Shifting From the Person-in-Environment Framework to the Individual-in-Contexts Model: Reimagining Social Work's Foundational Education and Practice Orientation

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Abstract: *Social work education and practice have maintained a dual commitment to individual change and societal reforms since the 1900s. This dual emphasis has sparked numerous intra-professional debates about the degrees to which micro- and/or macro-systemic change should be foregrounded. Such discussions also revealed the need for a unifying theoretical orientation for social work education and practice that highlighted the profession's change and reform foci. Eventually, the Person-in-Environment model became social work's guiding paradigm. While this model champions the interconnectedness between people and their environments, it narrowly focuses on social environments, often excludes natural and physical environments, and inadvertently raises power and language concerns. To address these concerns, the Individual-in-Contexts Model (ICM) is proposed, and its conceptual framework is detailed. This article concludes with a brief case study to illustrate the ICM's application to social work practice, as well as a recommendation to empirically validate the model in future research projects.*

Keywords: *Social work theory, ecological systems theory, social work education and practice, individual-in-contexts model*

Throughout its history, and to varying degrees, social work has maintained a dual focus on individual change and societal reform (Cox, 2020; Popple, 2018; Richmond, 1917/1964). This emphasis emerged from an awareness that individual suffering and societal problems exist in dynamic, often co-constitutive interrelationships. Such awareness sparked the need to develop a framework that all social workers could use to conceptualize these frequent interconnections. Over the last fifty years, this conceptualization has become increasingly important as social workers, the primary social and behavioral health providers in the U.S. (Heisler, 2018), have attempted to serve in a world affected by climate disasters, technological displacement, political polarization, and global socio-economic inequities. During this same period, social work chose an education and practice model that captured its dual commitments to people and their circumstances: the *Person-in-Environment* (PIE) framework. This article offers a brief overview of the historical precursors to social work's PIE orientation. The limitations of the PIE model are discussed next. Furthermore, this project proposes a new model to guide social work education and practice, *The Individual-in-Contexts Model* (ICM). Finally, this article concludes with a brief case study highlighting the ICM's application to social work practice, as well as a recommendation to empirically validate the ICM in future projects.

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A Brief History of Social Work's PIE Orientation

The social work profession emerged during the American progressive era, roughly between 1898 and 1929 (Popple, 2018). According to Popple (2018), "One of the defining characteristics of the progressive era was the idea that more efficient, effective, and scientific means must be developed to manage what was perceived to be a more chaotic society" (p. 168). This societal ethos sparked community and national efforts to establish and maintain social order. Social work's primary contribution to this effort was its focus on ameliorating poverty. The early creation of settlement houses and persistent attempts to reform public policy highlighted social work's commitment to societal-level change. Concurrently, other change agents promoted a formal approach to working with individuals and families, known as *social case work* (Richmond, 1917/1964). This approach involved gathering information about people and developing an action plan to address their individual-level concerns. These early models for social work practice established the macro- and micro- duality as the distinguishing feature for the profession. This duality also sparked decades-long debates about which practice modality ought to be emphasized and to what degrees (Harty, 2024; Payne, 2020). However, by the mid-twentieth century, social work scholars began championing integrative theories and practice models.

The Great Society era of the mid-1960s catalyzed research and social welfare policies to address the multi-factorial problems of poverty and social inequality (Popple, 2018). This emphasis on problem complexity influenced social work's conceptual and practice orientations. Norton (2012) noted the significance of Hollis's (1966) psychosocial approach, with its focus on psychological and social factors. Furthermore, Germain's (1973) ecological perspective emphasized individual-environment interactions. These framings later evolved into a broad perspective known as the PIE model (Dybicz, 2015). Social work has considered this model central to professional education and practice since the late 1970s and early 1980s.

Critiques of Social Work's PIE Orientation

While the PIE model has undoubtedly provided social work with a unifying theoretical framework and practice orientation that centers the complexities of human experience, important critiques have been leveraged. Some scholars have argued that the model is too broad to helpfully guide social work practice (Green & McDermott, 2010; Probst, 2013). Norton (2012) asserted that social work commonly privileges social environmental forces and frequently excludes natural world considerations in its conceptualization and application of PIE. Furthermore, Akesson et al. (2017) contended that social work's use of the term *environment* to describe primarily social milieu typically neglects the importance of physical places and the related concepts of *place attachment*, *place identities*, and *territoriality*. These concepts highlight the significant connections between physical spaces, an individual's construction of psychospiritual well-being, a community's sense of belonging, and a society's shared legacy of cultural stability.

