

# Contextualisation as a Client - Centred Approach in Engagement Process

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**Abstract:** *Social work as a profession, for successful practice, necessitate interventions focussed to the context within the frame work of the realm of practice. This process of context building involves engaging the client to travel from the wider 'social world' to his narrow 'private world'. Social world refers to the larger social milieu of which he is an integral part where the client connects himself with others in culturally approved ways. Inability to satisfy the demands of the situation could develop into problems. Social worker's concern is to analyse situations that could result in better understanding and identification of the problem. Establishing clarity on the problem is the key to problem solving. "Contextualisation is a client-centred approach that visualises the client in totality, considering his outer social world and his narrow private world and the problems originating from his unsatisfied engagement that undermines his coping, with a view to improve the effectiveness of service delivery". It is a process of arriving at a problem segment from a gigantic problem tree, and from an intriguing client profile to a clearer vision of client peculiarities and situation specifics. This paper discusses the two key concepts namely Engagement and Contextualisation as integral to social work practice.*

**Keywords:** Contextualisation, Engagement, Adjustment, Relationship, Private World, Social World

## 1. Introduction

Social work is a professional service that aims at problem solving through enabling individuals, groups or communities to realize the best of their potential freeing them from obstacles to their growth. In the case of individual oriented services, the hindrances may be internal or external to the person. The practitioner works closely with client and operates, through a relationship he has carefully and deliberately built, in the interest of providing services. The challenge is to narrow down to fixing the problem in question from a whole lot of closely interrelated problems, from details to situation specifics surrounding the problem, and evoking client insight to generate preparedness.

This could be achieved only through a meaningful engagement between the client and the practitioner. "Engagement is the result of an emotional bonding involving mutuality and respect between the client and practitioner that help them move together closely in pre-designed ways towards accomplishing the goal". The following components namely bonding, closely moving, pre-designed ways and accomplishing goal, are important in any professional engagement. Bonding begins with a rapport at the outset that soon grows into a sustained emotional bond, with practitioner nurturing it into a relationship through controlled involvement and use of professional self. Moving closely indicates a progression in forward direction whereby the practitioner becomes an instrument in deciding the direction and pace of movement. Goal refers to realization of purpose. Client service focuses on removing problems of maladjustment arising out of reduced coping ability or accumulated stress. The client is enabled to address his own problems diving into manifest or latent contributors of causation, and picking the best suited from a range of alternatives open before him. This we call the attainment of goal. In this process the client assumes responsibility for his problems as well as his choice of the solution.

## 2. Literature Review

The phrase client engagement appears frequently in the practice literature of Social Work. In behavioural and mental health services it is strongly linked to improved outcomes and treatment completion (E. Flynn, et.al 2021). It is variously considered as identification of client concerns (GS Tryon, 1986), clientcentred practice as person-centred process of engagement (K D'Cruz, 2016), client engagement as mechanisms that influence change (A F Farrell et. al, 2012) etc. The level of engagement might vary from simple client practitioner relationship (A K T Tsang et. al, 2011) to a partnership relationship (J Pennel et. al, 2010) as observed in some therapeutic studies. A study on adolescents in psychotherapy suggest that client needs are important to be addressed as part of the engagement process prior to initiating attempt at behavioural change (K Bolton et. al, 2003). Client engagement and job satisfaction are positively correlated in certain studies on employee adaptation to organisational change (N L Jimmieson et. al, 2004) denoting engaged employee as a satisfied employee. These and many similar studies outline the importance of engagement, but falls short of defining it. This study explains engagement at a still higher level of context building – a journey from outer social realities to problems of inner conflict.

## 3. Initiating Engagement

Engagement begins with problem perception. Problems stem from the individual's inability to cope with situation. Problems that hugely impact the psyche can result in bodily dysfunctions. For instance, larger levels of anxiety and stress may lead to high blood pressure. In the same way many somatic problems such as disablement arising out of accident, injury etc. or chronic illnesses like Tuberculosis requiring prolonged medication resulting in loss of productive capacity can affect the psyche and is expressed through worry, restlessness, insomnia, irritability, aggression

or frustration. This dyadic interplay of somatic and psychic components is inseparable in human nature. Both combine to give way to three sets of problems – interactional, functional and adjustment problems. Interactional problems are reflected in conflicts, withdrawal, hate, rejection, jealousy etc. thereby limiting social interaction. Secondly it can lead to behavioural issues affecting social interaction resulting in maladjustment. An individual not feeling comfortable with his social environment may find himself at odd with surroundings.

