

# Contextualizing Practice in Cambodia: A Hidden Living Place with Practice Insight

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**Abstract:** This article is not a first-person narrative but rather a cultural reflection after a study-abroad program in Cambodia that aimed to provide an approach for promoting a deeper appreciation of international social work practice. We (the authors) describe and analyze our interactions with residents in the “floating city” of Chong Khneas using a contextual approach. We categorize these exchanges into context recognition, context analysis, and context management. We focus additional analyses on four contextual environments (people-centered, knowledge-centered, assessment-centered, and community-centered environments) to develop a cross-cultural practice framework. Our reflection supports two practice principles for social work practice: learning through human interactions and assessing with positivity.

**Keywords:** Chong Khneas, Cambodia; Tonle Sap Lake; Contextual Practice; Child Welfare; Observational Approach; International Social Work

## Contextualizing Practice in Cambodia: A Hidden Living Place with Practice Insight

In 2013, the authors of this article, along with a group of study abroad students, journeyed to Cambodia on a trip that illuminated the importance of studying immigrant cultures from a contextual perspective. We gazed in awe the first time as we approached Chong Khneas and saw proof of the floating city’s namesake: the land, heavy with lush trees and nearly suffocating humidity, really does float atop green, moss-colored water. As we digested the landscape surrounding us, our eyes darted between all the activities occurring at once – locals swam vigorously, napped lazily, began the afternoon’s cooking, and initiated conversations of content we hoped to get translated. We found ourselves hoping that our time in the floating city would not be limited to watching, but would also allow us to learn from the people around us whose lives on the water were so different from our landlocked lifestyle at home. If we floated just above the water every day, would we get sea-sick? Would we stay healthy and clean? Would we or our loved ones be in danger of drowning? While we pondered the questions we could not yet ask of the locals, we noticed that their concern seemed incredibly minimal compared to our own.

Rich in history, Cambodia is home to many ancient temples, including Angkor Wat (a one-thousand-year-old temple discovered in the jungle), the Temple of Bayon (famous for having many carved faces), Ta Prohm (a Bayon style temple

called Rajavihara), Silver Pagoda (inside Khmer Royal Palace), and temples of Khmer memorial landmarks called “the killing fields.” The word “killing” apparently links to those who were killed during the Khmer Rouge massacre. As we entered these worship places, we couldn’t believe but see countless skulls and human bones placed in gigantic viewing boxes. These religiously enriched places provided us with a setting to retreat, pray, observe history, and reflect on the country’s recent wars. While visiting these sites, we discovered one location with a profound cultural history: the “floating city” of Chong Khneas, where we focused on the lives of immigrant families living on fishing boats. Although the villagers expressed a need for additional resources, they were also clear about their desire to be treated fairly, equitably, and respectfully. Based on our time-limited exposure to this unique culture, we were introduced to the history of the floating city and the hardships of the people currently living there. During and after this journey, we discussed the use of a contextual approach to develop culturally and ethnically relevant strategies in social service delivery with indigenous, migrant and immigrant populations. Through this narrative, we recalled residents’ perceptions of positive changes in their environment to make recommendations for improving the daily quality of life in Chong Khneas. Although this narrative does not contain actual dialogue or conversational content that may have taken place, we aim to provide this population’s voice through our observations about them.

## CONTEXTUALIZING SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

Throughout and after this journey, we discussed their social service delivery needs with a contextual lens. We read from Allen-Meares and Garvin (2000) that contextualized social work practice is assessed using integrated social work practice skills that focus on educating through learning about power within one's living environment, identifying a collective process to determine practice strategies, and connecting "community, class, and culture" for effective practice strategy building (p.13). We interacted with local people using three contextualized assessment lenses: 1) context recognition, 2) context analysis, and 3) context management. *Context recognition*, a term common in research on nonverbal behaviors, uses historical or behavioral patterns as contextual information to help a person or a group of people recall memories about a place or situation (Morency, Lee, Sidner, & Darrell, 2005). In this study tour, we paid attention to the people of Chong Khneas as they described the history and memory of their cultural environment; they also provided a heartfelt connection to our contextualized assessment. *Context analysis*, a term derived from business research, is the process of scanning environmental information to discover changes that may affect people's lives and behaviors. Analyzing the context is considered a "situation analysis" in strategic planning to promote organizational effectiveness (Ward & Peppard, 2002, p.82). Learning from secondary sources prior to attending this experiential journey, we reflected upon the local people's relations to their own family and others, which helped identify risk and protective factors for children. *Context management*, a term generated from tourism studies, is a participatory process that aims to identify relational factors among the study targets through various means of interaction (Buján et al., 2013).

