Social workers should recognize and respect the ethnic and cultural diversity of the societies in which they practice, taking account of individual, family, group and community differences.


A current buzz and source of excitement in social work education and the profession of social work involves the international nature and globalization of practice. The enthusiasm surrounding social work’s many efforts to reach across the world and embrace various population groups is profound. Dr. Elvira Craig de Silva, president of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), acknowledges, “In the social work profession, there is much interest in furthering our nation’s involvement in issues that affect the global scene. Fortunately, social workers have the training and worldview to be an important part of this effort” (2008, p. 3).
Many social workers find it difficult to attend a conference, workshop, meeting, or continuing education event without entering a conversation or discussion regarding the international context and nature of contemporary social work education and practice.

Enthusiasm for international social work education is bubbling over among students, faculty, and practitioners. The International Association of Schools of Social Work and the International Federation of Social Workers are even working on new definitions of social work, noting that the profession in the twenty-first century is dynamic and evolving. New avenues for partnerships are being sought. (Leggett, 2008, p. 48)

Regardless of specialty or area of practice, many social workers would agree that the realities of modern-day practice necessitate an enriched and informed understanding of people, social-economic issues, cultural context, politics, and social systems from both near and far.

It is social work’s long-standing commitment to assessment and change involving the social environment, especially with larger social systems (e.g., communities and societies), that positions the field for a leadership role in grappling with the human elements and challenges associated with globalization. Unlike other helping professionals, social workers have historically embraced the rich and comprehensive nature of the social environment in everyday life. Social work has a unique tradition in America of working with a variety of population groups to promote human well-being by promoting living wages, safe housing, affordable transportation, nurturing daycare, comprehensive health coverage, and quality education. When considering the social-economic and technological interconnected and interdependent nature of our contemporary world, it seems only logical for social work to be at the forefront of efforts to provide a broader, more comprehensive approach for examining and addressing both the positive and negative consequences of globalization.

In order to grasp the changing nature of living conditions, social circumstances, and practice opportunities and challenges across the globe, social work practice is challenged to identify new and creative ways for keeping informed about various cultures and the profession’s responses to the needs
of people in and from other countries. Educational opportunities include scholarly readings, course work, workshops, conferences, training sessions, internet sites, and educational trips. As with any form of social work practice, social workers also learn from their experiences with consumers of services. There is no formal substitute for the educational benefit obtained from critical thought and analysis of the cultural relevance of values, customs, beliefs, and behaviors as expressed by clients. Social workers and clients prosper when education is bidirectional, concerted, and ongoing.

In keeping with the NASW Code of Ethics, social workers will also want to document “competence in provision of services that are sensitive to clients’ cultures and to differences among people and cultural groups” (NASW, 1996, p. 9). In our litigious age that emphasizes credentialing and limiting practice to defined scopes of practice, social workers will continue to be called on by regulatory entities (e.g., state licensing boards) and funding sources to provide evidence of their abilities and competency in practice. Arguably, it is no longer sufficient in many locales and jurisdictions simply to seek to understand the nature of social and cultural diversity. Instead, social workers need to document and be able to demonstrate in concrete ways (e.g., certificates of completion) sensitivity and competence in working with clients from various cultures. Indeed, as a means to assist social workers to keep abreast of current literature and best practices in areas of expertise, the NASW has initiated teleconferences for specialty practice sections for continuing education units. Using technological advancement for continuing education holds promise for learning about and documenting knowledge and competency in working with a variety of populations groups as well as innovation in international practice.

Some social workers believe that our profession is being challenged to “rethink whether a traditional professional approach is well-suited to the needs of a complex, diverse and divided world” (Mohan, 2005, p. 246). If globalization and the international nature of life are prompting and calling for adaptation in professional practice, then social workers, social work educators, and students of social work must be willing to step out of their comfort zones in order to consider and embrace occurrences, concepts, terms, beliefs, behaviors, practices, modes of change, policies, interests, values, and realities that are unfamiliar and must be willing to appropriately challenge conventional wisdom and modes of intervention.
This book presents examples of social work practice and policy in various countries for analysis and contemplation. With each example of international practice, allow yourself to imagine being in another country and become immersed into the national context, social situation, presenting circumstances, and social work responses. Frame thinking with the assumption that differences in intervention, policies, and programs are to be expected and reflect time, place, culture, and people. It is hoped that the various examples will serve as an impetus for learning more about situations, struggles, and the strengths of people in the countries discussed and promote additional professional involvement in addressing and improving social-economic conditions of people across the globe.

