability and, consequently, challenges social work practitioners (Blommaert, 2013; Boccagni, 2015; Boccagni and Righard, 2015; Vertovec, 2006). Social workers face many complexities and dilemmas that arise from the vulnerability of clients and cannot be easily solved. van Ewijk (2010a) therefore argues that in the context of the continual transformation of societies and communities, social work should redirect itself toward "contextual–transformational social work." It should focus on "changing situations, improving contexts, and strengthening relationships" (van Ewijk, 2010a: 70). The main tasks of social workers include the following: (1) improving self-reliance, (2) improving conditions for societal participation, and (3) improving social cohesion.

An important question is how contextual–transformational social work with vulnerable people in superdiverse contexts is constructed in the everyday social work practice. In this article, we uncover the perspectives of the stakeholders of a particular social work organization regarding outcomes and working principles in a contextual–transformative practice with vulnerable people in superdiverse contexts.

We conducted our research in a small generalist service organization, "De Sloep," which is situated in a deprived neighborhood in Ghent, Belgium, and provides services to clients with a migratory background who are confronted with "wicked problems." Following O'Toole (1997), we define these challenges as problems on different life domains that cannot be handled by dividing them up into simple pieces in near isolation from each other.

In the first section of the article, we describe the contextual–transformational perspective on social work. Next, we elaborate the value of a practice-oriented

perspective to the evaluation of social work organizations. The second section outlines the methodology and introduces “De Sloep,” the social work organization within which we conducted our study. We then describe the evaluative perspective of clients and social workers of “De Sloep.” We first elaborate the experiences and perceptions of the outcomes of the practice of “De Sloep” by clients and social workers. Next, we continue with the perspective of the social workers concerning the working principles they use in practice to support their superdiverse, vulnerable clientele. In the concluding section of the article, we reflect on the value of a contextual–transformative approach to social work in superdiverse societies.

Social work: A contextual–transformative practice

Active citizenship and contextual–transformative social work

The starting point of van Ewijk is the ever-growing societal and social complexity of our welfare societies (van Ewijk, 2010b: 22). This complexification of society is due to different processes of change: globalization, increasing mobility and migration, individualization, secularization, and neoliberalism (van Ewijk, 2010a). This social complexity challenges people more and more to find their life path in an open and complex society. van Ewijk argues that, social competences and social capital are essential factors in finding a position in society (van Ewijk, 2010b: 25). He argues that “active citizenship” can be seen as a leading idea and a common ground for a value-shared framework for social and democratic politics. Active citizenship implies a dialectic relationship between the principles of self-responsibility, human and social rights, and social responsibility (van Ewijk, 2010a).

For social work, the concept of active citizenship means that social work starts from the assumption that citizens are responsible for coping their own lives and collective life, based on a system of rights and duties. However, some citizens need some professional support for participating and making their rights effective, due to their vulnerable positions or lack of personal capacity to answer all the demands and claims of active citizenship. In this context, the main task for social work is to support the socially vulnerable members of society to improve their place in society, to empower them, and to provide them with a positive life perspective.

An important replenishment for capturing a “just” meaning of active citizenship is offered by Otto et al. (2009). They argue that social work is a social justice profession and that social professionals should not work to change “the actual being and doings of its clients but rather to expand the scopes and scales of their ‘substantive freedoms’” (Sen, 2001). Social work should widen “the set of possible actions and states its clients are genuinely free to do and achieve in pursuit of whatever goals and values they have reason to value” (Otto et al., 2009: 247). In other words, “the aim of professional action is to indicate new and more extensive options for conduct leading to broader participation and prospects, in short, to establish or re-establish autonomy in leading their own lives” (Dewe and Otto, 2002 in Gredig and March, 2010: 75).

