

Contextual Indigeneity in Social Work (CISW): A Decolonized Approach to Practice, Education, and Social Justice

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Abstract: *This literature review examines the importance of decolonizing social work by integrating Contextual Indigeneity (CI) into the profession. It emphasizes aligning social work practices with the needs and perspectives of Indigenous communities, as recognized by global organizations such as the United Nations (UN), the International Federation of Social Work (IFSW), and the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE). Drawing on recent scholarship by Indigenous scholars and allies, it highlights the need to dismantle colonized systems and infuse culturally grounded approaches into social work education and practice. Indigenous communities hold unique strengths that support eco-social justice and reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples, Nations, and Tribes. Theoretical frameworks such as Tribal Critical Race Theory (TribalCrit), Indigenous Decolonial Feminism (IDF), Indigenous Wholistic Framework (IWF), and Indigenous Ways of Knowing provide critical insights for developing culturally sensitive and effective practices. Indigenizing curricula, research, and community programming is essential for promoting educational justice, inclusion, diversity, representation, and, where appropriate, reparations. Social workers have an ethical duty to acknowledge the historical and ongoing trauma Indigenous Peoples face while recognizing their resilience and continued existence. The Contextual Indigeneity in Social Work (CISW) model offers a pathway to embed Indigenous sovereignty into social work, transforming theory into actionable, decolonial practice.*

Keywords: *Decolonizing social work, Contextual Indigeneity in Social Work (CISW), social work education, Indigenous justice*

The Contextual Indigeneity in Social Work (CISW) framework offers a transformative, human-rights-based pathway to embed Indigenous sovereignty, self-determination, and relational accountability into the core of social work practice, education, research, and policy. Developed in response to the profession's enduring complicity in colonial systems, the CISW moves beyond theoretical critique and into operationalizing, actionable strategies, and structured allyship. Informed by critical literature on decolonial social work and Indigenous experiences, the CISW offers a structure for anti-oppressive discourse. Contextual Indigeneity refers to Indigenous peoples' inherent rights, knowledge systems, and cultural identities as place-based and to be self-determined. Here, decolonizing refers to the dismantling of oppressive systems through the intentional determination and centering of Indigenous voices in social work.

Rather than a traditional literature review, this paper conceptualizes CISW as a response to both academic discourse and anti-oppressive allyship tool gaps – integrating Tribal Critical Race Theory, Indigenous Decolonial Feminism, the Indigenous Wholism 6R's framework, and Indigenous Ways of Knowing to foster transformative, culturally responsive approaches. Effective decolonization demands more than superficial reform that pacifies settler-centrism and calls for a community-driven, bottom-up framework that

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prioritize Indigenous resilience. The CISW model is structured around four core components: 1) Cultural sensitivity and respect, 2) Ecosocial justice and inclusion, 3) ethical practice, research, and education, and 4) systemic healing and reconstruction. These pillars guide social work to embed Indigenous epistemologies, supporting environmental and social justice, and fostering long-term reciprocal partnerships within Indigenous communities. The essential strategies of the CISW model are contextuality, inclusion, collaboration, dynamism, creativity, and transparency. These principles ensure that Indigenous voices are centered on creation towards relational accountability. The CISW rethinks intersectionality through the amplification of Indigenous perspectives, acknowledging the overlapping systems of oppression such as racism, patriarchy, and colonialism, within which constructs like race and gender operate. The CISW offers a pathway tool to transcend Eurocentric limitations into decolonial transformation.

Background: Indigeneity and Global Contexts

This CISW model is informed by literature on decolonial frameworks grounded on Indigenous sovereignty, relationality, accountability, and resistance to colonial legacies in social work. Indigenous is defined as original peoples usually referred to as Native, Tribal, Indian, Aboriginal, etc., whose identities are shaped by deep, cultural, spiritual, and territorial ties (Ife & Tascón, 2016). Decolonizing is explicitly defined here as dismantling colonial structures by embedding Indigenous etymologies, promoting self-determination, and ensuring community-led authority across practice, policy, and education (Gray et al., 2013).

Globally, over 476 million Indigenous people from more than 90 countries, speaking over 5,000 languages, constitute only about 4.6% to 6% of the world's population (Amnesty International USA, 2025; Mamo, 2024, 2025). However, Indigenous peoples safeguard over 28% of the Earth's land surface and protect more than 80% of the world's biodiversity while facing systemic oppression through globalization, neoliberalism, and environmental exploitation masked as "green" initiatives (Amnesty International USA, 2025; Mamo, 2024). Indigenous resilience persists despite capitalist green transition paradigms or colonial conservation models, which seek economic gains and blame Indigenous peoples for environmental wildlife exploitation (Knox, 2024). While the CISW mostly focuses on Indigenous experiences in the Americas, particularly within the United States, it situates these experiences within a broader global context of rights violations, highlighting the need for systemic healing frameworks. Despite legally binding international conventions like the International Labour Organization's Convention 169, which enshrines human rights related to land, Indigenous communities around the world continue to endure forced displacement, environmental harm, and legal disenfranchisement as countries fail to ratify it (Mamo, 2025). Countries willingly signal virtue in voting towards the non-legally binding UNDRIP but refuse to ratify the ILO 169 (Mamo, 2025). These realities underscore CISW's commitment to addressing colonial harm as a global problematic system requiring decolonial praxis within social work. A look at the Western settler-colonial states like the United States and Canada reveals that Indigenous rights violations and colonization never ended.