BASIC CONCEPTS AND TERMS

Few would disagree that the current interest in international social work “stems mainly from increased global interdependence. As such, many social work practitioners and scholars have argued that the field of social work must ‘internationalize’ itself to address these new, complex social problems stemming from the international context” (Xu, 2006, p. 679). Some social workers argue the ramifications of a global economy for social justices are multiple and complex and constitute one of the most important challenges for social work in the 21st century (Polack, 2004). However, this is not to suggest that international social work should be viewed solely on the basis of technological strides and trends toward social-economic interconnectedness that have been experienced over recent years. It is important to recognize that U.S. social workers have a history of involvement in humanitarian efforts across the globe, as evidenced by the contributions of social workers in the International Red Cross Movement and organizations such as the Peace Corps, the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration, and the United Nations Children’s Fund.

Over three decades ago, Friedlander (1975) acknowledged social work’s broader, global perspective in helping and in the conceptualization of the social environment. “For years, a number of social workers have taken it upon themselves to work for international development agencies and non-governmental organizations in direct services, administration,
program planning, and development” (Fred, 2005, p. 4). Hence, social work's commitment to problems around the world and initiatives across national boundaries is not simply or solely attributable to recent trends involving globalization. Instead, social work has been pursuing and building momentum for international work based on the profession’s long-standing devotion to principles of human rights and social justice. It is important to remember that “globalization is not new. It has been under way for centuries. What is new is the pace and the transforming effects” (Ramos & Briar-Lawson, 2004, p. 365).

So, what is international social work? There is not a simple answer to this question. Healy (2001) states: “The definition of the term international social work has been the subject of much debate. . . . international can mean any of the following: between or among two or more nations, of or pertaining to two or more nations or their citizens, pertaining to the relations between nations, having members or activities in several nations, or transcending national boundaries or viewpoints” (p. 5). Regardless of definition, Healy has identified four dimensions to international action—“internationally related domestic practice and advocacy, professional exchange, international practice, and international policy development and advocacy” (p. 7).

In an abstract fashion, the phrase “international social work” can be thought of and defined as focusing “on the profession and practice in different countries, the different roles that social workers perform, the practice methods they use, the problems they deal with, and the many challenges they face” (Hokenstad, Khinduka, & Midgley, 1992, p. 4). Using this definition, and consistent with the impetus of this book, the primary focus of international social work involves social work practice as defined and implemented in various countries. In social work practice and education, professionals and students learn and can benefit from thoughtful analysis of examples of practice and policy in other countries. International social work promotes an awareness and exchange of information about perspectives, approaches, and techniques utilized in social work that are grounded in a specific country’s traditions, laws, culture, geographical setting, and social environment.

In their education in the United States, many social workers have been introduced or exposed to social policies and human services from other
countries. Projects and papers typically are designed with the intention to expand thinking, examine the merits of practices from different countries, and analyze the influence of culture and values on policy formation and the provision of services. An example is the critical analysis of the strengths and limitations of universal healthcare policies in Canada as compared to the privatization of healthcare in the United States. When confronted with such an assignment, students often grapple with the appropriateness and applicability of policies and service delivery as defined and implemented in another country. This type of analysis is called international social welfare or comparative social policy.

A growing body of literature in social work is dedicated to the study of people living across country boundaries. Furman and Negi (2007) identify and describe “the emergence of a population of migrants who live their lives across transnational borders” (p. 107). The term “transnational migration” refers to people “engaged in lives across countries and cultures for economic reasons, while immigrants and traditional migrants discontinue such consistent movement across boundaries with the passing of time” (Furman & Negi, 2007, p. 108). When working with transnational migrants, social workers need an understanding of two or more cultures as well as family structure, political influences, social-economic conditions, and technical capabilities (e.g., communication and transportation technology) that necessitate, support, and challenge transnational lifestyles.