Additionally, Zapf (2010) offered a multi-pronged critique of PIE. The author first noted that social work's social science bias, its historical over-reliance on psychology,

sociology, and political science knowledge bases, facilitated a social environment focus at the expense of the physical ecology. He also argued that the erasure of the natural environment from mainstream social work thinking about PIE poses ethical concerns. The author then questioned social work's ability to engage and collaborate effectively and responsibly with aboriginal, indigenous, native, and First Nation peoples whose lives are intimately intertwined with their natural surroundings. He finally underscored PIE power and language concerns. Zapf (2010) contended that the PIE model has fundamental flaws because it implies a separation between the person and the environment, rather than recognizing their interconnectedness. The phrase itself suggests a hierarchical relationship, where the person is dominant, and the environment is secondary.

More recently, the interconnectedness of people and their environments was bolstered by neuroscience research. Pierce and Black (2023) observed that advancements in neuroscience suggest that the nervous system itself is deeply intertwined with environmental influences. The theory of neurosocial interdependence (NSI) addresses the gap between social work theory and neuroscience research, creating a more biologically informed approach. The authors cite several examples of neuroscience and psychosocial intersections, such as loud noises prompting dissociative states, and quiet natural settings improving mood experiences. This perspective, in concert with Akesson et al. (2017) and Zapf's (2010) PIE critiques, supports the assertion that social work needs a new education theory and practice model that more concretely explicates complex interactions among psychological, social, cultural, natural world, and temporal experiences.

The Evolution of the Individual-in-Contexts Model

Fields of study outside of social work, like health sciences education and feminist psychology, have recognized that human beings shape and are shaped by their multiple surroundings. Batt et al. (2021) applied Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory to healthcare systems. Bronfenbrenner's (1994) model asserts that individual experiences affect and are affected by interactions among people and five nested systems, wholes comprised of interrelated parts: *micro-* (close relationships), *meso-* (interactions among close relationships), *exo-* (direct and indirect community forces), *macro-* (political, social, and cultural dynamics), and *chrono-* (historical and developmental influences) *systems*. Building on Bronfenbrenner's model, Ballou et al. (2002) developed a feminist ecological systems theory. This framework includes an examination of planetary (the natural environment) factors and intersectional power dynamics that affect all human experiences. While these models expand the Person-in-Environment model by elucidating the multiple systems people influence and are influenced by, these frameworks primarily focus on healthcare delivery, human development, or psychosocial health.

Although the multi-systemic features of ecological systems theories concretely offer social work a more complex framework to conceptualize problems and solutions, limitations remain. One limitation is the language used to describe theoretical concepts. The prefixes micro-, meso-, exo-, macro-, and chrono- obscure the meaning of these constructs and their usefulness to social work practice. Another shortcoming of these models is the fact that these frameworks, despite being visually depicted as nested and