Indigenous Realities in North America

In the United States, part of Turtle Island, over 574 federally recognized Native Nations continue to face structural colonialism, reflected in reduced life expectancies, high suicidality, alcoholism, and diabetes rates, which were exacerbated post-COVID-19 (California Improvement Network, 2023; Love et al., 2018; Stavish et al., 2025). These disparities stem from the settler-colonial “settler-native-slave” triad, designed to erase Indigenous peoples while co-opting other marginalized groups to sustain colonial power (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 18). CISW calls for dismantling these systems by amplifying Indigenous leadership and ensuring equitable access for Indigenous scholars to lead culturally relevant interventions.

Colonial Histories and Education in the U.S.

Colonial violence persists through educational genocide, notably through boarding schools designed to erase Indigenous identities under the motto “kill the Indian, save the man” (Clarke & Yellow Bird, 2021, p. 40; Gray et al., 2013). U.S. education mainly covers a surface level of events like the forced displacement of Choctaw Tribes among many others in the Trail of Tears; fewer are taught about the systemic design of educational genocide through policies like the boarding school systems (Schultz et al., 2016). These violent systems fueled by land-grabbing policies like the Termination Act of 1953 seeking to dissolve federal Tribal land-right recognition led to the necessity for the creation of policies like the 1978 Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) prohibiting the removal of Indigenous children from their families, or the 1978 American Indian Religious Freedom Act passed to protect Indigenous spiritual practices from persecution (California Improvement Network, 2023). In 1983, *Hardwick v. United States* reversed some harms, but not enough to prevent current trends of the harms upon Indigenous communities (California Improvement Network, 2023). For example, this case resulted in a landmark settlement restoring some land rights to the Kumeyaay people after years of federal mismanagement; however, it must be noted that this only addressed a fraction of broader land dispossession, failing to truly reverse systemic violence upon sovereignty and resources across other tribal nations (Schlosser, 2022). Social work, as a profession within the colonial system, is complicit in state violence, with contributions to assimilative practices, necessitating a shift from performative anti-oppression to structural decolonization. Social worker subjectivity can lead to more harm than good, especially in child welfare systems, which almost saw the elimination of ICWA in 2023 (Perez-Aucar, 2023). CISW supports this shift, calling for Indigenous centrism.

Gendered and Legal Violence

Indigenous women and Two-Spirited, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex and Asexual (+2SLGBTQIA) individuals, endure disproportionate violence compounded by legal structures or rulings like the 1978 U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Oliphant v. Suquamish* that stripped Tribal nations of the authority to prosecute non-Native offenders on Tribal land (Amnesty International USA, 2025). Reports in the U.S. alone

show over 83% of violence among Indigenous women, with sexual assault rates twice as high as those of any other racial group (California Improvement Network, 2023; Rosay, 2016). Survivors navigating under-resourced, patriarchal judicial systems face compounding disadvantages where Indigenous jurisdictional protections are structurally absent or legally unenforceable (National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls [Canada] & Cochrane, 2019). The same exclusionary legal architecture that fails Indigenous women also denies communities formal land titles, creating conditions where land grabbing, intimidation, and violence operate with institutional impunity (Mamo, 2024).

Indigenous Centrism in International Talks and Social Work

This literature review informs the creation of the CISW model as a potential tool to address the social work profession's obligations to human and cultural rights protections. Since its inception in the early 1900s, U.S. social work has evolved within pre-civil rights eras in colonial and racist frameworks, contributing to the assimilation and marginalization of diverse groups of people (Wright et al., 2021). Despite reforms like the 1973 Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) mandate for minority inclusion or The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) cultural sensitivity efforts, the profession has largely neglected Indigenous justice, favoring generalized social justice and multicultural frameworks only (Clarke & Yellow Bird, 2021; NASW, 2022). Global entities such as the United Nations (UN) and the International Federation of Social Work (IFSW), alongside the CSWE, have called for cultural humility, yet lack more intentional and structural actionability towards Indigenous sovereignty. This is seen in the less than 3% total Indigenous enrollment, or the lack of Indigenous justice mentions on documents like Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) that accredit social work institutions (CSWE, 2022, 2023; International Association of Schools of Social Work et al., 2012). In the new CSWE 2023-2024 report, this pipeline is still visible with American Indian/Alaska Native students being just 1.1% of BSW enrollment, about 2.3% of MSW enrollment, and 0.8% of DSW enrollment. At the PhD level, just 1.3% enrolled and a mere 1.4% of graduates, and this is even lower for tenured or non-tenured faculty (CSWE, 2025).