Xu (2006) proposes an expansive yet sensible definition of international social work that emphasizes the influence of organizations and agencies in determining professional practice and exchange across national boundaries. For example, are community-based agencies willing to engage in international partnerships, and at what cost or benefit? This perspective recognizes that the definition of international social work practice in many settings is influenced directly by the perceptions of agency and community leaders and stakeholders concerning the impact of globalization and migration for a particular geographical area (Xu, 2006, p. 684). An agency-oriented approach is needs based, highlighting the reality that many organizations and communities become involved in programming, services, and educational efforts in a reactive rather than proactive fashion—based on organizational or community need(s).
Finally, as mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) has worked with various international organizations, including the International Association of Schools of Social Work, to create a commonly accepted definition of social work that transcends national boundaries. The IFSW (2005) defines social work in this manner:

The social work profession promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being. Utilising theories of human behaviour and social systems, social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work. (p. 1)

While one could debate the specifics of any number of definitional aspects, this definition is an important milestone for providing social workers with

### Reflection Exercises

1. Visit the homepage of the International Federation of Social Workers/International Association of Schools of Social Work (http://www.ifsw.org/home) and read about the organization’s mission, value and principle statement, and planned activities. What are the themes of the information? What information do you find especially helpful when considering an international experience?

2. Group Debate: Randomly divide class members into two groups. The first group supports the agency’s decision (presented next) and describes the merits of the decision. The second group points out the negative consequences of such a decision.

My child welfare agency is experiencing appreciable budget problems. These financial woes have forced leadership to prioritize the needs of consumers in the community over the plight of people from and in other parts of the world. For example, the agency plans to eliminate international adoptions, the refugee relocation program, and emergency services for people unable to document their legal status in the United States.
CONSIDERATIONS FOR TRANSITIONING TO AND EMPLOYMENT IN A FOREIGN COUNTRY

Social workers fortunate enough to have spent time in foreign lands often have a romantic approach to travel and learning about different places, ways, and people. Reading about, encountering, and contemplating everyday life in another country can be personally and professionally enriching and inspirational. Both opportunities and challenges are presented to social workers when studying and practicing abroad. Salient considerations include: language acquisition, meeting people, developing new relationships, securing reliable sources of information, safety concerns, the country’s political stability, culture shock (e.g., unfamiliarity with local customs), and the presence of infrastructure (e.g., agencies and organizations) for professional oversight to process important issues or dilemmas.

In reality, most visitors and professionals in a foreign country must learn to rely on acquaintances and friends on the ground to support everyday functioning and activities. It is common to rely on a trustworthy go-to person or host family to help address the complexities of everyday existence (e.g., transportation, shelter, food, laws, and customs). Especially when language is a barrier, seemingly simple and basic tasks can become overwhelming. As an example, in many developing countries, commodes are not regularly available. “Squatters” and makeshift holes in the ground may be the norm. Sanitary toilet paper can be scarce. Imagine trying to go to the bathroom without anyone explaining the local scene and the dos and don’ts.

When considering employment in social work in a different country, White (2006) suggests sensitivity to and understanding of “differences in social welfare systems and legislation; in the organization of human services and role expectations; and in communication styles, professional terminology and perhaps also in language spoke, as well as in professional qualifications” (p. 631). The tradition and current implementation of the practice
of social work and human services in any particular country is especially relevant. A primary consideration involves the professional authority and stature of social workers: expectations, rights, and ethical responsibilities. In a practical sense, what types of activities and functions can social workers perform with consumers of services?

Across borders, do not assume a common definition, understanding, or credentialing of social workers. In some countries, the term social worker refers to a formally recognized status that requires an educational degree in social work. Indeed, social work practice could be differentiated by basic versus advanced practice, contingent on degree level and/or number of years of practice. In other countries, becoming a social worker is more an artifact of experience in social welfare organizations, a special certification, or governmental designation (classification). In the United States, status as a social worker is regulated by state law and differs appreciably from state to state.