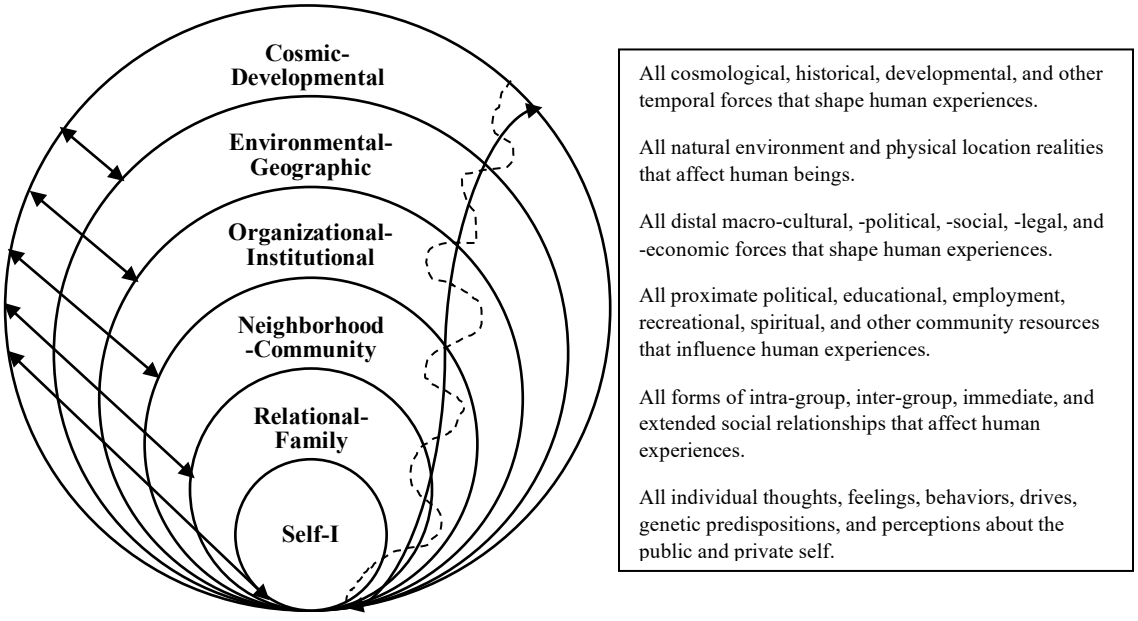
interactive, seem to be discrete monolithic concepts. For example, the term *macro-system* encompasses myriad social, cultural, political, and economic forces, yet the term minimizes that complexity with its single label.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, these models appear to reinforce the idea of *environments* as the primary way to describe the situations in which people's lived experiences unfold. Schalock et al. (2020) argued for a shift from the *Person-in-Environment* fit to a more inclusive *context paradigm* that examines the interconnected conditions influencing a phenomenon. Shogren et al. (2014) defined *context* as "a concept that integrates the totality of circumstances that comprise the milieu of human life and human functioning" (p. 110). This shift from environment (external social spaces) to contexts (spaces that range in size and scope from the intra-molecular to the ever-expanding cosmic) enhances the central tenets of social work education and practice (Hightower & Grant, 2024). It highlights a vaster array of spaces in which humanity's lived experiences, unique, shared, positive, neutral, and/or negative, originate and evolve. Such a theoretical shift empowers social workers to comprehensively re-imagine client system assessment and intervention.

The Individual-in-Contexts Model

The proposed model, the *Individual-in-Contexts Model* (ICM), draws conceptual inspiration from the previously discussed theories and intends to offer social workers a framework that better reflects their conceptual needs and practice realities (Hightower & Grant, 2024). Figure 1 illustrates the ICM and defines its core interrelated concepts.

Figure 1. *Individual-in-Contexts Model Defined*



The ICM expands the number of Bronfenbrenner's systems to six hyphenated contexts. These constructs include: *Cosmic-Developmental*, *Environmental-Geographic*, *Organizational-Institutional*, *Neighborhood-Community*, *Relational-Family*, and *Self-I*. In the model, hyphens play a crucial symbolic and conceptual role by linking paired constructs to reflect the continuous, co-occurring, and interconnected nature of human experience across the six contextual domains. Rather than simply joining terms, the hyphens represent the dynamic, infinite, and often ambiguous space between them. Drawing from Bhattacharya (2015), this in-between space embodies concepts like *lokaloka* (simultaneity) and *nepantla* (living between binaries), and emphasize that human experiences and meaning-making are generated in movement and relation, not in isolated concepts. Hyphens, therefore, signal both unity and separation, connection and distance, allowing for a nuanced understanding of how contexts overlap, shift, and interact.

For example, in the author's social work group practice with middle-aged gay men, the ICM deepened his understanding of the group's experience with traumatic loss. The group's current experiences with typical, age-related physical changes and existential crises had to be understood in the context of their historical losses. Such losses centered around stigmatized gay male deaths in the 1980's due to HIV/AIDS when group members were coming of age in a more homophobic time period. Thus, the ICM revealed important temporal intersections that bolstered assessment accuracy and inspired bespoke narrative and political engagement interventions that better helped group members address their grief.