Understood in these terms, the job of social workers is a complex venture. The systems (persons, communities, societies) that social workers face in their daily work are dynamic, nonlinear, complex, and sometimes even chaotic (Sanger and Giddings, 2012). Social workers address some of the most complex systems imaginable, and in their interventions, there is no simple and direct relation between causes and results because in all cases, clients have the capacity to think, “which means that they can alter their behavior on the basis of their interpretations and understanding” (Biesta, 2010: 497). Schwandt (2005: 99) describes the difficulties for professionals in these complex contexts: “We are always on ‘rough ground’, where values, personalities, evidence, information, feelings, sensitivities, emotions, affect, ambiguities, contradictions, inconsistencies, and so forth are simultaneously in play as we try to do the right thing and do it well” (Schwandt, 2005: 99).

Superdiversity seems to further complicate the circumstances and the challenges of professional social work because of the extreme variety of unknown contexts and complexities resulting from underlying concurrent processes of societal differentiation. At the same time, the concept of superdiversity opens new possibilities for understanding in its ability to “describe the tasks ahead in complex ways, as ‘the outcome of a way of looking at the world’” (Eriksen, 2007).

Professional knowledge and the value of practice-oriented evaluation research

We understand practice as “a particular kind of human engagement that involves one’s dealings with or interactions with others that unfold in view of some particular understanding of substantive rationality appropriate to the practice in question” (Schwandt, 2005: 98). Substantive rationality means that outcomes are evaluated in terms of human objectives that cannot be reduced to effectiveness, efficiency, or goal attainment. It also implies that practitioners should have a good perspective on what goods their practice aims to realize and what it means to be a good practitioner. Being able to “wisely judge” is of particular importance. It is the “ability to discern the salient particulars of a situation and to understand what general knowledge, principles, and values are involved in deciding what to do on a particular occasion” (Schwandt, 2005: 98). In similar terms, Payne (2009: 81) speaks of the social professional as a wise person who can mediate and negotiate different forms of knowledge. Indeed, professional knowledge is characterized by hybridity because it combines different types of knowledge (Gredig and March, 2010) and different layers of knowledge: it includes explicit knowledge, as well as tacit knowledge or situated knowledge (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995; Polanyi, 1966).

Schwandt (2001, 2005) conceptualizes a practice-oriented approach to evaluation as follows. It starts from the premise that at the heart of the practical action of a professional is an imperative to evaluate. This imperative is understood to be a “deliberative conversation about value, about the appropriateness and aptness of goals and means” (Forester in Schwandt, 2005: 103). He further

argues that a practice-oriented approach to evaluation is at once philosophical, contextual, pragmatic, and transformative. It is philosophical because it puts questions about “good” social work and “good” professionals at its center. It examines what can be and should be. It is contextual because it focuses on how professionals act here and now and how values and norms are put into action. It is pragmatic because it enquires into actions that can change and improve practice. Finally, it is transformative because it helps define new self-understanding and new identities (Schwandt, 2005: 104).

Methodology

Our practice-oriented approach to evaluation was part of an ethnographic study aiming to investigate the “knowledge-in-action” (Schön, 1983: 54) of social workers of “De Sloep” concerning the relationship among poverty, superdiversity, and professional social work. Our starting point is that practice is not an object but “an event (or series of many events) that is always developing, unfolding, and being accomplished” (Schwandt, 2005: 100). Thus, the activity dependence of knowledge-in-action calls for a methodology that allows the study of practice in process. The long-term commitment of the ethnographic method proved to be a prospering context for the evaluative results of the research on which this article focuses. The ethnographic method combines data gathered via different research strategies (participation, observation, interviews, focus groups) “to create a person-in-environment representation of the subjects” (Floersch et al., 2014: 3).

For the social workers involved, the principal aim of participating in the research was to learn about their own practice. They wanted to understand better “what they know in practice.” The role of the researcher–evaluator is mainly “to help practitioners understand the kind of evaluative decisions they face and enhance their ability to deliberate well” (Schwandt, 2005: 99). It is a pedagogical approach, “a process of teaching and learning about the deliberation of value, one that is encouraging and facilitative of critical reflection and self-transformation in conversation with others” (Schwandt, 2005: 103).