Additionally, expect theoretical orientations or the epistemological basis of social work practice to vary from nation to nation. In some countries, social work practice is more clearly grounded in problem solving and less oriented to an examination of the strengths of people, as can be seen in the IFSW’s definition of social work. Other countries emphasize cognitive-behavioral and evidence-based approaches, as currently can be found in many parts of the United States. Conversely, other parts of the world view social work practice as more of an art than science with little consideration of measurable outcomes. The challenge in these realms for international social workers is to avoid the undue imposition or exclusion of modes of practice, especially biases derived from one’s country of origin. Lum (2007) states:

> If the mission of social work is truly to promote social and economic justice, we must translate that commitment into culturally relevant and nonoppressive social work practice. Social workers need to do their own work in relation to understanding their own boundaries of moral exclusion and developing a stance of inclusion, in which all people are entitled to the same values, rules, and considerations of fairness. (p. 89)
The pragmatic aspects of obtaining employment across country borders “can be easier if transnational arrangements already exist for worker mobility between specified countries” (White, 2006, p. 632). For the European Union, there is the European Job Mobility Portal (www.europa.eu.int/eures). This is a good example of how countries can use technology to collaborate to provide information and guidance concerning employment opportunities in allied countries. When regularly updated, this kind of portal system can facilitate the fluid movement of professionals across national boundaries and effectively assist organizations in addressing labor market needs.

The recognition and validation of professional social work degrees and credentials relies heavily on designated national regulatory organizations. For example, in the United States, the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) examines and makes a determination concerning the comparability (equivalency) of a social work degree from another country with a bachelor’s of social work (BSW) or master’s of social work (MSW) earned from an American university. “According to Todd Lennon of CSWE . . . CSWE considers admission criteria, level and duration of course work length and supervision of field instruction and the content of the program from which the degree was received” (White, 2006, p. 635).

Other practical considerations for social workers hoping to practice in other countries involve the cost and time involved in the processing of visas and work permits. Understanding the myriad of regulations and forms to move paperwork through embassies, consulates, and immigration offices can be challenging and a barrier for employment. It is not unusual for people to hire attorneys or other professionals who specialize in obtaining visas and work permits. Employing a reputable person to prepare and efficiently process applications is often a huge advantage that assists people in receiving services.

CONTEMPLATE MOTIVATIONS FOR INVOLVEMENT IN INTERNATIONAL SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

Before engaging in international social work practice, ask yourself two important questions: Why here, and why now? As with any form of social work practice, the primary motivation for engagement in practice must
center on the needs and concerns of consumers of services and one’s professional preparation and strengths. Even the most cursory of assessments of the effects of globalization on the human condition would suggest that social-economic inequality, poverty, oppression, and strife over human rights can be found in many nations and across the globe. Indeed, many social scientists would argue that “in general, a significant economic change is likely to benefit some while hurting others. Globalization is not just about dollars and cents: globalization takes place with a social context where it [regularly] impacts upon people and their environments” (Ramos & Briar-Lawson, 2004, p. 372).

Involvement in international social work practice should be intentional, meaningful, and centered on using one’s talents for the benefit of consumer groups. A conscious and concerted effort should be made to ensure that international practice is advantageous to the identified client populations, not a vacationlike adventure in a foreign land. Social workers participating in efforts abroad have a value-added effect as opposed to being a drain on scarce resources. For example, in writing this book, the authors were careful to not burden or pull social workers away from their practices and work with client populations. In one instance, the authors of this book decided not to request a contribution from a social worker whose personal and professional commitments abroad were so great that writing would have presented an undue hardship.

Like other forms of social work practice, international practice should not be a self-centered, self-serving endeavor primarily for personal or professional gain. Although social workers certainly benefit intellectually and otherwise and can enjoy and learn from experiences abroad, international social work practice is predicated on improving the well-being of consumers of social services. When considering participation in international social work and international exchanges, it is important to acquire an understanding and overview of the other country; identify the benefits and costs for you and others associated with your practice; and clarify the specific expectations, roles, and responsibilities associated with the new social work position (Mathiesen & Lager, 2007).

Networking, knowing and developing an ability to interact with people and professionals with an organization(s) in another country, along with
an interest in and a passion for learning more about a particular culture are common sources of motivation for work, travel, and developing affiliations abroad. In this book, the examples of international social work practice reflect these functional realities. People tend to migrate toward and network with people on the basis of familiarity, interest, and interpersonal contacts. Many of the contributors to this book have long-standing professional relationships with each other. As suggested by Healy (2001), countries selected for inclusion in this book could have been chosen on the basis of a host of dimensions (e.g., state of development, status of the profession of social work, rankings of well-being, geographical region). The examples of international social work practice you are about to read, much like the migration of many social workers across national boundaries, came about primarily as a result of relationship building, contacts in social work, and the professional experiences of the authors. For the most part, country selection was predicated on professional relationships from social work practice and education.