International efforts like that of the UN to address systemic Indigenous historical trauma including genocide, ethnocide, ecocide, and linguicide remain inadequate. One such effort includes the 2007 UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), co-drafted by Indigenous leaders within The State of the World's Indigenous Peoples like Dr. Ketil Lenert Hansen (Sami), Dr. Murkta S. Lama (Tamang), and Dr. Collin Tukui-tonga (Niuean), which formally acknowledges colonial harms to Indigenous autonomy and rights (Bebbington & Unerman, 2018; United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues [UNPFII], 2015). The UNDRIP's adoption marked progress in affirming Indigenous human rights and addressing colonial harms including *genocide* or the deliberate violence toward Indigenous people, *ethnocide* or the intentional destruction of people's cultures, *ecocide*, the environmental destruction of Indigenous communities, and *linguicide* or the destruction of Indigenous languages (Gray et al., 2013; United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs [UNDESA], 2015). However, there is a lack of legal enforceability, such as the nonbinding nature of Article 19 on informed consent,

highlighting a persistent global failure to protect Indigenous autonomy when it relates to land rights. The CISW model's Ecosocial justice pillar builds on these international efforts, emphasizing the importance of localized knowledge and ecological cultural survival.

Indigenous Leaders in Social Work and Social Justice

These grievances are not new, but amplified by the work by longstanding advocacy and prominent Indigenous scholars. For example, Dr. Hilary Weaver (Lakota) who has written extensively about cultural rights within social work, Dr. Linda Tuhiwai Smith (Maori) who has introduced foundational concepts on decolonizing research methodology, and Dr. Michael Yellow Bird (MHA Nation Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara) who advances neurodecolonization as a path to healing. Justice activists like Ada E. Deer (Menominee) who helped terminate harmful federal policies, or Goldie Denny (Quinalt) who also fought for Tribal sovereignty and ICWA enforcement. We also have scholars like Dr. Autumn Asher BlackDeer (Cheyenne) who highlights decolonial trauma theory in social work and rethinks feminism, Dr. Evelyn Blanchard (Laguna/Yaqui) who centered Indigenous epistemologies and education, and Dr. Cindy Blackstock (Gitksan) who has led child welfare equity and human rights of First Nations children (UNDESA, 2016; UNPFII, 2015). The UNDRIP provided a step in a good direction, with some Indigenous co-authorship in defining self-determination and consent, and more is needed. For instance, practitioners must grapple with the legal and cultural implications of Indigenous peoples' varied relationships with state citizenship, a complex non-conforming identification for Indigenous individuals and Nations in a settler-colonial state (Gray et al., 2013). Social work can and must enhance its policy-driven arms to advance legal enforceability of Indigenous justice, because while the CSWE has acknowledged harm to Indigenous communities and revised accreditation standards, deeper structural reforms and increase in representation are needed (CSWE, 2022; Weaver et al., 2021). Some efforts can be seen in the appointment of Indigenous leaders like Dr. Hilary Weaver and Dr. Halaevalu Vakalahi and the 2022 IFSW's People's Charter for an Eco-Social World centering international eco-social justice and Indigenous values (The People's Summit, 2022).

Theoretical Foundations of the CISW Model

The creation of the CISW model spotlights Indigenous wisdom and calls for its integration into social work to dismantle social work's colonial roots (Martínez & Agüero, 2021; Smith, 2021). Western constructs of social identities should not be imposed on Indigenous peoples. Indigenous peoples have the right to self-determine and this must be understood within their specific, cultural, and historical contexts especially because postcolonial and postmodern theories often overlook the ongoing realities of colonialism (Gray et al., 2013; Smith, 2021). Social workers must confront moral disengagement—the psychological process of absolving the self from responsibility for institutionalizing colonial harm (Lo Cricchio et al., 2022). Social workers can start by embracing Indigenous theories such as Tribal Critical Race Theory, Decolonial Indigenous Feminism, Indigenous Wholistic Framework (IWF), and Indigenous Ways of Knowing (IWK), to advocate for

more respectful self-determination, cultural survival, and Eco-Social justice (Ife & Tascón, 2016; McPherson, 2020).

Indigenous Wholistic Framework

The IWF offers structural grounding for CISW and the broader Contextual Indigeneity framework. Emphasizing respect, relevance, reciprocity, responsibility, relationship, and representation, the IWF provides a collaborative template for all to engage meaningfully in decolonial work (Pidgeon & Riley, 2021; Tsosie et al., 2024). Its focus on co-creation and Indigenous inclusion ensures that decolonization is not symbolic but embedded in practice, education, and policy through relational accountability.