We followed the social workers of “De Sloep” throughout an entire year (December 2012–December 2013). In the first phase, we observed different practice events (team meetings, group work, and individual counselling) and we engaged in different conversations about the aims of the research. In interviews with each of the seven social workers of “De Sloep” and one collective dialogue during a team meeting, we co-constructed the different aims and research questions of our collaborative research. In the second phase, we used a variety of methods to “access the experiences” (Fook, 2002), as well as the knowledge-in-action residing in these experiences. We observed client meetings (10) and team meetings (10); we conducted a focus group with clients, and we held several reflective interviews with five of the seven professional social workers (15 in total). During these consecutive reflective interviews, we discussed one of their cases, thereby exploring their oral narratives concerning specific cases across the period of one year. This allowed us

to follow developments in the client cases, as well as in the evaluative reflections of the social workers with regard to these cases and their professional interventions. The sampling of the clients is an example of quota sampling (Blackstone, 2013). We identified different subgroups in advance according to the variation in needs and the kind of activities wherein clients participated (individual counseling, group-work, learning activities). For each subgroup we included persons, but on the basis of convenience. All participants have been asked for consent to use data from their interviews. In the third phase, we concentrated on the analysis of our ethnographic data. We used thematic analysis to interpret the materials collected. Thematic analysis “involves analysing the material for recurrent patterns that emerge and that broadly fit the experiences being analysed” (Fook, 2002: 90). Data transcripts were discussed with practitioners, and these discussions subsequently became data for further dialogical examination of practice. The field-work ended with interviews with each of the social workers about their reflections concerning the evolution and changes within the last year and concerning the learning outcomes of the evaluation process. The main author of this article has remained in contact with the team at “De Sloep.” They have been informed about the publication of the research, and the dialogue concerning the evolving outcomes of the project continues. The management and staff of “De Sloep” agreed with openness about the name of the organization and the city where the organization operates. No names of persons are mentioned.

Picturing “De Sloep”

Founded in 1996, “De Sloep” is a nonprofit, independent, and pluralistic social work organization that adopts a preventive perspective in working with issues concerning family and parenting. The organization combines different functions: as a Consultation Office for Child and Family, it provides preventive follow-up services relating to the health and development of children aged 0–3 years. As a Prenatal Support Service, it provides advice and support on practical, health, and psychological issues during pregnancy.

The target group consists of disadvantaged families with children aged 0–6 years, as well as families who are expecting children. The organization operates in a disadvantaged neighborhood of Ghent that is characterized by a large proportion of families in poverty and immigrant families. The client population of “De Sloep” reflects the superdiverse nature of various contemporary European cities. For example, the registration files of the clients who visited “De Sloep” in 2012 reveal that these clients had originated from 34 countries, with large groups from Turkey (19.5%), Bulgaria (14.3%), Albania or Kosovo (11.7%), Slovakia (11%), and Ghana (6.6%). Smaller groups had roots in Morocco, Jordan, Syria, Chechnya, Afghanistan, Algeria, Angola, Bosnia, Burundi, Ecuador, Ethiopia, Gambia, India, Iraq, Russia, Senegal, and other countries from around the world. The complexity of the cultural and ethnic diversity of the client population

is further increased by differences in legal status, gender, age, education, and housing conditions.

The questions of clients reflecting their problems and needs are also very heterogeneous. The range of questions stretches from “no residence permit,” over “no house,” “financial difficulties,” “hungry” to “bad marriage,” “isolation after divorce,” “how to handle my toddler,” “no access to Dutch lessons,” “how to expand my network.” In 2014, for example, the social workers of De Sloep registered 133 questions concerning upbringing, next to questions concerning health (390), pregnancy (92), education (241), childcare (267), housing (427), material assistance (389), payment problems (441), residence documents (165), family (256), child benefits (316), work (349), training (45), other (356). The diversity of the questions of clients raises many issues relating to settlement and integration, in addition to the many other welfare-related questions. In 2015, 10 professionals and 40 volunteers worked together to provide support to 1250 families.