This type of framing is vital in social work because it supports a culturally humble, justice-oriented approach that attends to the complexities of identity, power, and multi-contextual experiences (National Association of Social Workers, 2021). Hyphens, along with visual tools like double-arrowed lines (which show mutual influence) and broken lines (which highlight intersectionality), deepen awareness of how various forces shape and are shaped by individuals within and across contexts.

Building on the general descriptions of the ICM concepts and the model's visual depictions of within (e.g., Cosmic-Developmental) and between (e.g., Cosmic-Developmental and Environmental-Geographic) contextual relationships, the next section of this article discusses each contextual concept in detail and illuminates its importance to social work education and practice.

Cosmic-Developmental Contexts

Everything that occurs and exists originates from and unfolds across particular and multiple units of time simultaneously. Such units include seconds, minutes, hours, days, years, decades, lifespans, pasts, presents, futures, and eternities. *Cosmic* refers to the largest overarching dimensions and experiences of time catalyzed by the Big Bang, like human evolution, while *developmental* describes more current temporal realities, such as age. Attending to such framing and influences has relevance to social work education and practice. According to Diller (2019), human services students and practitioners need to understand that several concepts of time exist across cultures. Some cultures, like many who reside in the U.S. and Western Europe, are clock-determined and experience time

linearly. However, other cultures, such as those who live in aboriginal, First Nation, indigenous, and native communities experience time in relation "to specific events (event-based), or as repetitive (cyclical)" (Diller, 2019, p. 99). Knowledge of such temporal differences across cultures would result in more culturally humble and accurate social work assessment and intervention. For instance, social work students and professionals often assess a client's orientation to time during diagnostic interviews. Misunderstanding a client's temporal experiences could result in an inaccurate assessment and unhelpful intervention. Moreover, a Cosmic-Developmental contextual analysis also enables social work students and practitioners to better interrogate interconnections among harmful historical legacies within and across generations, such as anti-Black, trans- and inter-generational historical traumas (Cosmic) and current rising suicide rates among Black youth (Developmental; Hampton-Anderson et al., 2021; Williams-Washington & Mills, 2018; Yates et al., 2024).

Environmental-Geographic Contexts

In interconnected ways, Cosmic-Developmental contexts affect and are affected by natural environments, local weather patterns, global climate factors, and geographic locations on Earth. These Environmental-Geographic contexts do not support human life equally. Life sustaining resources like clean air, potable water, fertile soil, and high-quality calories are not naturally, economically, or politically distributed equitably. The convergence of natural resource distribution inequality, human-made climatic harms, and economic greed disproportionately affects Black and Brown peoples living in developing nations, racially segregated communities, and/or eco-refugee camps. This fact is confirmed by data which indicates that 90% of the world's deaths by suicide occur among youth and young adults living in low- and middle-income nations: primarily located in the global south and especially vulnerable to climate disasters (World Health Organization [WHO], 2019). Moreover, Reuben et al. (2022) developed an empirical model underscoring the intersections of environmental toxin exposure, racism, neighborhood location, and poor behavioral health outcomes. Given such realities, social workers have a duty to include natural environment and geographic contexts in client system assessment, conceptualization, and intervention efforts (Akesson et al., 2017; Norton, 2012; Zapf, 2010). In doing so, the profession would be better equipped to fulfill its responsibility to address racialized eco-injustices.

Organizational-Institutional Contexts

Within and across temporal, natural, and physical contexts, humans organize their experiences. They also create institutions to codify their organizational values and beliefs. The Organizational-Institutional contexts reflect numerous human-constructed ethno-cultural, religious, legal, ethical, social, political, and economic scaffolding (Organizational) and nation-wide implementation structures (Institutional) that shape and are shaped by individual, family, group, and societal experiences and understandings. Such experiences and understandings emerge through macro-interactions with institutional forces that range, for example, from legislative mandates to religious and spiritual

