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Contextual-transformational social work in superdiverse contexts : an evaluative perspective by clients and social workers

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An evaluative perspective by clients and social workers

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1. Introduction

One of the most important contemporary transformations of our societies concerns the emergent demographic complexity driven by worldwide migration. Phillimore, Humphris & Khan (2015: 3) emphasize that whereas migration-driven diversity is a global and transnational phenomenon, 'new local problems that are arising as global tensions are played out at local levels, particularly in the intersection of religion/ethnicity/age and gender, and new forms of inequality, exclusion and hegemony are emerging.' This process, which was labelled superdiversity by Vertovec (2007), is one of the major contemporary processes contributing to the rapid increase in structural complexity in our societies.

Superdiversity induces higher rates of social vulnerability and, consequently, challenges social work practitioners (Vertovec, 2006; Van Robaeys & Driessens, 2011; Boccagni, 2015; Boccagni & Righard, 2015). Social workers face many complexities and dilemmas that arise from the vulnerability of clients and cannot be easily solved. Van Ewijk (2010) therefore argues that in the context of the continual transformation of societies and communities, social work should redirect itself towards '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

including the following: 1) improving self-reliance, 2) improving conditions for societal participation and 3) improving social cohesion (van Ewijk, 2010a).

An important question is how contextual-transformational social work with vulnerable people in superdiverse contexts is perceived by social workers and clients. 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 conduct our research in a small generalist service organization, 'De Sloep', which is situated in a deprived neighbourhood in Ghent, Belgium, and provides services to clients with a migratory background who are confronted with 'wicked problems' in different life domains (O'Toole, 1997). We follow Blom (2004: 24), stating that generalist practice means that social workers are affiliated with service organizations that work with all types of problems and client cases.

Few studies combine the evaluations of social workers and clients using a contextual-transformational perspective. In doing so, our aim is to contribute to the search for new methods for and approaches to social work with vulnerable people in a complex, urban and superdiverse context. Additionally, our research design presents an innovative approach on how evaluation research can be conceptualized for the study of the performance of general and complex understandings of social work. Our research reflects a practice-oriented approach to evaluation (Schwandt, 2005) that is also responsive (Stake, 1991) as it takes the concerns and issues of the stakeholders of the organization (social workers and clients) as its point of departure (Schwandt, 2001: 73).

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 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 and the added value of practice-oriented evaluation studies in this regard.

2. Social work: a contextual - transformative practice

2.1. 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; Verstraete & Van Robaeys, 2011). This social complexity challenges people more and more to find their life path in an open and complex society. Van Ewijk argues that next to poverty and low education, 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 should start from the assumption that citizens are able to cope with their own lives and collective life, but individuals, groups or communities in vulnerable positions need professional support. 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. However, the idea that social work will solve all of their problems must be abandoned (Mitendorf & van Ewijk, 2015:12). Integration into society and the local

community, citizenship, responsibility and social rights are key words (van Ewijk, 2010a: 174).

An important replenishment for capturing a 'just' meaning of active citizenship is offered by Otto, Polutta & Ziegler (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, Polutta & Ziegler, 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 & 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, non-linear, complex and sometimes even chaotic (Sanger & 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. 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).

What type of practice framework can support this contextual-transformational perspective on social work? Van Ewijk argues that an integrative, generalist approach is most suited for answering contextual problems of social work clients. A social worker must be able to act on the individual micro-level, as well as at the meso level, of informal and formal networks and on the local environment and institutions (van Ewijk, 2010b: 28). Social work is a multi-level, multi-system and multidimensional practice (Lewandowski, Bolin & GlenMaye, 2004).

2.2. 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 & March, 2010) and different layers of knowledge: it includes explicit knowledge, as well as tacit knowledge or situated knowledge (Polanyi, 1966; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995).

Generalist social work organizations often face difficulties in explaining the outcomes and value of their approach in a societal and professional context that is heavily influenced by the evidence-based paradigm. Because these organizations are not solely focused on 'solving problems' but are primarily occupied with expanding the freedoms

and agency of clients, evidence for 'success' should also be defined in these terms (Otto, Polutta & Ziegler, 2009). By adopting a practice-oriented approach to evaluation, we managed to bring out and express this type of evidence.

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 centre. 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).

In this article, we investigate the perceptions of outcomes of clients and social workers of 'De Sloep' and the views on working principles in practice by using the practice-oriented evaluation approach of Schwandt. Before presenting the evaluative knowledge of clients and social workers, we first elaborate on our methodological framework.

3. 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. 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). The general outcome of such a process is the transformation of the way of being of practitioners towards the cases at hand. This article presents a narrative account of the knowledge that was expressed during the process of deliberating value.

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. 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 fieldwork 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.