Tribal Critical Race Theory (TribalCrit)

The CISW draws from TribalCrit's critiques on Western dominance and assimilationist practices, while emphasizing that colonization is endemic and engraved in law, culture, and institutions, particularly in the U.S. (Black & Verbos, 2022). The endemic nature of colonization refers to the ongoing, deeply embedded impacts of colonial structures, attitudes, and practices within systems and the interconnectedness of law, culture, and institutions in oppressing Native Nations (Black & Verbos, 2022; Rowe et al., 2015). TribalCrit also calls for sovereignty with eco-sustainability and collective well-being over individualism across multiple fields like in science, economics, or social work. TribalCrit highlights the importance of understanding contextualized harm and the nature of the spirit over individualism (Black & Verbos, 2022). For social workers, TribalCrit demands a refinement of assessments that align with values that are community-based on resilience and move beyond pathologizing medical models.

Indigenous Decolonial Feminism (IDF)

The IDF addresses the intersection of colonialism, gender, and heteropatriarchy, exposing how trends of feminism erase Indigenous women's sovereignty. Mainstream feminism or "white-stream feminism," as coined by scholar Sandy Grande (Quechua), explains that white middle-class experiences are most centered in feminist conversations, inadvertently neglecting Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination (Grande, 2003, as cited in BlackDeer, 2023). This framework advocates for relational worldviews, place-based resistance, and the integration of Indigenous knowledge through collaboration with elders and community leaders for more genuine allyship, especially in academia (BlackDeer, 2023). Social workers must be critically reflective and non-conforming to challenge settler-fused higher-ed experiences and knowing.

Intersectionality

Intersectionality examines how colonial hierarchies, patriarchy, and systemic oppression intersect across race, gender, and socioeconomic status, particularly impacting Indigenous women and +2SLGBTQIA individuals. Within the CISW model, this requires

moving beyond performative allyship and towards genuine support for Indigenous futurism. Here, the term futurism is not used in the specific sense developed by Grace Dillon (2012) in her work on Indigenous futurism, a literary and cultural movement within science fiction and speculative arts that unravels colonial iterations of Indigeneity. Instead, the term is used more broadly to describe envisioning and fostering Indigenous-led pathways forward within social justice work. While Dillon situates the important movement of Indigenous Futurism in a context of speculative creativity and the thriving of Indigenous peoples, Indigenous futurism can also be understood as a nonfantastic assertion of the everlasting Indigenous dignity that has withstood the test of colonial time. We must enter a future where social work recognizes that justice or liberation and support for Indigenous self-determined futures need not be defined by colonial oppression. The CISW also urges a rethinking of existing mainstream notions of intersectionality by more intently centering Indigenous voices and worldviews. While African American legal scholar Kimberly Crenshaw has been an influential voice in articulating the overlap of systemic struggles, she herself clarified that intersectionality is not a new theory, but a reflection of long existing realities (Crenshaw, 1991).

Indigenous Ways of Knowing

The CISW acknowledges that Indigenous peoples are not a monolith, and that social workers must self-educate on Indigenous Ways of Knowing (IWK) as serious theories (Simonds & Christopher, 2013). IWK are inherently contextual and specific to lands, languages, and cultural traditions. For instance, social workers must recognize that Mexican migrants may identify with Indigenous cultures rather than national Mexican identities, reflecting complex intracultural perspectives shaped by colonial borders. IWK encompasses diverse approaches, including Cosmovision, Ubuntu, Buen Vivir, Two-Eyed Seeing, and the Seven Generations Principles. Some IWKs, like Ubuntu and Buen Vivir, were added to the People's Charter as important frameworks towards an eco-social world (The People's Summit, 2022).

Cosmovision is an Indigenous worldview of Maya Guatemala and parts of Central America that emphasizes the interconnectedness of language, culture, nature, spirit, and community stewardship (LeGuen et al., 2013). This IWK informs essential ecological agroforestry that protects nature, nutrition, and communities (LeGuen et al., 2013). Ubuntu, from sub-Saharan Africa, emphasizes interconnectedness and mutual respect, advocating for relational decolonization that replaces oppressive methodologies with culturally appropriate approaches and promotes eco-social responsibility (Konadu-Osei, 2022). Buen Vivir, from the Quechua and Aymara peoples of the Andes in Ecuador and Bolivia, speaks to a life based on harmonious relationships with nature and a focus on collective well-being over individual gain (Suran, 2021). IWK contextualizes community, respect for nature, and commitment to a reciprocal way of life, challenges modernization and globalization, and asks for harmony in sustainability conversations (Gudynas, 2011; Suran, 2021).

The Two-Eyed Seeing was introduced by Mi'kmaw Elder Albert Marshall, combining Indigenous and Western knowledge systems (Leonard et al., 2022). This IWK sees respect, co-creation, and Indigenous leadership in addressing complex issues like environmental

sustainability, supporting cross-cultural learning experiences that embrace dynamic Indigenous knowledge (Leonard et al., 2022). This view can be seen in research on environmental sustainability benefits, such as those presented at Partnership for Observation of the Global Ocean, where panel sessions discussed Indigenous wisdom being imperative to marine life scientific collaboration (Leonard et al., 2022). Lastly, both the Haudenosaunee principle of Seven Generations and IWK emphasize long-term thinking, sustainability, and holistic perspectives, challenging the short-sighted nature of contemporary systems, urging responsibility toward future generations and the environment (Akers, n.d.).