The key principles of the organization, mentioned in the mission statement of the organization, are as follows: (1) a focus on the neighborhood, (2) an explicit choice for approachability, (3) engagement in the delivery of “integrated services,” (3) a search for the balance between professionalized and socialized care and aid, (4) investment in current knowledge and permanent innovation, and (5) the fight against poverty (particularly child poverty). “De Sloep” is alert for ongoing changes in their neighborhood and its communities. They invest in a continuing search for adapting to the realities of mobile populations, and the organization is also constantly moving and changing. It is in the combination of these principles and the continuing focus on change that we present “De Sloep” as a case reflecting a contextual–transformational perspective on social work.

The general aim of the organization “De Sloep” is, in the words of the social workers, “supporting vulnerable families in their social functioning.” Families have access to support and advice on demand, based on any question or any story. They are supported through individual and family counselling, group meetings, and practical support. The social workers describe their main task as establishing links between clients and their inner selves, their environment and networks, and society as a whole. All of the activities, in all their variation, are, in their words, an answer to the following questions: “how can we help people?” How can we help people in getting rid of “whatever is in the way?” How can we help people to survive? How can we help practically? How can we support people morally? How can we assist clients in making connections with their own strengths? How can we support families in thinking about their future? How can we connect clients to the services of “De Sloep” and other organizations? Broadening the range of options for clients is seen as an important goal: “if people can choose between different options in looking for answers to their problems, well, that’s being less poor.”

The social workers of “De Sloep” see themselves as supporting clients in a generalist way: on different problems, in different identities, in different ways,

and by different means and methodologies. They choose to work with the “whole” person, the “whole” picture, in its complex characteristics. Their vision statement reads as follows: “generalist work requires vision and a fundamental choice to act on different domains. In specialist organizations, problems are often isolated, while people can’t be reduced to one category or problem.” In the words of the coordinator:

Every question can be asked here. I have been doubting the feasibility of such an approach for quite some time, but now, I think, actually, that IS the basic principle.

Another employee described the generalist approach as follows:

In practice, you can come here with your ‘whole self’. Rarely, if ever, are you referred away. For example, if you come here and you have problems with your water supply, you are divorced, you have debts and you also have a childhood trauma and your little one cries at night, well, you can come here for all of that.

Over the course of one year, the team and the principal author of this article invested in a co-constructive reflective evaluation process on the outcomes and working principles of their generalist practice.

Evaluative reflections on “outcomes” of the interventions in “De Sloep”

Blommaert (2013: 6) stated: “This is superdiversity. It is driven by three keywords: mobility, complexity and unpredictability.” This observation certainly resonates with the experiences of the social workers of “De Sloep.” A central theme in the narratives of the social workers concerns the social vulnerability of clients and how to respond professionally to this challenge. Factors associated with this vulnerability include the plurality of legal statuses for people with a migration background. The differentiation between citizens according to the residence status promotes in the eyes of the social workers social inequality and the increase of the risk of poverty. In this context, social workers struggle to find ways to cope with the unpredictability of their work, to handle the ethical tensions, to manage the complexity, and to “muddle through” (Schön, 1983).

However, through the evaluation-process, it became clear that even in this context of extreme vulnerability of clients, social work can be of great importance.

A sense of belonging

All clients reported that they feel very much at ease in “De Sloep.” Different clients (and social workers) used the words “home” and “like family” and expressed the importance of feeling connected, safe, and welcome (see also van der Graaf and Duyvendak, 2009). This sense of community and security seems especially

important for people with a migratory background, who are occupied with the task of adapting to and integrating into new contexts.

Finding a place to belong is for a significant group of clients an important outcome. One of the clients said:

One word: family. It feels like family here. You feel at home here. It's not like you're going somewhere to visit and you have to be careful about how you behave and what you say. Here, you feel really at home.

Another client expressed her feelings by saying, 'At "De Sloop", there is always tea.'

Additionally, a group of clients finds it important that participating in the activities at "De Sloop" results in a reinforcement of their personal networks. Clients reported that the different group meetings and activities were essential for adapting to the superdiverse neighborhood. For many of the newly arrived migrants, diversity is as unusual as it is for the dominant majority. In "De Sloop," clients learn to interact with diversity and to feel at ease in their superdiverse neighborhood community. In the words of one of the focus group participants:

You also learn to adjust to life in this area. At first, we thought that we would never adapt here. We were used to associating only with Turkish people. But here, we have learned to enter into dialogue with people of other cultures, to have less fear and to feel more at ease.