In the next section, we present the aims and the generalist approach of 'De Sloep'. We then move on to the evaluative perspective of clients and social workers on their contextual-transformative practice. How do they evaluate their practice? What outcomes are emphasized in their narratives, and what working principles do they prescribe for supporting vulnerable people in superdiverse contexts?

4. Picturing 'De Sloep'

Founded in 1996, 'De Sloep' is a non-profit, 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 neighbourhood 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 diversity of the 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 are as follows: 1) a focus on the neighbourhood, 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 neighbourhood 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 supporting vulnerable families in their social functioning. 'De Sloep' strives to be an 'open house for all parents'. 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 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' support clients in a generalist way: on different problems, in different identities, in different ways and by different means and methodologies. They do not, as specialized professionals risk doing, presuppose the problem to be found. 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. In the following section, we report on the perceived outcomes and working principles in a superdiverse context when effecting a contextual-transformational vision on social work.

5. Evaluative reflections on 'outcomes' of the interventions in 'De Sloep'

The interventions of 'De Sloep' are experienced as supportive in two different ways. First, clients valued 'a sense of belonging' that was induced by the way interventions in 'De Sloep' develop. Second, they felt supported in broadening their 'practical competences', referring to the knowledge and skills necessary for coping with everyday

life. Combined, these outcomes are attributed to feelings of confidence, capability and empowerment.

5.1. A sense of belonging

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 & 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 therefore an important outcome of the interactions of the clients with 'De Sloep'. 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 Sloep', there is always tea'.

Additionally, clients find it important that participating in the activities at 'De Sloep' results in a reinforcement of their personal networks. The superdiverse character of the organization is important in this respect. Clients reported that the different group meetings and activities were essential for adapting to the superdiverse neighbourhood. For many of the newly arrived migrants, diversity is as unusual as it is for the dominant majority. In 'De Sloep', clients learn to interact with diversity and to feel at ease in their superdiverse neighbourhood-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 Sloep', 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 Sloep'.

5.2. Practical competencies

Next to the feelings of belonging, much appreciation was reserved for the very practical manner in which 'De Sloep' creates possibilities for participation and learning for their clients. They refer 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 Sloep' are, at other places, often excluded from participation in these activities due to their illegal status or financial problems. Clients define these skills and wisdom, learned and practiced in 'De Sloep', 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!'

5.3. 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 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 the 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…'

In the next section, we examine the reflections of the social workers of 'De Sloep' concerning the working principles that they consider to be responsible for the achieved outcomes.

6. **Evaluative reflections on 'working-principles' in 'De Sloep'**

6.1. An 'open' house

The social workers were clear: in their experience, the principles of practice at 'De Sloep' that contribute largely to the outcomes of their practice relate to the mutual, informal relationships between social workers and clients, besides the relationships and networks between the clients themselves. 'De Sloep' is organized as an 'open house', and much investment goes into creating a place of belonging for their superdiverse clientele. Establishing relationships of trust is deemed a core concern for a successful practice, similar to using a strength-based perspective and being a divers-sensitive organization.

'De Sloep' is a 'present' organization, a warm and open house where people are welcomed, first of all, as humans. During office hours, daily from 9 to 17 h, people can come in without making an appointment in advance. There are no 'offices'; social workers and clients look for a place to sit together in one of the rooms of the organization. Families do frequently visit 'De Sloep' with questions concerning their problems, but not necessarily. People are also welcome if they want to participate in one of the groups, or visit for no reason, no questions asked.

The social workers of 'De Sloep' consider the principle of 'the open house' to be extremely important for bringing about the outcomes of the practice. 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's 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.

6.2. The value of affective relationship-building

'We know the people through and through, not just halfway. We don't have doubts about where they come from, what their name is, what the last point in their story was… No, we know it. 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 of 'De Sloep' are trained and supported in establishing affective relationships with their clients. That this is extremely emotionally challenging work became clear during fieldwork. One of the social workers, for example, who himself was expecting his first child with his wife, supported a young, newly arrived undocumented woman during the process of losing her baby during pregnancy. Because she was socially isolated at that time, he visited her on a daily basis in the hospital, informed her about her choices to address the situation and finally helped her arrange the funeral. He showed an extraordinary capacity to empathically support her while also standing back and observing what he could do to improve her options in moving forward with her life. Another social worker, 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.'

> 'I had to let go the idea that I was going to fix their lives, that I was going to bring some structure to their lives. I realized that our emotional connection was so important and that this connection might be the first step towards something, or just the last step. It depends. But our reasoning doesn't work in that way. We like to think: do a, do b, do c… and then they will automatically be on the highway of life. This isn't true.'