READING EXAMPLES OF INTERNATIONAL SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE AND POLICY

In the chapters to come, you will be presented with thought-provoking examples of international social work practice and policy. For analytical
and critical thinking, consider these criteria when reading each example of practice and policy analysis:

- Foundation areas and core competencies
- Culture
- Organizational context
- Issues of safety and self-care in international social work practice
- Ethical considerations

These elements can be points of discussion for use in class or in conversations with classmates and professional colleagues.

**Foundation Areas and Core Competencies**

Traditionally, social work education has identified foundation areas (e.g., research, practice, social policy and services, values and ethics, etc.) that when considered collectively identify social work as having a body of knowledge, value orientation, and skill base for professional development. For many social workers, Greenwood’s (1957) article “Attributes of a Profession” stimulated thinking about and analysis of the unique nature, authority, and subculture of our profession. As social workers, we constitute “people who ‘profess’ or claim to know something special about particular phenomena. This claim to special knowledge is not an insignificant thing, for it is on the basis of such claims that doctors, lawyers, social workers, and other professional groups maintain privileged positions in society” (Gilbert, Miller, & Specht, 1980, p. 14).

Aligned with each example of international social work practice in this book is a different knowledge area typically associated with the profession of social work. In 2008, the CSWE endorsed new standards (Educational Policy and Accreditation, 2008 Standards) reconceptualizing foundation (knowledge) areas into “core competencies” for the preparation of social workers. In writing this book, a conscious and concerted attempt has been made to pay homage to traditionally recognized foundation areas in social work as well as to embrace the spirit of newly transformed CSWE standards delineating core competencies in social work education, emphasizing critical thinking, ethical practice, human diversity, research-informed
practice, human behavior and the social environment, social and economic well-being, policy practice, field education, and practice with clients at multiple levels.

When examining examples of practice in another country, ask yourself a variety of questions about the appropriateness, applicability, and unique nature of each foundation/competency area for social work practice. For example, is research for informed practice in South Africa (Chapter 6) the same or different from research in your native land? How might field education, now defined as signature pedagogy in social work education, differ in Portugal (Chapter 4) from that of other countries? How is human behavior and the social environment uniquely defined in Costa Rica (Chapter 7)? Ultimately, in a comparative fashion, one of your tasks should be to focus on the merits of how knowledge, skills, and the value orientation of social work are implemented in a unique fashion in each specific country and how they differ from your own national experience.

Try to approach each chapter with a creative yet skeptical spirit. Lindsey (2005) suggests six general themes for use when engaged in study abroad and contemplating foreign countries; these include: “opening the mind to new ways of thinking; awareness and insight into one’s own values and beliefs; social awareness and challenges to societal values and beliefs; appreciation of difference, cultural sensitivity, and anti-discriminatory practice; social justice; and professional identity development” (p. 229). Attentiveness to these themes will be helpful for understanding and deciphering the relevance of each identified knowledge area within a national context. As an example, how does cultural awareness and knowledge of values and beliefs in Mongolia (Chapter 5) inform and assist the reader to think about engagement, assessment, intervention, and evaluation of practice with individuals and families?

**Culture**

Upon return from a foreign land, it is not uncommon for interested coworkers, friends, and family members to ask: “So, what was it like living and working in [insert name of the country]?” Frequently, returnees hesitate to share a mere glimpse of their experience abroad. They can be apprehensive about entering brief conversations to describe complicated matters in complex cultural environments. One fear or source of caution involves
the ability to accurately and fully describe and share the culture of another country. A person may think: How can I ever do justice in communicating to friends and colleagues my immersion in another country?

Historically, a country’s culture has been conceptualized as a binding force or the social glue of a nation that involves shared knowledge, beliefs, morals, and customs, passed from generation to generation. Culture can be thought of as a blueprint for living or a prescription for life in a country—advancing ever-changing expectations and standards for members of a society concerning acceptable values, beliefs, behaviors, and activities.

