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James Midgley

Journal of Social Work 2001; 1; 21

DOI: 10.1177/146801730100100103

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Issues in International Social Work

Resolving Critical Debates in the Profession

JAMES MIDGLEY

University of California, Berkeley, USA

Abstract

- *Summary:* A review of the theoretical construction of international social work.
- *Findings:* Although social workers are now more frequently engaged in international activities than ever before, they remain divided on a number of critical issues. These include the definition of international social work; the nature and impact of globalization on social work; the proper role of remedial, activist and developmental practice; and finally the place of values, cultural diversity and internationalism as an ideological position. These issues are discussed and clarified, and an attempt is made to formulate proposals that can accommodate and resolve differences.
- *Applications:* The applications of this article concern the theoretical construction of social work, in particular, the development of transnational social work; the construction of curricula for social work education and a reconceptualization of the importance of globalization and regionalism for social work practice.

Keywords cultural diversity globalization internationalism
international social work

Terms such as 'shrinking world', 'global village' and 'international interdependence' are now used with monotonous regularity. Although commonplace, they signify the dramatic changes which are taking place in the way people experience the social world. For centuries, the immediate locality shaped and bounded reality. With the rise of nationalism in the nineteenth century, the nation state emerged to frame human experience and today people's identities are moulded by national affiliation. However, a global consciousness is also emerging and many more people now have a greater appreciation of their place within a complex, worldwide system of human activity. The emergence of a greater global awareness has, of course, been facilitated by objective changes in

the way the social world impinges on human experience. The revolution in communications, the ability to travel readily to remote parts of the world, the increasing cultural diversity of national populations, enhanced global trade and economic activities as well as greater international political cooperation, have all fostered the globalization of the human experience.

While the profession of social work is also affected by the trend towards globalization, social workers have been engaged in international exchanges for many decades. Indeed, formative attempts to formulate a social work practice methodology involved extensive international contacts between the profession's founders in the United Kingdom, the United States and other industrializing countries in the late nineteenth century. Innovations such as charity visiting and settlement work in the United Kingdom diffused to the United States and, in turn, theoretical developments in American social work were adopted in Europe and elsewhere. Since then, as Hokenstad and Kendall (1995) report, international exchanges between social workers have increased significantly. Today, social workers are more interested in developments in other countries, they travel more often to international meetings and conferences, and they are more frequently engaged in international collaboration.

In spite of enhanced international engagement, social workers are sharply divided on a number of important international issues. There appears to be little agreement on what positions the profession should take on these issues. There is disagreement about the nature of international social work and the profession's commitment to internationalizing the curriculum and social work practice. The normative implications of globalization are also in dispute. Although many social workers stress the positive benefits that enhanced economic, political and cultural integration can bring, others are highly critical of these developments. There are differences of opinion on whether the profession should be primarily committed to remedial, activist or developmental forms of practice. This issue is particularly pertinent to the question of social work's proper role in the developing countries of the global South, but it is also relevant to the industrial nations. Finally, social workers are divided on the question of the universality of social work values and whether internationalism is a desirable normative position for the profession to adopt as it seeks to respond to the forces of globalization.

These and other issues pose a challenge to international social work. It is unlikely that they can be easily resolved, but this article seeks to clarify the debates attending each issue in the hope that clarification will result in a better appreciation of how differences of opinion might be reconciled or, at least, be better understood and respected. Although social work, like many other applied fields, has tended to polarize issues, it is possible to find ways to accommodate differences and propose resolutions that most social workers can accept.

Engaging in International Social Work

Since its inception and formalization in Europe and North America just over a century ago, the social work profession has spread around the globe. Although there are no estimates of the total number of professionally qualified social workers in the world today, professional social work education is offered in many countries. Hokenstad and Kendall (1995) report that there were some 1700 professional schools of social work in more than 100 countries in 1995. The expansion of professional social work has been impressive. In 1929, when the first organized efforts at international collaboration were initiated by the International Committee of Schools of Social Work, only 46 member schools in 10 countries were involved. In 1950, when the United Nations undertook its first survey of social work education, there were 373 schools in 46 countries (United Nations, 1950). About 25 years later, Kendall (1974) reported that the International Association of Schools of Social Work had 459 member schools in 66 countries.

The growth of social work as a profession in different countries owes much to international collaboration. As was noted earlier, the founders of social work exchanged ideas and experiences and, in the late nineteenth century, innovations in some industrializing countries were diffused to others. The creation of the first school of social work in the developing world in 1925 was also, as Kendall (2000) notes, a product of international collaboration. Although international exchanges have continued unabated since then, Hokenstad and Kendall (1995) believe that there have been several periods of particularly intense international activity. They suggest that the formative exchanges of the early decades of the century were followed by a second burst of international activity after the Second World War when social workers in the Western industrial countries promoted the expansion of professional social work in the newly independent developing countries. Today, as social work is expanding in the former communist nations and in China, international exchanges are again being accentuated.