6.3. The contribution of a strength-based perspective

The team of 'De Sloep' adopts a strength perspective in assessing their clients and argues that this perspective results in empowering outcomes. One of the social workers described this aspect of the social work approach of 'De Sloep' as follows:

> 'I see it when I watch my colleagues, too. The way they treat people bears witness to a deep recognition of all the things that people are. We don't look at them solely from a problem-perspective. We see the problem, but we try to work with the strengths of people.'

The social workers argued in different cases that seeing the strengths of people and naming these strengths impacted the outcomes of the interventions.

> 'Why should we take things over? It's not necessary, she can do it herself. During the whole process, I have told her many times how strong she is. She is strong: being pregnant, doing your best to eat vegetables, trying to solve your undocumented status, looking for medical help… She did all of those things. We think that is strong. We continued telling her.'

In some cases that we followed, we could also observe the very concrete and direct manner in which this strength perspective was translated into practice. For example, to bolster the self-confidence of one of the clients, a social worker arranged informally for the client could go to a hairdresser. When asked why he arranged something like that, the social worker answered:

> 'It contributes to happiness. Because we know that small things like that actually make a big difference, although they have nothing to do with basic needs. Things like that can ensure that a person goes with courage to the food distribution the next day. She feels a little bit more proud than would otherwise be possible. It makes it easier for people to go into the streets, and thus, it helps avoid isolation. It contributes to feelings of strength and worthiness.'

6.4. The importance of divers-sensitivity

The fact that clients of 'De Sloep' feel at home is due to the divers-sensitivity of the organization. Divers-sensitivity entails being aware of and respecting 'otherness' (Lum, 2011; Van Robaeys, 2014). This respect can reside in small but meaningful affairs. For example: the chambers of 'De Sloep' are decorated with canvases picturing mothers with children. However, 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 honour to pronounce all of the different names as well as possible.

'De Sloep' seems chaotic from time to time. 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.'

Additionally, in the organization of the daily activities, diversity is one of the primary principles. It is 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. A lack of knowledge of Dutch is never used as an argument for not helping people.

In dealing with differences in language and culture, humour 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 dare to ask questions that breach 'otherness'. For example, clients wearing a kerchief sometimes are asked about the type of hair they have beneath.

6.5. *The role of informational and practical support and learning opportunities*

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. It isn't enough to merely create a place of belonging. 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.

'De Sloep' also functions as 'a place of practice'. The team develops different types of practice opportunities for speaking Dutch, for improving educational and communicative competences and for improving the self-reliance of people. Volunteers practice Dutch with clients on a weekly basis; there are possibilities to sport. There are groups for Turkish-speaking mothers, for Arabic speaking mothers, for fathers, and for women who are pregnant. The social workers involve clients in organizing feasts from time to time. Group work is important in each of these instances:

> 'Participation in these groups enhances empowerment; clients develop skills such as learning to talk to people they do not really know well. They learn to ask questions if something was not well understood.'

Strengthening people in all of these different ways, in instrumental and emotionally supportive ways, is, according to the clients and the social workers of 'De Sloep', crucial for the outcomes of the practice.

7. Discussion & Conclusion

This article explores what contextual-transformational social work with vulnerable people in superdiverse contexts looks like in practice. 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 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, Polutta & Ziegler, 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 four practice principles. The first principle is the investment in effective relationship-building with clients. The second practice-principle is the use of a strength-based perspective. Instead of focusing on personal weaknesses, problems and failures, strengths and empowerment are considered to be the 'building blocks of the solution-focused helping relationship' (Roose, Roets & Schiettecat, 2014: 4). The third practice principle valued by social workers and clients is the divers-sensitivity of the organization and the social workers. In superdiverse contexts and communities, social work practices must be recognizable for their clients and scintillate respect for cultural differences. The last working principle emphasizes that informational and practical support is essential for helping clients to acquire their (social) rights.

It is clear from the results that social work of the future needs well trained generalists. In complex, superdiverse contexts in which continual changes of persons, groups and the society as a whole are a 'constant' variable to be dealt with, the value of generalist professionals who are capable of working at once on different levels, with different systems and different dimensions in an instrumental and emotionally supportive way should not be underestimated. Further empirical research on contextual-transformational social work must explore in greater depth how combining these different practice principles heightens the quality of the outcomes of generalist social work practices. By adopting a practice-oriented approach to evaluation, we succeeded in expressing the type of evidence that shows the outcomes of a contextualized generalist social work practice engaged with expanding the freedoms and agency of clients. We believe that this approach, initiated by Schwandt (2005), is a promising avenue that deserves further exploration by the social work research community. This type of evaluation not only has the capacity to bring out professional knowledge from daily practice but also to strengthen and support social workers in the continuing process of deliberating value that is an essential part of professional social work.

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