For social workers engaged in international practice, the ability to understand culture and acquire a worldview between cultures for helpers and help seekers is crucial for participation in culturally appropriate practice and policy-oriented endeavors in foreign lands (Kee, 2003). For international practice, either through structured opportunities (e.g., classes, readings, and workshops) or less formal, experiential means, social workers need to understand and reconcile differences and develop a cognitive synthesis between their new and old society and culture (Kee, 2003). Making a deliberate effort to front-load information, taking preparatory steps for immersion into another country, and reflecting on one’s own culturally bound values and beliefs are important ingredients for combating culture shock and forming an appreciation of difference and cultural sensitivity to engage in antidiscriminatory practice (Lindsey, 2005).

In most societies, language, verbal and nonverbal, is a primary mode of communicating and sharing cultural aspects. Culture is socially transmitted through communication from members to members, individually and via groups and technology (e.g., media). Because language structures communication, one of the most relevant considerations for international practice involves “the importance of language in communicating with others . . . how language structures not only thinking, but the ways in which individuals perceive and make sense of their world and subsequently use these understandings in their interactions with others” (Dominelli, 2004, p. 515).

Before traveling abroad, you will have to make a decision concerning language and its role in learning about culture and subcultures of any land. Can you rely on your native language to understand another country’s culture and effectively communicate with people? If necessary, how quickly can you adopt another language? Will you need to rely on a translator(s)
to function successfully in another country? What are the limitations of depending on others for translation?

**Organizational Context**

Each of the examples of international social work practice or policy in this book takes place in and/or refers to organizational contexts. Organizations constitute a specific form of social unit where people unite and are structured to accomplish a common goal(s). In modern societies, organizations are known for placing “a high moral value on rationality, effectiveness, and efficiency . . . by coordinating a large number of human actions, the organizations create a powerful social tool” (Etzioni, 1964, p. 1). In developing countries, organizations may be less formal, rationale, and purposeful, emphasizing social-emotional and relational aspects.

Given Etzioni’s definition, it can be seen that the unique features of any organization, be it a social service agency, business, or club, are influenced by its societal and cultural context on the basis of common goals of people. More specifically, human service organizations tend to be built with the size, complexity, division of labor, and diversity of services needed to address identified goals and needs.

If organizations are open social systems and seek input from the broader environment for forming and adapting to “serve the various needs of society and its citizens” (Etzioni, 1964, p. 1), special attention needs to be given to how agency goals are established as well as which values influence the creation and development of organizational goals. For example, try to assess how the broader national context (e.g., political, religious, and economic conditions) and culture (e.g., beliefs and values) have impacted the organizational context of social work practice in each particular country. Management style, philosophical orientation to helping, ritualized practices, artwork, agency symbols, use of technology, jargon, shared assumptions about consumers of services as well as a variety of other elements can be dictated by organizational climate and culture (Ott, 1989).

Given the interconnected nature of countries and the movement of people across and between national boundaries (transnational migration) in the current era, Furman and Negi (2007) suggest that in many countries, an “important service need is to establish multi-service social welfare
agencies that are capable of responding to transnational populations” (p. 42). Multiservice agencies are human service organizations that offer a variety of goods and services to address the needs of identified population groups. As you read examples in this book, seek to identify the presence of multiservice social welfare agencies in each country. To and from which nations-states are people moving, and why? Would multiservice agencies be a realistic consideration in each identified country—why or why not? What type of expertise (e.g., language, knowledge of cultural and economic circumstances) is needed to practice social work in multiservice agencies with transnational population groups?

Issues of Safety and Self-Care in International Social Work Practice

As you contemplate social work practice in a variety of national settings, an essential consideration involves the safety, health, and overall well-being of each social worker. In order to help others, a professional needs to take care of her- or himself. A cardinal rule is to avoid placing oneself in danger. Familiarity with surroundings and the establishment of policies, procedures, and personnel to create a safe workplace are essential.

While social work practice in another country can be perilous, the quest and excitement for learning about people and cultures in other lands can cloud judgment and place a social worker at risk. In international social work practice, especially practice in developing countries, social workers can be tempted to circumvent typical safeguards in practice (e.g., supervisory oversight and safety procedures) in favor of very fluid, merging, undefined, and unstructured work environments. Caution is required to ensure that the passion for helping people abroad does not taint or supersede practice wisdom for maintaining safety. As examples, traveling alone, venturing into unknown surroundings, eating strange foods (dietary considerations), exposure to disease, and defying local norms, values, and laws can have disastrous consequences. As you read each chapter, identify obvious or seemingly inherent risks for each social worker.