In everyday life it is natural that problems may arise. By virtue of the very human nature and skills he is capable of solving problems and come out of it. The tendency to postpone problems and address it later does not by itself solve it. Rather it will only aggravate to a whole lot of deferred problems and this becomes a potentially bigger problem to grapple. Why should we postpone problems? Most often it is because we do not have a suitable solution, may be either due to our limited resources, or a perceived risk or discomfort with the solution. That apart inability to perform one's role effectively can also give rise to problems. For instance, an individual has to perform several roles from time to time depending on the changing situations. Inability to satisfactorily fulfil the demand of the role can cause strain on social relations and adversely affect favourable adjustment. Thereby the problem assumes a different dimension. Client's perception of his own problem unfolds as the process of engagement sets in.

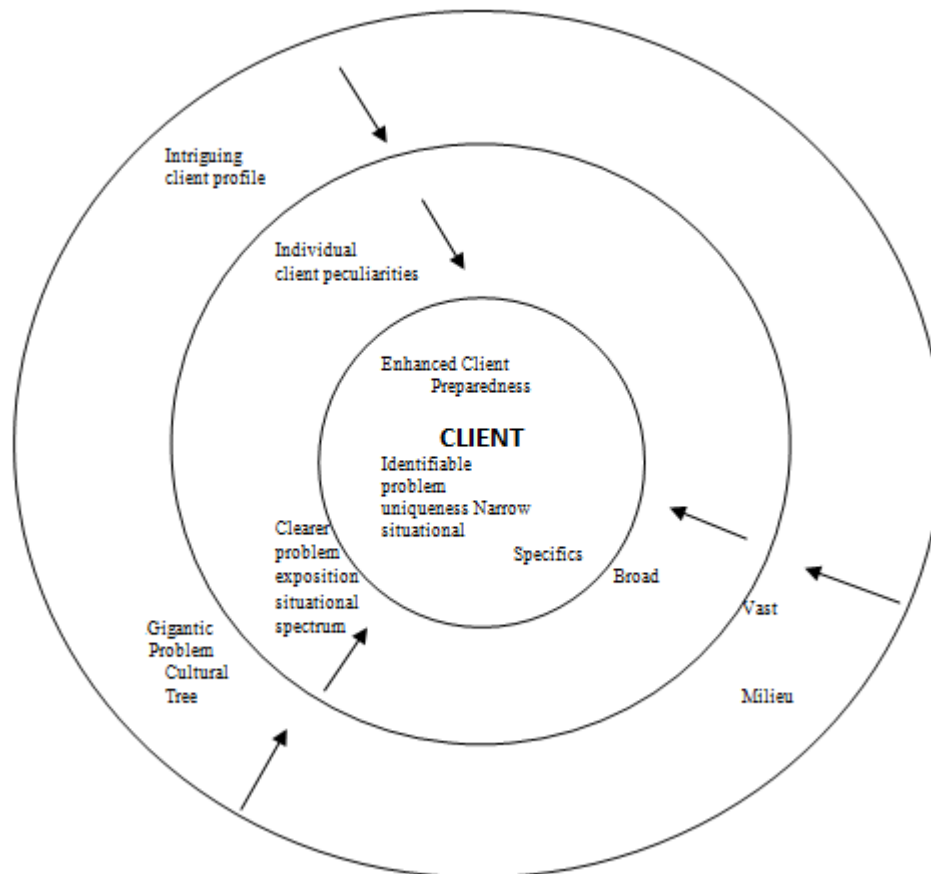
Every individual is operating within a web of social relations. Generally speaking, it is safe to presume that responses or reactions arising from others largely depend on one's own behaviour and conduct. Rather, others' actions are a consequence of our own behaviour most of the time. This accounts for roughly seventy five percent. The remaining arises out of reasons beyond our own control. Just for instance is certain of unprecedented negative behaviour that comes from others. But it is interesting to note that even this relatively fewer instances could be tackled through adjusting our own behaviour. The ability to build and maintain relationships counts how harmonious it is. Harmonious relationship refers to how good a person is at peace with surroundings. It could be conceived as a state of equilibrium, of give and take. Imbalances result in breakdown of relations leading to individual dysfunction. Whereas this pertains to the client, for the social worker, relationship is central to all social work services. The ability to build meaningful and productive relationship with the client decides quality of services. Relationship is the interface for interventions targeted at improving social functioning, particularly

services directed at individual clients. Although the entire gamut of relationships fall within the ambit of social work practice, recognition of a professional relationship with the client is essential to service delivery and conscious efforts to nurture it is vital to contextualisation.