The social workers also recognize the importance of learning to interact with diversity. In "De Sloop," there are plenty of opportunities. The clients not only meet professionals but also volunteers and people in training. They encounter other clients of different origins during activities or in the waiting rooms. In all these interactions, clients are becoming part of the superdiverse community of "De Sloop."

Practical competencies

Next to the feelings of belonging, much appreciation was reserved for the very practical manner in which "De Sloop" creates possibilities for participation and learning for their clients. A considerable group of clients refers to the weekly group meetings for learning Dutch, the group meetings concerning parenting, and the possibilities for being active in the weekly sport moments. The clients of "De Sloop" are, at other places, often excluded from participation in these activities due to their illegal status or financial problems. In the focus groups, clients defined these skills and wisdom, learned and practiced in "De Sloop," as important outcomes:

I have learned all kinds of things concerning the education of my children, what we should do, how we should behave, and surely that we should be patient. That we can calm our children by providing toys, all these tips have helped me very well.

And certainly, the Dutch language, it is very important. If you can't speak it, you don't feel comfortable. Even if we only learn two or three new words each week, it's better than before!

Feeling confident and capable

Before, if someone asked me to come along, to the post office for example, I always had an excuse, a headache, or something. But now I feel strong because I can go to all the services and explain my problems. I have learned that at "De Sloep". Now, when I lie in my bed, I practice Dutch!

The combined effects of the different forms of support in "De Sloep" and the many possibilities for participation, practicing, and help lead, in some cases, to real success stories of empowerment. The social workers see some of their vulnerable clients transform into stronger and more autonomous people who feel more confident in and capable of making decisions concerning their own lives. This does not mean that people are not poor or excluded. However, small things have changed, and these clients feel confident in going their own way. In the words of two of the social workers:

If I think of Myriam, a Ghanaian mom who speaks only Twi and had a lot of psychological problems—her child was in placement, she was illegal. Well, now she has documents, her child lives with her, and she takes very good care of her. She searched for a crèche herself. She takes Dutch lessons—she also arranged that herself. She has grown a huge amount, and I think this is because "De Sloep" has always believed in her.

Also, an Arab woman, she was a very shy woman. She only left the house to take her children to school and bring them back home. Since I have been there for some home visits and I convinced her to come to "De Sloep", things have changed. She now comes regularly to the Dutch language and the Arab mother groups. She's flourishing now. I think it's so beautiful. It gives me such a good feeling because I've seen the whole evolution—that timid lady in her house who just sat there, and now she is a proud woman who enjoys being among others...

Evaluative reflections on "working-principles" in "De Sloep"

An "open" and "divers-sensitive" house

It's because we are working in a focused way. That is our culture: we are connecting with people and enabling real, authentic encounters, not only as social workers, but also as humans.

The social workers were outspoken: in their experience, the principle of practices at “De Sloep” contribute largely to the outcomes of their practice. Important in their ideas is to relate to the mutual, informal relationships between social workers and clients and to the existing networks among clients themselves. “De Sloep” is organized as an “open house,” and much investment goes into creating a place of belonging for their superdiverse clientele.

The social workers of “De Sloep” consider the principle of “the open house” to be extremely important. They refer, as the clients do, to the importance of feeling at home and feeling embedded in the community of “De Sloep,” as well as the help clients receive in finding practical solutions for their problems. One of the social workers explained:

R: It’s what I find so important, that warm welcome, the feeling that you’re welcome. That you get a cup of coffee, and that you sit at ease, that you feel like you’re at home.

I: Are you saying that one of the elements that actually works in “De Sloep” is this kind of welcome?

R: Yes, I think so. It is very important to give people the feeling that they are welcome. It’s very important for their feelings of self-worth. It’s an idea that I share with all of my colleagues.