Case Studies Contextualizing Indigenous Knowledge Systems in Education

The CISW model is informed by global examples of how IWK can be seen in practice, and particularly how they reshape education systems to more sovereignty-based models.

United States: Indigenizing Social Work Education

At the University of Hawaii, the Myron B. Thompson School of Social Work integrated Native Hawaiian values through Kanaka ‘Ōiwi-Crit Theory, emphasizing cultural resonance, co-learning, and Indigenous epistemologies (Nakaoka et al., 2019; Pidgeon, 2016). This showed how context can be adjusted to the CSWE’s EPAS 10th competency on engagement to be culturally relevant in school events as well as faculty training or resourcing repositories (Osborn & Karandikar, 2023). Similarly, the Brown School at Washington University in St. Louis created the Social Workers Advancing through Grounded Education (SAGE) program to support Indigenization in higher education by culturally grounding professionals in Indigenous knowledge systems. For example, SAGE emphasizes Indigenous relational values by placing students in Tribal health clinics and Indigenous-led nonprofit organizations, where practicums are guided by authentic Indigenous conceptualizations of wellness (Thompson et al., 2021).

Guatemala: The MAIA Impact School

Indigenous communities in Guatemala have experienced one of the worst Indigenous genocides in the Western hemisphere, with an ongoing displacement crisis and socioeconomic barriers (Nichols, 2024). However, programs like MAIA Impact School demonstrate how Indigeneity fosters intergenerational resilience amid colonial legacies. Founded in 2017, the MAIA Impact School is an Indigenous-led holistic program for hundreds of Indigenous girls, addressing systemic barriers while fostering resilience and self-determination (Mona Foundation, 2024b). MAIA implements Indigenous values that uplift socioeconomic gender rights, doubling academic performance, career attainment, and economic mobility compared to national averages (Mona Foundation, 2024a).

Decolonizing Practice: Indigenous Digital Justice

Decolonized social work practice extends to digital spaces, where Indigenous data sovereignty (IDSov) protects communities from continued extraction and misrepresentation (Engstrom et al., 2024). Data governance, like land stewardship, is a matter of sovereignty and self-determination. Social workers engaged in research, policy, and community collaboratives must uphold IDSov to counter digital colonialism (Hickey, 2020). Emerging technologies, such as blockchain, cryptocurrencies, decentralized autonomous organizations, and Web3, pose both risks and opportunities (Dobson & Fernandez, 2023). This requires ethical Indigenous centrism of power and advocacy in modern spaces (Dobson & Fernandez, 2023; Dyson et al., 2020). Social work co-exists with the reality of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and the continued expansion of digital colonialism – systems that often rely on the extraction of Indigenous data, the appropriation of cultural knowledge, and environmentally exploitative practices, such as extensive water use in AI data centers. These realities demand that social workers advocate for ethical digital allyship, by challenging the erasure and exploitation of Indigenous peoples and technological developments and policy spaces (Li et al., 2025; Justice AI, n.d.).

CISW Versus Universalist Human Rights Frameworks

Unlike Universal Human Rights models, which often overlook land, reparations, and Indigenous specific needs, the CISW demands active, Indigenous-led solutions that challenge Eurocentric norms of professionalism and efficiency (Tuck & Yang, 2012). Similar to Indigenous Decolonial Feminism, the CISW posits that Indigenous Wisdom is vital for more rights-based practice and education (BlackDeer, 2023). True advocacy efforts would more consistently support diverse Indigenous realities, rejecting homogenization and reaffirming Indigenous stewardship of sustainability and knowledge systems.

Reconciliation: Sovereignty Over Inclusion

Reconciliation efforts have often served to maintain settler interest, failing to address Indigenous land rights or systemic oppression (Tuck & Yang, 2012). Reconciliation does not inherently equate to justice and, in fact, often renders itself ineffective. Research on intergenerational trauma, such as that stemming from the Armenian genocide and African enslavement, reveals the limitations of truth and reconciliation commissions globally, underscoring their frequent inadequacy in addressing historical and ongoing atrocities (Clarke & Yellow Bird, 2021). Promoting Indigenous futures requires disrupting power structures through material commitments to sovereignty, including land-based learning, Tribal partnerships, and mandatory curricula like that suggested in the CISW model (Clarke & Yellow Bird, 2021; Dyson et al., 2020). While anti-racist frameworks can promote racial reconciliation towards the promotion of diversity and inclusion, we must also see that this alone may not be enough to address assimilation within existing systems. In establishing Indigenous-led governance in social work institutions, we may begin to make strides towards truer relational accountability and see reallocation of resources to

Indigenous scholarship, like CSWE appointments of Indigenous leaders like Dr. Hilary Weaver (Lakota) or Dr. Halaevalu Fonongava'inga Ofahengaue Vakalahi (Tonga), community programming, and Indigenous leadership continuity.