#### **4. Contextualisation**

The social environment of which he is part determines an individual's development and realization of potential. Growth could be fostered through assisting individuals to adjust with the environment or by bringing changes in the environment in favour of the individual. The former could be conceived as resolving problems emanating from intra-personal discomfort, and the latter is a question rooted in interpersonal discomfort. Looking beyond, interpersonal discomfort is the result of the individual's transactions in the outer world. The interplay of various conflicting forces set in motions tensions that affect the psyche and distort his perceptions. It undermines his ability to maintain stable social relationships and satisfactory living. Enhancing individual's competency, clarifying thinking, and strengthening the ego, all form an essential part of addressing intra-personal dimensions of the problem. On the other hand, manipulating environment in favour of the individual, calls for structural changes in the environment as well as pattern of social relationships. Hostile atmosphere of hatred, jealousy, aggression or annoyance is replaced by one of congeniality that results in blossoming of happiness, satisfaction, self-esteem and growth. The ultimate goal is to remove the blocks to growth so that the individual attains desirable level of social functioning and enjoy satisfying relationships.

While dealing with a client, just as we get into the thick of things, we distinguish two worlds – external social world and inner private world. Individual is at the centre stage of all development processes. The environment around comprising of family, neighbourhood, social organization and the state exercise a direct influence on the individual and his social behaviour. The outer socio-cultural milieu which dictates appropriate behaviour, the gigantic problem tree that clouds the vision of the client, and the client's own personality characteristics together constitute the outer world. The inner private world comprises the one and single unique problem, its situation specifics and the client's preparedness that has been evolved out of carefully designed professional engagement between the practitioner and the client.



**Diagram 1: Stages in Contextualisation**

The practitioner sets a smooth journey for the client to travel from his social world to the private world. Engagement follows a series of delineable stages resulting in disclosure and discovery in the process of contextualisation. “Contextualisation is a client-centred approach that visualises the client in totality considering his outer social world and narrow private world and the problems originating from his unsatisfied engagement that undermines his coping, with a view to improve effectiveness of service delivery”.

“Contextualisation is the outcome of a purposeful and systematic engagement between the client and practitioner, from complex outer social world to his exclusive personal world, involving a long and gradual journey of recapitulation and rediscovery, intended to enable the practitioner visualize the inner processes that client experiences, in order to improve the effectiveness of service delivery”. Contextualisation contributes to increased awareness and activates the potential in the client to proceed towards its realization. This is the ground work for any meaningful response in the individual towards the larger goal of bringing change. Engagement results in contextualisation, while contextualisation is the very purpose of engagement.

## 5. Conclusion

Basic human needs are most often depicted as food, clothing and shelter. This apart, safety and security are also essential human needs. On top of this, justice and equality also figure in as integral and basic. Whereas equality represents opportunity and rewards, justice refers to fair consideration

free from discrimination. Maintaining equality is a precondition for ensuring justice. Hence both the above are complementary. The two together propels individuals to a desirable state of wellness. If any of these needs are deprived an individual loses satisfaction and happiness. Modern societies have established appropriate institutional arrangements to cater to the needs of citizens. Public policy and governance connect individuals in the chain of supply of the institutional services. Often individuals are incapacitated to access and avail services or resources of the institutional mechanisms and this inability affects effective service delivery. The disconnect between unidentified resources and unfulfilled needs distract an individual so as to hamper his wellbeing. Discovering the problem, ascertaining the need and identifying resources are significant. The problem may be internal to the person or external. The resource could be internal and integral part of service of the professional or something external that need to be mobilised. The need could be obscure and hard to discover. Outcome of social work interventions depend on efforts for contextualising the brings all of the above to surface and bridge the gaps.

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