indoctrination, and school socialization to media exposure. Through such interactions, people internalize values, beliefs, and expectations about themselves, other people, and the world (Joy, 2019). These beliefs often manifest in complex emotional and behavior patterns that are context- and relationship-specific. For example, to provide competent social work services to a Bangladeshi trans-female client struggling to secure asylum in the U.S., a student or professional needs to understand the client's specific contextual experiences with anti-Trans, anti-Muslim, and Bangladeshi beliefs and biases within both Bangladeshi and U.S. socio-cultural organizations and institutions. Examples include the ethno-religious violence related to an influx of Rohinga refugees and the reality that Bangladesh is geo-politically situated between two regional superpowers that support anti-Muslim policies. Moreover, the country continues to suffer the consequences of being a former British colony in terms of its historically-shaped social hierarchies. Finally, this asylum-seeking client's lived experience is likely harmed by the current anti-immigrant and anti-LGBTQ+ policies in the U.S. (Nath et al. 2024; Metcalf et al., 2024; Sultana Zakia & Harun, 2024). This multi-contextual analysis of a trans-female Bangladeshi asylum-seeker offers social work students and professionals a conceptual framework to develop culturally relevant and comprehensive assessment and intervention approaches.

Neighborhood-Community Contexts

Consistent with public health's social determinants of health paradigm (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2024), Organizational-Institutional forces influence local neighborhood (where a person's immediate living space is located) and community (the broader immediate surroundings) experiences. The primary differences between Neighborhood-Community and Organizational-Institutional contexts pertain to scale, scope, and proximity. The latter contexts operate broadly and distally across an entire society, whereas the former contexts function narrowly and proximately. While these contexts interact and mutually influence one another, Neighborhood-Community contexts more frequently and directly affect inhabitants' daily experiences. For example, town residents are more likely to notice the influences of town government, city commerce, and community resource availability because contact with such local entities occurs regularly. These contacts, or lack thereof, can shape human lived experiences. For instance, to understand the high suicide rates in Mountain West U.S. states, social work students and professionals need to understand the interactive confluence of low community-population density (an indicator of loneliness and social isolation), a dearth of social and behavioral health services, a rugged-individualistic cultural ethos, limited high-paying occupational opportunities, and easy access to firearms (Kandula et al., 2023; Pepper, 2017). Such understanding is not only crucial to social work education and practice efforts to prevent and/or reduce suicides in these communities, but this conceptual framing also extends to other challenges the profession addresses in local contexts.

Relational-Family Contexts

Human beings are social animals that require secure-enough attachments to others to survive (Bowlby, 1998). This security is predicated on an internalized sense of trust that

evolves from *good enough* early life human-to-human interactions. The classic example is an infant who cries to communicate a need and a caregiver who responds attentively. Such interactions build the psychosocial capacities to thrive. The Relational-Family contexts of the ICM emphasize the power, both the beneficial and harmful potential, of intimate human connections. In these contexts, the presence, absence, and/or quality of familial and extra-familial connections mutually influence one another (Flynn & Mathias, 2025). For instance, research has highlighted the ways parents and infants often mirror, affect and are affected by, one another's social and emotional states (Frosch et al., 2019). Moreover, the loneliness crisis in the U.S. underscores the deleterious effects, such as premature death and heightened states of depression and anxiety, related to diminished Relational-Family contexts, (Park et al., 2020). In contrast, Nath et al. (2024) found that supportive and non-judgmental connections among LGBT youth, peers, and/or family members reduced suicide risk. These examples underscore the significance of Relational-Family contexts. Such instances highlight the need for social workers to be able to situate such understandings in broader contextual interrelationships. These abilities enable nuanced and likely more effective social work assessment and intervention with a range of client systems.

Self-I Contexts

The Individual-in-Contexts Model (ICM) conceptualizes identity as a continuum that ranges from the Self to the I, representing different levels of intrapsychic and contextual influence (Hightower & Grant, 2024). The *Self* is an innate, intrapsychic presence that reflects a person's inner sense of authenticity (Schwartz, 2023). For example, the statement "I experience myself as Black and queer" expresses a core aspect of identity. At the other end of the continuum, the *I* embodies the interplay of contextual forces and an individual's bio-psycho-social-spiritual appraisal of themselves. This process is shaped by external influences, as seen when a person internalizes negative societal feedback and concludes, "Based on what I've heard from the media, classmates, and family about being Black and queer, I think I am bad." The coexistence of these dimensions aligns with Internal Family Systems (IFS) theory, which posits that an individual consists of multiple internal parts (Anderson et al., 2017). These parts, or I's, are internal entities that function independently, possessing distinct thoughts, emotions, and beliefs, while also being shaped by broader social and cultural contexts. Even as these parts reflect external influences, they coexist with the *Self*, which remains an intrinsic and stable presence. This duality highlights the complex ways individuals internalize and navigate external perceptions of their identity.