Although we used an observational approach to describe this environment, during this visit, we asked questions to ascertain how local people have used environmental support to manage their lives. These questions included: "What have you or your family done to obtain drinking water for the community?" "How do you obtain and maintain external resources?" "What is a memory about this place that you would like to pass on to your next

generation?" "What would you expect your next generation do to support this community?" "What are the most helpful resources in your environment and where can these resources be found?" and "What kind of environmental changes have been helpful for this community?" These questions were generated from a central open-ended question asked among the social workers during the trip: *What cultural exchanges would we expect to observe and hear from the families and their community?*

### Context Recognition: The Floating City

Based on the residents' description, we researched a website by the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2013) which describes that heavy rainfall and flooding has rendered this area to be one of the most fish-abundant regions in the world. Residents see Chong Khneas as a small village that sits on Tonle Sap Lake, the largest freshwater lake in Southeast Asia. The main tributary of the lake is the Tonle Sap River, which receives excess water from the Mekong River during the rainy season. Roshko (2011) describes this excess water reverses the direction of flow of Tonle Sap River and, as a consequence, leads to the inundation of 1.25 million acres of forest and agricultural land for several months each year. Residents live with lake resources as the surface area of the lake has grown more than quadruples, from 2,500 to 11,000 square kilometers, and its depth increases from one to ten meters. In recognition of its rich biodiversity the area was declared as a biosphere reserve in 1997. People in this area stated that they have been relying upon the abundance of fish and the agricultural richness of Tonle Sap Lake and the surrounding area for their livelihood for centuries. The Tonle Sap Lake has played a large role in shaping the country's cultural identity, its economic health, and the stability of the people in Chong Khneas for years. As reported by Mydan (2000) and Roshko (2011), the people living in the Tonle Sap area represent ethnically diverse groups such as Vietnamese boat people and local Khmers living in poverty. Their livelihood and economic state depend solely on the resources acquired from the lake.

### Context Analysis: Past and Present of the Hidden People

We used information collected from the local population around the Tonle Sap Lake area to identify

the importance of understanding human diversity. We began with their historical development. According to local residents, at the turn of the nineteenth century, the Tonle Sap Lake region was sparsely populated. The Khmers began to move onto the lake in order to fish toward the middle of the nineteenth century, settling in the area when the fishing season was most favorable and returning to their villages once they had harvested enough fish for their yearly consumption. Fishing was considered an easily learned occupation that required only a small initial financial investment since the nets and materials to catch the fish were affordable. Most fishermen caught what they needed each day to feed their families and traded the remainder of their daily catch for other sources of food, including rice. The presence of the Khmer on the lake became more prominent after 1979 when the Khmer Rouge disbanded. Today, many Khmers are still moving to the floating village of Chong Khneas. Tourism of Cambodia (2014) names this lake area “an important commercial resource” as it provides “more than half of the fish consumed in Cambodia” (webpage). Although we did not hear directly about the reasons for settling in Chong Khneas, we examined the literature later and found that they include lack of land, family disputes, poverty, lack of education and technical skills, and familiarity with the environment (Roshko, 2011). Khmer population accounts for the majority of an estimated 80,000 people living in floating villages around Tonle Sap Lake. Many immigrants have also settled there, including ethnic Siamese (Thai) and a large population of Vietnamese, but no formal statistics detail how many immigrant families previously or currently live in the villages. At a museum (on a boat) a local person told that the floating villagers were once farmers who lost their land during the Khmer Rouge’s reign of terror and fled to the lake area in the 1970s. Some Vietnamese families who decided to stay in Cambodia no longer have family ties or connections in Vietnam.