Concerning self-care, Gibelman and Furman (2008) state, “An emotionally volatile worker is of little use to clients” (p. 222). Social workers need to identify their vulnerabilities in working with people and take
appropriate actions to ensure responsible, professional action with consumers of services. Taking time off, seeking professional help, maintaining sound and supportive supervision, surrounding oneself with positive and constructive colleagues, and establishing clear boundaries between professional and personal self are examples of ways to promote and enhance self-care. Stresses and tensions for social workers engaged in international social work practice can be uniquely challenging and idiosyncratic. In each chapter, take a few moments and make a special effort to ascertain what you think would constitute sources of stress or strain for a social worker. Given these demands, how might a social worker effectively embrace self-care?

**Ethical Considerations**

No matter the venue, many social workers would readily agree that ethical awareness and conduct is a foundation of professional social work practice. However, one of the most important considerations for a social worker participating in international practice and research involves “considering ethical matters . . . within the social, economic, and political reality of the host country” (Young, Johnson, & Bryant, 2002, p. 89). These social, economic, and political realities provide the context for and often shape beliefs concerning what constitutes ethical behavior and action by social workers, producing the potential for considerable variability in definition of ethical principles and acceptable professional conduct from country to country.

In an effort to promote ethical standards for social workers worldwide, the International Federation of Social Workers and the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) have developed a document to cut across borders to delineate general principles and guidelines on professional conduct “to encourage social workers across the world to reflect on the challenges and dilemmas that face them and make ethically informed decisions about how to act” (IFSW, 2005, p. 3). Consistent with many national codes of ethics, these ethical principles and guidelines, titled “Ethics in Social Work, Statement of Principles,” were approved by the IFSW and IASSW in 2004 and emphasize respect of human rights and
dignity, social justice, competence, integrity, compassion, professionalism, confidentiality, accountability, collaboration, ethically informed decision making, and evaluation of national codes. The complete and most recent version of this statement can be found on the IFSW’s Web site at www.IFSW.org.

Most chapters in this book highlight an ethical dilemma grounded in a country context for your reflection and thought. Consider each chapter’s ethical consideration with the IFSW’s “Ethics in Social Work, Statement of Principles” as well as your native country’s code of ethics for social workers. How do each country’s social-economic and political conditions influence relevance and applicability of the ethical issue? If you were assigned to an ethics panel to review each situation, how would you respond as a professional to each ethical concern or allegation?

FORMING AN IMAGINATION FOR INQUIRY

In a seminal book, C. Wright Mills (1959) called on social scientists to look beyond their everyday lives (work, family, and circumstances) to critically examine the experiences and social patterns of people in connection with corresponding social structures (e.g., countries) given a specific time in history. He sought a conscious and deliberate, not necessarily scientific, examination of the social-cultural environment and ways of life of others. Mills referred to this ability as the sociological imagination.

When applied to the examination of social work practice and policy in foreign lands, the quest becomes to identify and critically analyze the essential features and qualities of each country, group of people, organization, social structure, and form of social work practice and policy. In order to embrace Mills’s sociological imagination, strive to leave behind your own unique worries, trials, and realities of everyday life. Concentrate on content in each chapter, and attempt to immerse yourself in the examples of international practice and policy, as if you actually were the social worker in each country. Cognitively place yourself in each national context and imagine the pleasures, trials, and enjoyment of each experience. Who knows; someday you may experience a social work practice as professional in a distant land.
SUMMARY

An increasing number of social workers are engaging in international practice. Certainly the profession of social work recognizes globalization as a feature that needs to be addressed through curriculum, workshops, seminars, conferences, research agendas, professional travel, and the thoughtful consideration of the experiences of social workers around the world. Globalization challenges social workers to expand their fields of practice and knowledge and to consider social justice from a broader, worldwide perspective.

This chapter introduces you to the idea of international social work by discussing key concepts and suggesting that you consider unfamiliar countries and customs. Placing social work in a larger context promises exciting adventures for social workers interested in a variety of cultural and political factors across consumer systems. As you read each country-based chapter, live vicariously. Allow yourself to take the role of the other and cognitively assume the status of a social worker in another country. This approach promises to be liberating, filled with contextually relevant ideas, thoughts, experiences, challenges, and modes of professional engagement from the everyday lives and experiences of colleagues committed to the ideals of professional social work.

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