Decolonial Social Work Research: Methodology and Ethics Considerations

Decolonizing social work research requires more than criticism of current research; it demands actively embracing relationship and spirit, advancing Indigenous Methodologies and cultural protocols (Smith, 2021). For example, frameworks like Indigenous Storywork, coined by Jo-Ann Archibald (Q'um Q'um Xiiem), emphasize cultural survival through narrative, ceremony, and place-based contextual understandings, challenging Western compartmentalization in research (Kuly, 2021; Phillips, 2021). Ethical social work practice demands that IWK – like the Queer AZN¹ and Pasifika Critical Race Theory that recognize the intersectionality of Indigenous queer identity and colonialism – inform research, community engagement, policy, and direct service (Alvarez et al., 2024). Social work must ask what constitutes evidence, who defines research, and whose knowledge is being prioritized, or shaping interventions and systems change (Alvarez et al., 2024; BlackDeer, 2023).

The CISW offers practical categories to guide away from rigid homogenous-centric academic standards and into promotion of IWK and CI. The CISW advocates for accessible ways to amplify the validity of Indigenous knowledge-seeking practices, co-creation, community engagement, and IWK. As Indigenous scholar Dr. Steven Salaita asserts, formal knowledge under unequal power dynamics often reinforces oppressive structures, whereas marginalized communities sustain justice-oriented, intuitive ways of knowing (Gone et al., 2024). Integrating mixed methods and storytelling validates resilience and the *science of the spirit* that has often been excluded in Western research (Mitchell et al., 2020; Smith, 2021). Contextualized Indigenous approaches are vital. A study with the Crow Nation showed how non-Indigenous research can lead to fragmenting narratives into thematic units that prove incongruent with Indigenous meaning, storytelling traditions, and knowledge sharing (Simonds & Christopher, 2013). This misalignment shows the importance of resisting essentialist methods that minimize or oversimplify IWK. These shifts must inform social work to cultivate more ethical and contextually grounded practices, honoring diverse ways of knowing and preserving culture.

Photovoice: Visual Context for Indigenous Self-Determination in Research

While non-Indigenous researchers cannot fully embody Indigenous lived experiences, approaches grounded in humility and reciprocity, or participatory allyship, can facilitate meaningful social justice collaboration. Photovoice, a participatory visual method where

¹ "Queer AZN" refers to the intersection of LGBTQ+ identities with Asian, Asian American, and Pacific Islander (AAPI) communities, often highlighting intersectional justice, cultural pride, and resistance against anti-Asian and anti-LGBTQ+ sentiment. It is a term representing queer and trans AAPI individuals, sometimes utilizing "AZN" to evoke youth/hip-hop culture and "Asian Pride" (Alvarez et al., 2024).

community members document and analyze their experiences through photography, aligns with Indigenous ethics by centering self-determination and relational accountability, promoting Indigenous narratives in epistemologies, and serving as both a research tool and vehicle for advocacy and education (Jarldorn, 2019; Simonds & Christopher, 2013). This approach has advantages over traditional approaches that help capture visual-contextual data that textual information may overlook or not allow co-witnessing. Through Indigenous-led centrism in research, traditional processes like informed consent and research ethics can be defined with more cultural respect (Smith, 2021). Photovoice has been effectively applied to highlight Indigenous environmental justice in Oklahoma with the Cherokee Nation, visually conveying emotional and cultural ties to the land (Carroll et al., 2018). It has also been used with First Nations in Canada to visually engage participants and policymakers in dialogue about social inequality in ways that showcase collective power towards trust and a redefining of self-determination (Castleden et al., 2008). Similarly, research utilizing online Photovoice has seen successful Pacific Islander Indigenous youth engagement in topics relating to science, ecological well-being, and traditional knowledge (Waegh et al., 2023). By amplifying Indigenous perspectives, photovoice can help social work research reach new potential in understanding what sustainability means contextually to Indigenous peoples.