We were told that lack of a formal education system on the floating city has contributed to poverty and the absence of opportunities for upward mobility. Residents rely heavily on fishing and natural resources to feed their families. For many residents in Chong Khneas, life on the water is a cultural tradition they cherish despite a lack of resources. According to our tour guide, many villagers we

talked with about their living conditions are not there by choice. These residents like the floating city because it has natural resources, but they do not want to keep living there. Many prefer to live on land so that they would have access to clean water and sanitation. Their lack of financial resources may limit alternatives for them to “land” on the dry land of Chong Khneas since life on the river is what they know best.

### **Context Management: Reflecting the Experience of Poverty**

Visual evidence told a story of high poverty in this floating city; families survived on low income from trade, fishing, museums, and other jobs that would be described as “blue-collar” in American culture. When we asked those around us about the death rates in Chong Khneas, we received no answers more informative than “We don’t know.” However, if there was any anxiety on their parts about catching some fatal, waterborne illness, they never expressed it. In fact, they did not seem anxious about any of the factors we saw as problematic through our Western lens: poor health, poverty, isolation. Rather, they smiled as they welcomed us wholeheartedly into their private environment. As they hopped out their boats easily and naturally, we saw their faces an expression of the pride they had in their primary mode of transportation and way of life.

In the floating city, most residents learn to accept poverty as part of their natural environment. According to recent data in Cambodia, being poor is defined as living under the national poverty line of US \$0.93 per capita per day (Ministry of Planning, 2013). UNICEF (2015) estimated that approximately one third of Cambodians are living below the national poverty line. Without the support of census data on the floating villagers, we could only observe these families living with insufficient resources to meet their daily needs. Partially due to the degraded drinking-water sources, waterborne diseases represent a major public health issue in Cambodia. Preventable diseases such as diarrhea and respiratory infections are the leading cause of death in children, among whom 45 percent also suffered from malnutrition (UNICEF, 2015). Families with home-based water treatment systems and safe storage for their water are less likely to fall ill from waterborne pathogens. Our observations in this trip could only attest to some residents’ concern

about their children's health condition. This information provides a description of the need for safe drinking water and for safe sanitation. In particular when we found that the Cambodian Red Cross was a first NGO to develop and implement a ceramic filter to provide local families with safe drinking water, we appreciated more of the clean water we have been drinking.

### **CONTEXTUALIZING FURTHER: ENVIRONMENT-FOCUSED STRATEGIES**

As social workers, we utilized four "environments" as our contextual references when working with culturally different clients—in this case, with the people in an Asian country away from our homeland. Analyses of these environments expand our views so that we can learn from clients and families as they connect to their environment. Through this cultural learning, the following questions were generated.

People-centered environments: How do we use new information from our clients' surroundings to assess the situation?

Knowledge-centered environments: What are the missing links between the assessment and the expected solution?

Assessment-centered environments: What is the expected outcome and what can we do to achieve the goal set with and for the client? What do the clients see, feel, and think about the intervention process in the environment?

Community-centered environments: What kind of support do we need to help clients achieve the expected goal?

#### **People-Centered Environments**

We directly observed the villagers with our contextual analysis. Many make a living by fish farming, fishing on the river, and selling fruits and vegetables to their neighbors and local stores. In order to create a sustainable community, NGOs such as the Red Cross and the United Nations local office have helped this floating city host two schools, a community market, a general store, a Catholic church, a Buddhist temple, a healthcare clinic, and a

basketball court with netting around the sides to keep the balls from falling into the water. The residents use long rowboats to access these floating buildings, and a solar-powered cell phone tower provides phone service to connect them to the outside world. Since they can use their private boats to take tourists up and down the river, we can get a glimpse into their life on Chong Khneas.

In recent years, the floating city of Chong Khneas has become a popular tourist destination. Tourism, along with the expansion of the garment, construction, and agricultural sectors, has had a positive impact on Cambodia. We felt that the villagers have been accustomed to tourists in boats photographing their daily lives. The boats, many of which do not contain indoor plumbing or electricity, have been converted into habitable homes for the families. During our river trip, women and children used their cultural adjustment skills to maximize the tourism business. Women rowed their tourism boats and sold goods while breastfeeding their babies. Many of these women covered their faces with scarves and large cone-shaped hats in an attempt to protect their skin from harsh winds and sun reflecting on the water. Children played alone in boats and on the side of the river.