The social workers of “De Sloep” embody this “open-house principle” in a tacit and continuing manner. Clients are received in a positive and cordial atmosphere, and time is taken for informal moments and contacts. An example involves an observation of an ordinary Friday. Every Friday, there is “Djuma,” a weekly afternoon meeting where people can come together, participate in a sewing workshop or practice Dutch under the guidance of committed volunteers. On those Friday afternoons, “De Sloep” is something of an anthill: everyone goes in and out, and just about everyone on the team will stop by the meeting room for a chat. Visitors are exuberantly welcomed, hugged for a moment or encouraged to speak Dutch. Another scene involves the following: for one of the clients it is a special day. Her son is home after months of placement in a foster home. He joins his mother for the first time at “De Sloep.” All of the social workers show her, verbally and/or non-verbally, their joy over the fact that her son is there and that they know what that means to her.

The social workers described in very concrete terms what they do to arouse a sense of belonging among their clients. It is about being aware of the informal sphere: the social workers say “hello” to the visiting clients, and they take a few moments to play with their children. When a mother who has participated in the group for pregnant women arrives with her newborn, everyone congratulates her and shows his or her enthusiasm about the fact that the baby has been born. When they meet clients in the street, they say hello and take time for a small chat. The social workers of “De Sloep” are convinced that this informal sphere is crucial for making people feel at home.

The social workers of “De Sloep” are also trained and supported in establishing affective relationships with their clients. One of the social workers, who supported a vulnerable family whose children were put in foster care, reflected on different occasions on the value of establishing an affective relationship with vulnerable clients, even in seemingly hopeless situations:

They were so lonely, the two of them . . . They had no connection with anyone or anything. There was just “De Sloep”. I think that in their case, that was the most important thing we could do and did do: we listened to them and we gave them information about what happened: “Your children are placed. This means this and that and that . . .” But also listening to them, acknowledging their emotions and also admitting that you, too, feel emotional, even as a professional . . . The message then is, it’s normal that you feel that way . . . It strengthens her if I can show her that. At that moment, we were connected.

The effectiveness of “the open house principle” is probably not restricted to clients in a superdiverse context. However, we think that the centrality of this principle in the perception of clients and social workers in this organization is due to the divers-sensitive way in which “the principle” is performed. Diversity is embedded within De Sloep in very practical terms. For example: the chambers of “De Sloep” are decorated with canvases picturing mothers with children. The portrayed women have different migratory and cultural backgrounds, which enhances clients’ ability to identify with them. The social workers also became accustomed to the wide variety of names of clients. For the team, it is a point of honor to pronounce all of the different names as well as possible. It is also completely normal for the organization to work with interpreters, to translate the leaflets of the organization and to integrate some basic words from foreign languages in the vocabulary of the social workers. “Google translate” is one of the most frequently used websites. In dealing with differences in language and culture, humor also plays an important role. The team makes jokes about language. A Dutch colleague says, laughing to a Turkish-speaking colleague: “I speak Turkish better than you!” Clients and social workers alike learn words by heart in the language of the other; all of this contributes to connecting with one another. Social workers also dare to ask questions that breach “otherness.” For example, clients wearing a kerchief sometimes are asked about the type of hair they have beneath.

Next to this divers sensitivity, it is also the complex way in which De Sloep is organized, that is being recognized by clients recognize and makes them feel at home. In De Sloep, different functions are combined in one building, and all types of people, speaking all types of languages, come together in a myriad of activities. It resembles “life,” and the house exudes diversity in such a manner that the social workers believe it contributes in an important way to the success of the organization:

The fact that “De Sloep” is a lot of things at once—a consultation office, a second hand shop, a place of activities . . . all in one place. This chaos is very recognizable for

people. They don't have the feeling that they are coming into a tight, neat place where they have to watch where they should sit...where everything is "white", "white people" in a "white manner", to put it very crudely. I think that this is a very important aspect, and also that children are really welcome here. They can play and mill about.