In social work practice, the ICM better illuminates a client's identity conflicts. Such conflicts often emerge because tensions exist between authentic, innate Self-contexts (who a client is intrinsically), and the I-contexts shaped by family, friend, community, and cultural influences. For example, clients who struggle to understand and reconcile positive and authentic LGBTQ+ identity contexts (Self) and anti-LGBTQI+ familial, community, religious, and political messages (I) would likely benefit from such a detailed contextual analysis of their concerns. Such an analysis would reveal how each part functions in relation to one another, as well as the possible ways the *Self* and *I* dimensions may better work together to enhance overall well-being.

Discussion and Implications

For over a century, social work's dual commitments to individual-level change and macro-systemic reforms have shaped its need to develop a unifying theoretical framework that would guide professional education and practice. While its current, and historically significant, PIE orientation provides a simple metaphor for conceptualizing client concerns, the model does not adequately offer social work students and professionals the requisite concepts to understand and address the myriad and simultaneous contexts that shape human suffering and well-being. The ICM builds upon the original PIE model and ecological systems frameworks by expanding conceptual content and illustrating intersectional power dynamics within and across contexts. Moreover, the ICM attempts to better balance real world complexity with more accessible language. In the remainder of this section, the author discusses ways the ICM could improve social work education and practice.

ICM and Social Work Education

The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) is the organization that establishes educational standards for, assesses, and accredits undergraduate and graduate social work programs in the U.S. According to CSWE's (n.d.) vision and mission statements, the organization,

> Ensure[s] a well-educated social work profession equipped to promote health, well-being, and justice for all people in a diverse society. . . [and] advance excellence and innovation in social work education and research by providing leadership, ensuring quality in teaching and learning, and strengthening the capacity of our member institutions. (paras. 2-3)

These statements are operationalized and codified in the CSWE's Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS). According to EPAS (CSWE, 2022), there are nine-competencies that all social work education programs must teach to and develop student behavior-based outcome measures for. These competencies emphasize practicing ethical professional behaviors; advancing human rights and social justice; promoting equitable and inclusive practice; and cultivating assessment, intervention, and practice evaluation skills across micro-, meso-, and macro-client systems. For example, CSWE Competency 2 requires social workers to "advance human rights and social, racial, economic, and environmental justice" (CSWE, 2022, p. 9). The ICM supports this competency by guiding students to assess client concerns across multiple hyphenated contexts, such as Environmental-Geographic and Organizational-Institutional, emphasizing how climate injustice and systemic oppression compound a client's distress. Through this lens, students learn to identify and challenge structural inequalities while crafting multi-level interventions that promote justice and client well-being.

The relevance of the Individual-in-Contexts Model (ICM) extends beyond the boundaries of academic preparation; it is equally vital to the lived realities of social work practice. As students engage with the ICM in educational settings, learning to recognize, analyze, and ethically respond to intersecting contextual influences, they simultaneously

develop the conceptual tools necessary for real-world application. The model's alignment with CSWE's competency-based framework positions it as a powerful bridge between classroom instruction and professional action. This conceptual continuity supports the cultivation of reflective practitioners who are equipped to navigate complex, multi-level human experiences with cultural humility, justice awareness, and contextual precision. The following section explores how the ICM can be practically employed to enhance social work assessment and intervention across diverse practice settings.

ICM and Social Work Practice

Assessment and intervention are central to social work practice (Cox, 2020; CSWE, 2022). Regardless of their roles, social workers gather information (assessment) and generate working hypothesizes about the meaning of that information (case conceptualization) in the contexts of client concerns and strengths. Such information gathering and conceptualization processes often frame a social worker's perspectives about the best ways to address (interventions) a client's struggles and bolster their assets. The ICM offers social workers a comprehensive framework for assessing and intervening in the multiple contexts client systems are situated simultaneously. To illustrate its application, the following fictitious case study is offered:

> Ana was referred to the school social worker after missing several weeks of school and expressing hopelessness to a teacher. A holistic assessment using the Individual-in-Contexts Model (ICM) helped the social worker understand the complexity of Ana's situation beyond conventional psychosocial evaluation.
>
> - **Cosmic-Developmental**: Ana's current emotional distress was assessed in relation to both her adolescent developmental stage and the historical trauma her family endured during the Guatemalan civil war. The social worker explored how intergenerational narratives of violence and migration shaped Ana's worldview and sense of security.
> - **Environmental-Geographic**: Ana's family lives in a densely populated urban neighborhood near a major highway, where air quality is poor and access to green spaces is limited. The social worker recognized the role of this environment in Ana's disrupted sleep and lack of physical activity, both contributors to her depressed mood.
> - **Organizational-Institutional**: Ana's undocumented status has prevented her family from accessing public behavioral health services. Fear of immigration enforcement and a lack of bilingual providers in the area further alienate them. The social worker collaborated with a local immigrant rights nonprofit to connect Ana to a pro bono therapist and legal resources for Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA).
> - **Neighborhood-Community**: Although Ana's neighborhood is high in poverty, it has a strong Guatemalan diaspora community. The social worker identified opportunities for Ana to reconnect with her cultural community through a neighborhood youth program that centers her heritage and identity.

- **Relational-Family**: Ana's father was deported two years ago, and her mother now works two jobs to support the family. Ana reported feeling both abandoned and overburdened, as she is expected to care for her younger siblings. The social worker helped Ana and her mother hold a mediated conversation about role expectations, grief, and emotional needs.
- **Self-I**: Ana struggled with internalized shame about being undocumented and feared that her depression made her weak. Through narrative therapy and journaling exercises, the social worker helped Ana begin to differentiate between her authentic Self (a resilient, caring, and intelligent young person) and the negatively influenced I (formed from social stigma and external rejection).

By using the ICM, the social worker was able to create a nuanced case formulation and a multilevel intervention plan that addressed Ana's needs across all six contexts. The interventions included trauma-informed therapy, community engagement, academic reintegration support, and systemic advocacy, fulfilling CSWE competencies related to ethical practice, justice promotion, and culturally responsive assessment.

Future Research

While the ICM addresses the conceptual and practical limitations of the PIE framework, future efforts need to investigate its validity and reliability. Researchers could investigate the distinctiveness and interactivity of the six hyphenated contexts. Such investigation is necessary to ensure that ICM constructs can be operationalized, measured, and statistically analyzed. For example, the ICM's Environmental-Geographic context could be defined and measured in terms of air pollution exposure, proximity to green spaces, and racial disparity by zip code in a project with the research question: What is the relationship between environmental risk exposure and anxiety in racially segregated urban neighborhoods? Moreover, qualitative projects that explore practitioners, students, and clients' experiences with the ICM may reveal insights about the model's applicability across diverse settings and populations. An example of an ICM-inspired qualitative research question is: How do Black and Native American communities differ in terms of their historical and intergenerational trauma and resiliency narratives? Both quantitative and qualitative analyses are critical because social workers rely on various forms of evidence to support their assessments and interventions. Furthermore, evidence-based education and practice models increase professional credibility among client systems, the public-at-large, and policymakers by demonstrating their effectiveness. Finally, statistically validated and qualitatively credible frameworks help social work students and professionals fulfill their ethical commitments to competence.

Conclusion

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, the social work profession has attempted to maintain a dual focus on individual-level change and societal reforms. This commitment has catalyzed intra-professional debates about the degrees to which either form of change ought to be emphasized by educators and practitioners. Such debates sparked decades of

theory development. Ultimately, social work education and practice embraced a Person-in-Environment orientation. While this framework has provided students and professionals with a simple metaphor for conceptualizing their work, the model has noteworthy limitations. These limitations include a lack of conceptual clarity, the exclusion of natural and physical spaces, and power and language concerns embedded in the Person-in-Environment framework. To address these limitations, the Individual-in-Contexts Model (ICM) was proposed. This model draws conceptual inspiration from ecological systems theories and intersectionality frameworks. The ICM illuminates the myriad, simultaneous, and dynamic contexts in which all human lived experiences emerge and unfold. Such illumination enables social work students and professionals to better assess, conceptualize, and address client system concerns, as well as augment their various strengths and assets. Finally, future research is needed to establish the ICM as an empirically supported social work education and practice framework.

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