While we were moving along the river in our motorized tour boat, a young girl around the age of six surprised us by suddenly jumping into our boat. Using non-verbal cues to gesture toward her product while repeating a chorus of "Cola! Cola!" the girl tried her best to sell us soda while we were still processing the shock of her sudden appearance. At first, we could not figure out where she came from or how she got into our boat since the driver had not stopped the boat during this encounter. We then saw that a woman had pulled a motorized row-boat alongside ours and was trying to sell soft drinks to tourists. When the girl noticed that we were still sipping leftover drinks from lunch, she swiftly leapt back into her own boat to pursue another more profitable audience, with skill a city person could hardly imagine. We reveled at the speed and efficiency with which the likely mother-daughter pair had worked as they peddled products of small value in order to turn necessary profit for survival.

These women were not the only females we saw working on the river. As we floated by many shops

and boats, the scenes we witnessed forced us to reassess our assumptions about the distribution of labor between genders. To our surprise, we frequently saw women tending to chores, selling goods, and cooking food for their families while their male counterparts dozed in shady hammocks nearby. Though some men were working, we did not expect to see such a sharp juxtaposition between actively busy women and napping men, which led to a discussion about the predominately matriarchal system in most Southeast Asian family cultures.

As our attention was drawn by the children, we witnessed how children, regardless of gender or age, sought money as soon as they spotted us—the tourists. Children as young as three and four years old would gesture and point toward us, clearly expecting money from the interaction. Our tour guide cautioned us to refrain from giving money and instead substitute food or items we might have carried over from the United States. When we presented the children with the only materials we had on hand, bottled water and pieces of fruit, their sullen facial expressions told us that these were not the donations they were hoping to receive. We later realized that the children typically did not value or understand the concept of clean, bottled water; rather, they viewed river water as a free and acceptable source of hydration, often taking gulps when they went swimming. Their goal of approaching tourists was to gain something they could not normally acquire on their own: money to freely spend on whatever they would choose. We focused on observing the locals' skills and strengths rather than their hardships in order to generate questions for reflection as related to cultural expectations. Using a strengths-based approach to focus on the positive aspects of their lives, our observations of interpersonal communication among the locals led us to discover three other types of environments.

### **Knowledge-Centered Environment**

Child welfare is an undefined concept in this setting where children are learning skills for daily survival. We encountered a small boy around the age of four with a large snake around his neck who was trying to earn money by allowing tourists to take photographs with him, showing his courage with a seemingly dangerous reptile. Another young boy

was lighting a cigarette and deeply inhaling it before handing it to his mother. In America, these public behaviors would have been considered highly unacceptable and perceived as child abuse and child labor. We could not believe that this mother was letting her child smoke; what was she thinking? Upon reevaluating our own perceptions, we realized with humility that mothers in the U.S. have little control over their children's risky behaviors, which placed us in a poor position to exercise judgment over this mother. In the floating city, these occurrences might be perceived as a normal part of life. We understood from our social work training that outsiders or tourists often make inaccurate assumptions about other cultures based on their own culture or law. Observing this environment first-hand helped us initiate discussions with locals about cultural expectations. We continued learning about their environment by asking additional questions about sources of education support, family entertainment, and environmental protection. Responses generally expressed a sense of pride in their land-water connection and ownership of their environment and culture.

### **Assessment-Centered Environments**

Participants in this study abroad trip shared conflicting perspectives on how we, as outsiders, could study this unique culture. While some expressed that thorough assessment of a foreign culture is inherently impossible, others believed that we could serve ourselves and those with whom we spoke by simply asking for further explanations of those cultural concepts we failed to understand. For example, the residents' sense of time differed greatly from ours. They told us that they did not necessarily know what time they went to the ocean to fish and came back each day, but they simply sensed the right time from their experience, and sometimes insight. Upon their arrival home from fishing in the evening, they parked their boats in different places on the water each night depending on their arrival time. We struggled to comprehend their conceptualization of time, space, and order, but we found that asking questions often helped us move toward a better understanding as we increasingly envisioned what our own lives would look like if we lived on the water. This view was supported by an urge to understand between poverty and drinkable water. We found that their ceramic filters are annually replaced. With regular maintenance, the filter surface can be regenerated

through regular scrubbing and cleaning, which helps to reduce surface deposits and increases the effectiveness of the filtration process. Although regular cleaning is necessary, repeated cleaning will eventually wear away the filter surface. Filters can be made locally, which can lower the prices and provide jobs to the local community, but NGOs currently produce most pot-style ceramic filters around the globe. Although filters seem relatively inexpensive, they still might be financially infeasible for the local villagers who live in poverty to maintain their clean water source. Collaboration between villagers and local NGOs would produce optimal outcomes for the physical health and financial stability of Chong Khneas. We couldn't find a better solution than the resources they already possess.