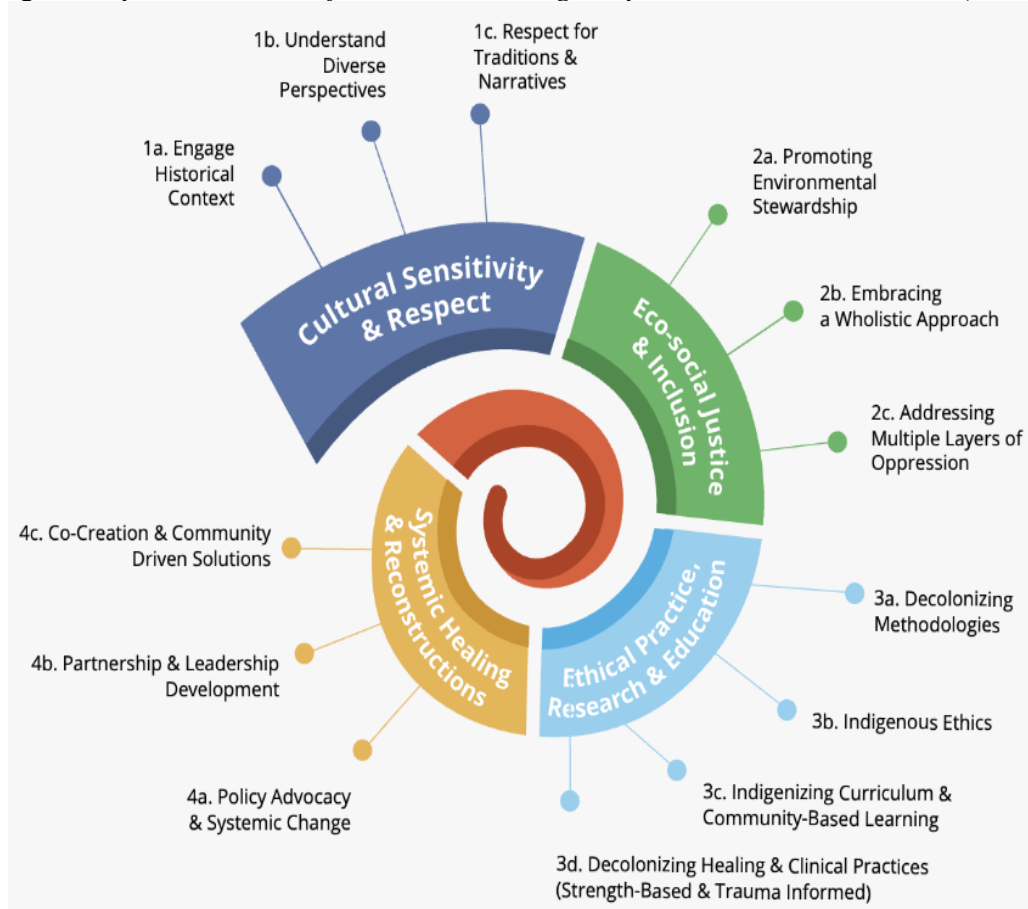
The Contextual Indigeneity in Social Work Framework (CISW)

Social work has been both inadvertently and, at times blatantly, complicit in colonial oppression; thus, its decolonization must be Indigenous-led with active allyship towards relational accountability (Tuck & Yang, 2012). The CISW acknowledges that colonialism is an ongoing structure that must be reimagined in social work. As mentioned throughout this paper, this CISW framework builds on suggestions from works benefiting Indigenous realities, mirroring the intent of the model. Social work must move from passive social justice declarations to active alignment with Indigenous sovereignty, autonomy, and cultural perspective. A good first step is revising the social work code of ethics to reject further colonial harms like *settler* nativism (rightful claim of being a Native on colonized land), *colonial equivocation* (seeing colonialism as a past and not a co-occurring event), and "*asterisking*" (labeling as at-risk) *Indigenous* peoples (Tuck & Yang, 2012). Social workers must instead recognize Indigenous peoples as sovereign peoples who are not relics of the past, but rather people with a past, present, and future (Tuck & Yang, 2012).

The CISW framework holds four categorical core components that outline critical elements towards fostering a more culturally respectful Indigenous allyship (see Figure 1. Components of Indigenous Allyship Spiral). The first component, cultural sensitivity and respect, ensures that cultural relevance is prioritized, outlining that social workers must self-inform about Indigenous histories, languages, and traditional perspectives through collaboration with elders and nations. In practice, this might mean collaborating with the Indigenous communities, respecting different IWK and methods of information sharing through storytelling and ceremony. Second, Eco-Social Justice & Inclusion emphasizes that Indigenous peoples are the best stewards of the planet, making their environmental wisdom valuable and an important opportunity for co-stewardship and relational

accountability. Social workers have much to learn about Indigenous perspectives on social wellness, land and water rights advocacy, and IWK from Two-Spirited and gender-diverse individuals (BlackDeer, 2023). Thirdly, Ethical Practice, Research, and Education call for methodologies rooted in Indigenous epistemologies and curriculum that honors Indigenous ethics, storytelling, and language revitalization. This means that self-determination in consent, relational accountability, and current research trends may call for Indigenous insights on what it means to self-determine; social workers must ask how land self-determines. Finally, Systemic Healing and Reconstruction encourages long-term partnerships with Indigenous communities at all system levels. This would truly promote economic justice and foster trauma-informed, community-driven healing practices that Indigenous peoples can co-create. Together, these components may help social workers implement decolonial, Indigenizing, sovereignty-centered approaches that move beyond theory into everyday practice.