The role of legal and informational support and the art of "problem setting"

For the clients of "De Sloep," finding their way in a complex society is a daily reality due to their migratory background and/or marginalized position in Belgian society. The social workers of "De Sloep" argue that in this context, the administrative and legal knowledge of social workers is crucial in supporting clients effectively. In supporting people to acquire their rights, a large amount of legal and professional knowledge concerning the welfare landscape is necessary. In the words of one of the social workers:

First of all, you must have a very good view of the rights and obligations of a person. On what services can people rely? How do these services work? We always remain up to date with the various social services in our city. We are pre-occupied with that. We not only know the services in theory, but we also invest in getting to know the people who work in those services. And legal knowledge, it's crucial!

Additionally, informational and practical support proved to be of great importance. The social workers help clients with reading letters, contacting specialized organizations, and looking up information. The social workers of "De Sloep" describe to their clients how to travel somewhere in the city or how to enroll their children in primary school. One of their central and time-consuming activities is mediating between their clients and the cultural codes and meanings of bureaucratic practices. For example, the social workers not only regulate child benefits for their clients but also take time to explain the logistics of that system.

Crucial in this branch of activities, seems to be the ability of the social workers of De Sloep to "unravel" the complexities in the situation of the clients. They showed experience in exploring what is urgent "in this moment" and in constructing "solutions" that can improve slightly the situation. Social workers reported having learned that "the irregular" is equally present and penetrating as "the regular." According to Floersch et al. (2014: 2), "social work is the act of using practitioner perceptual capacities to gather—seeing, hearing, thinking, and feeling—the contextual data relevant to a client's situation." Schön calls this the art of "problemsetting": "problem setting is a process in which, interactively, we name the things to which we will attend and frame the context in which we will attend to them" (Schön, 1983: 40).

Discussion and Conclusion

This article explores how contextual–transformational social work with vulnerable people in superdiverse contexts is constructed in everyday practice. The concept of

contextual–transformational social work is an answer to the ambition of social work to increase social justice and to liberate people from suppression and exclusion. Instead of emphasizing macro-structural changes, contextual–transformational social work is oriented toward taking small steps to positive change in concrete practice contexts. Our study demonstrates how the main tasks of social workers in a contextual–transformational vision of social work, namely improving the self-reliance of people and the conditions for societal participation and social cohesion, are combined in superdiverse settings. The context of superdiversity further complicates the circumstances and the challenges of professional social work because of the complexities resulting from underlying concurrent processes of societal differentiation.

By creating a place of belonging and, at the same time, providing informational, legal, and practical support to vulnerable clients, the social workers of “De Sloep” expand the “scopes and scales of the substantive freedoms” (Otto et al., 2009) of clients to lead their own lives in an autonomous manner. Clients and social workers emphasize the following outcomes: a sense of belonging, increased practical competences, and feelings of confidence and empowerment. To achieve these outcomes, the social workers combine different practice principles. The principle of installing an “open house” in a divers-sensitive and complex way, is in the perspective of clients and social workers utterly effective. In superdiverse contexts and communities, social work practices must be recognizable for their clients and emit respect for cultural differences. The investment in effective relationship building with clients shows also to be crucial. Finally, juridical, informational, and practical support is essential for helping clients to acquire their (social) rights. Social workers’ crucial competence here in doing a “good” job, is their capacity to “set the problem,” provide information, and to look for improvement in the specific context.

As such, the results of our explorative research give rise to the assumption that these broad practice principles, that matter for the social workers and clients of De Sloep, are important when working toward positive change with vulnerable clients in superdiverse contexts. Our research was explorative and open in nature and in this sense, the results are tentative. Our research was limited to one case in one context and therefore further research of other cases and in different contexts is necessary before we can reach a certain generalizability and transferability of the outcomes.

The challenge for future studies on contextual–transformational social work is exploring and demonstrating the concrete points/elements for positive change in contexts of clients. Reflecting on our explorative results, we think that strengthening social capital, co-creation processes, feelings of mutual support and informational access, can be explored as potential evidence for positive change in the contexts of concrete clients. In setting up these contextual case studies, we even might be developing a research approach that creates an alternative to hard core evidence-based research, in researching complex and superdiverse contexts.

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