### **Community-Centered Environments**

The villagers' community-based attitude was the most prominent quality we noticed during our observation. In terms of financial resources, most people who live in the floating village of Chong Khneas are independent farmers or fisherman practicing agriculture with traditional methods that are typically less productive. World Bank (2015) states that two thirds of the country's 1.6 million rural households face seasonal food shortages each year; rice alone accounts for as much as 30 percent of household expenditures in Cambodia. Rural citizens of Cambodia also tend to have the lowest levels of education. Only 78 percent of adults in Cambodia above the age of 15 are literate. On this trip, we observed that people living on the lake area need healthcare access as well as other public services such as educational resources in order to maintain their quality of life. No voices seem to come directly from this community, but they need a place to gather because of their mobility on the water.

### **PRACTICE PRINCIPLES FOCUSING ON POSITIVITY**

This experience invites additional discussions of practice which generated two principles of positivity. The first principle, learning through human interactions, relates to creating a rewarding social work experience through cultural interactions with indigenous and immigrant populations. We

found it culturally rewarding to observe the children's smiling faces and happy demeanor despite their apparent lack of basic needs, such as clean clothes and water. The environment should be the starting point for enhancing child safety and promoting their learning while preserving traditional values and beliefs. Through our practice-oriented observations, we would like to promote cultural learning about this boat village. In a study of volunteerism in Cambodia, Koleth (2014) states that it is important to consider local people's "hopes" and "capacities" (p.681). For these local people, it is their hope to continue their indigenous practices and unite efforts to increase their capacities through expanding clean water supplies and maintaining the floating schools, the multifunction gathering place and the grocery market. Participating in cultural exchange through their local businesses conveyed the unique hope of these people.

We recorded many other observations in this journey to identify the next principle, assessing with positivity. We observed the use of both internal and external support among the villagers to examine connections between the self and others. For their well-being, they value additional community resources that improve their lives but also appreciate the resources nature provides for them. When receiving tourists into their floating homes, they appeared very positive and optimistic. The most common facial expression we saw during largely non-verbal communication was smiling; in shops and on the river, old and young villagers alike greeted us with wide grins spread across their faces to bridge the language barrier. When we would venture into local boat museums, workers conducted thorough tours using non-verbal gestures. As they showed us mounted fish representative of their daily meals and live animals found in their local ecosystem, the workers constantly smiled with pride in their way of life. This course, even as a single study trip, has integrated observations with social work practice principles and stimulated social work students' awareness and appreciation of learning from a different culture through observations and interactions. We commended local people's efforts to connect their environmental challenges to potentialities.

A limitation of this study-abroad course was the use of a time-limited approach to help us experience interactions with all aspects of practice, including individuals, families, groups, and the community. The

trip offered a culturally relevant example for us as social workers to discuss how to integrate both micro and macro perspectives into practice. In this course, we did not have sufficient time to learn the Khmer language or interact in the language locals prefer. We acknowledged that the villagers' culture is largely the result of hardships created from the necessity of surviving difficult weather and surroundings. Our appreciation is extended when we discussed topics related to the people we met, and we believe this type of cultural exchange should continue. While there were limitations, this time-intensive experiential trip has provided practice insight for a better understanding of our learning process. The first step to this contextualized approach is to assess clients from multiple lenses and within clients' contextual environments. We would use these observations to remind ourselves, while working with clients cross-culturally that we must 1) empower clients to utilize resources that could improve safety and health care, and 2) respect clients' decision to look for and maintain what has been working for them. As we recall the image of a group of young girls waving and saying something like "come again," we move toward closer participation within their culture, think cross- and trans-culturally, and venture outside our comfort zone with a contextual lens focusing on the positivity of humankind.

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