Figure 1. *Spiral Framework for Contextual Indigeneity in Social Work Education* (2024b)



Note. Figure created by the author. This model was produced to showcase a culturally grounded framework for social workers to be proactive allies towards Indigenous Justice as part of the *Contextual Indigeneity in Social Work Toolkit* (CISWT; Alviz, 2024b).

Despite its potential, implementing the CISW framework may inevitably face resistance due to deeply entrenched Eurocentric norms, institutional resistance, and standard filters from within the Western gaze. Additionally, barriers may include policy-driven funding cuts that drain Indigenous justice mechanisms and prioritize non-Indigenous issues. Recognizing these obstacles is essential for accountability and developing adaptive strategies that foster institutional transformation and authentic partnerships towards Indigenous justice.

Ethical Implications and Limitations for CISW

The future of social work needs active integration and elevation of Indigenous communities, leaders, and knowledge systems (Dyson et al., 2020; Weaver et al., 2021). Cultural grounding involves embedding Indigenous perspectives across social work leadership, education, curriculum development, training, and research (Antoine et al., 2018). The CSWE acknowledges that passivity within the profession perpetuates harm, and that individualizing trauma pathologizes Indigenous care practices (Weaver et al., 2021). Social workers must confront elitist, evidence-based models rooted in colonial thinking and dominant “evidence” or “formal knowledge.” Social work must see that neutrality is unethical because it amounts to complicity in harm. As popularly articulated by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in his 1968 sermon, “Not merely for the vitriolic words and the violent actions of the bad people, but for the appalling silence and indifference of the good people who sit around and say, “Wait on time”” (Martin Luther King Jr.-Topic, 2015, 13:13). In other words, in the face of colonial violence and systemic inequities, a profession that claims to advocate against injustice must confront the hypocrisy of upholding structures that continue to oppress Indigenous communities. Failing to challenge these lingering shadows of oppression casts an even darker shadow on the very integrity, purpose, and essence of social work.

Implementing the CISW framework faces ethical and structural challenges like institutional resistance to Native knowledge, limited funding, and distrust towards Indigenous-led efforts. For example, contemporary debates on eliminating licensing requirements and unpaid internships reveal how social work continues to disenfranchise marginalized communities. Unpaid internships perpetuate colonial harm by economically exploiting students, restricting access to the profession, and silencing critical Indigenous worldviews essential for trauma-informed, resilience-based practice to serve the mental health needs of Indigenous communities (Farr, 2024; Kovach, 2021; McKinley & Knipp, 2022). This devaluation of Indigenous labor and knowledge reinforces settler-colonial hierarchies within education, privileging those who can afford unpaid work while marginalizing those with ancestral insights vital to decolonizing social work (Tamburro, 2013). Moreover, requiring unpaid placements in agencies serving Indigenous populations mirrors historical patterns of extraction and disregard for reciprocity, contributing to what Farr (2024) describes as a racist “net negative wage” (Farr, 2024, p. 4). These financial barriers undermine the emergence of Indigenous social work leaders, limiting the transformative potential for culturally respectful practice (Kovach, 2021; Wright et al., 2021).

Ethical tensions also arise when aligning Indigenous relational accountability with Western frameworks such as those outlined by the NASW and IFSW, which, despite emphasizing respect, dignity, and social justice, often neglect explicit commitments to sovereignty and Indigenous land rights (NASW, 2022; Smith, 2021). Addressing these limitations can foster a profession that upholds Indigenous justice. The CISW model is not simply a concept, but a framework grounded in historical analysis, theoretical insight, and urgent realities faced by Indigenous communities. The preceding literature informs each component of the CISW model, affirming its relevance and necessity for transformative social work practice.

Conclusion

Decolonized social work requires more than acknowledgments. It requires Indigenous-led partnerships that actively promote Indigenous knowledge systems into every facet of the profession (Smith, 2021; Weaver et al., 2021). Rooted in principles of interconnectedness, sustainability, and collective well-being, Indigenous epistemologies offer holistic solutions to the complex social and ecological challenges that contemporary social work must address (Bruton et al., 2021; Pidgeon & Riley, 2021; Tsosie et al., 2024). Moving beyond a one-size-fits-all framework, culturally grounded collaborations foster mutual respect, self-determining governance, and context-specific responses essential for genuine social justice (Clarke & Yellow Bird, 2021; McPherson, 2020).

The implementation of the CISW framework is both urgent and necessary. The framework requires social work institutions to do the following: first, dismantle Eurocentric standards seen in curricula, research, and practice, and second, invest in Indigenous leadership for authentic systems change. Third, revise ethical codes and standards for Indigenous visions for self-determination and relational accountability. Fourth, eliminate structural barriers like exams and unpaid work to avoid exploitation. Finally, commit to long-term, community-driven engagement based on mutual respect, not saviorism or charity. While institutional resistance may remain with limited funding, this is not insurmountable. The future of social work depends on the willingness to confront complicity. Social work has a future based on solidarity and human rights over individualism. Through honoring Indigeneity, social work truly supports a justice-driven force for collective liberation and ecological harmony.

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