In spite of the impressive growth of social work around the world, and the efforts of the International Association of Schools of Social Work and the International Federation of Social Workers to promote greater international awareness, some believe that the profession has not responded adequately to the challenges and opportunities of the new global era. They claim that international activities in social work are haphazard and uncoordinated, and that the absence of a systematic attempt to internationalize the profession has seriously impeded its ability to contribute meaningfully at the international level.

Evidence for this view comes from studies of the inclusion of international content at schools of social work in different countries, and particularly the United States. Nagy and Falk (2000) report that various reviews of curricular offerings at American schools since the 1960s reveal a serious lack of international content. Indeed, scholars such as Healy (1995) believe that there has

been a retreat from internationalizing the curricula of schools of social work in the United States. Evidence from other countries is equally bleak. In spite of the importance of acquiring an international perspective in today's globalizing world, Healy believes that schools of social work are not adequately exposing students to international content.

Other writers such as Midgley (1992) and Hokenstad and Kendall (1995) take a more optimistic view, contending that more international exchanges are taking place and that more social workers are aware of international events than in the past. However, it is true that relatively few social workers are informed about professional developments in other countries. The majority are concerned with local practice issues, and have scant understanding of global trends or concerns. Despite the critical importance of international issues, international social work is still the purview of a small group of experts. In addition, unlike many other professional and academic fields, social work has neglected comparative research and relatively little has been done to replicate, test and adapt practice innovations from other societies (Hokenstad et al., 1992).

While there are differences of opinion about whether a commitment to international social work has increased or declined in recent years, it is obvious that much more needs to be done if the profession is to claim that it has truly transcended its preoccupation with local concerns and adopted a broad, international perspective. In addition, as will be shown in the final section of this article, there is ambiguity about whether a greater commitment to internationalism is, in fact, a desirable goal for social work. While most social workers will support the idea of enhanced internationalization, many will be uncomfortable with the proposition that social work should be committed to internationalist ideology.

The Problem of Definition

There is no standardized definition of the term 'international social work' or agreement about what international social work entails. Even the experts have different views about the meaning of the term. Healy (1995) reports that a plethora of definitions have emerged, and her own review of the terminologies employed by social workers shows that a large number of different terms are currently used.

Some writers define international social work as a field of practice, stressing the importance of specific skills and knowledge to enable social workers to work in international agencies. This definition is the oldest, having been formalized in the 1940s and 1950s. Friedlander (1955, 1975) uses the term to refer specifically to the social welfare activities of international agencies such as the Red Cross and the United Nations. Healy (1995) reports that this approach was widely accepted in the past and that it governed the first definition of international social work adopted by the Council on Social Work Education in the United States in 1957. A variation of this approach defines international social

work as social work practice with immigrants or refugees. Sanders and Pedersen (1984) favour this definition, suggesting that social work education should include more international content to allow domestic social workers to properly comprehend the cultural backgrounds of immigrants and refugees and be more sensitive to their needs.

Yet another approach places less emphasis on practice and defines international social work as the contacts and exchanges that take place between social workers from different countries. Midgley (1990) questions the view that international social work is a distinctive field of practice and argues that it connotes instead a variety of international exchanges. Healy (1995: 422) agrees, suggesting that international social work is a 'broad umbrella term referring to any aspect of social work involving two or more nations'. Hokenstad et al. (1992: 4) develop this idea and say that international social work is concerned with 'the profession and practice in different parts of the world . . . the different roles social workers perform, the practice methods they use, the problems they deal with and the challenges they face'. This idea comes close to proposing the creation of an academic field of comparative social work that would systematically study social work in different countries (Nagy and Falk, 2000).

Yet others take an even broader view and define international social work as a global awareness that enhances the ability of social workers to transcend their preoccupation with the local and contextualize their role within a broad, global setting. This approach finds expression in the proposal by Asamoah et al. (1997) to end the international-domestic dichotomy in social work and to create a global mindset among social workers that transcends local concerns. This idea is similar to Robertson's (1992) belief that a global consciousness is gradually emerging among ordinary people today. Other writers have echoed this idea, with the notion that social work must enhance international linkages, provide a professional education that inculcates a greater global awareness among students, and address problems on a worldwide scale (Hokenstad and Midgley, 1997: 7).

Many writers believe that the issue of definition needs to be resolved. Unless the nature and scope of international social work can be defined in concrete terms, it is hardly likely that social workers will hasten to become more involved in the field. Similarly, if schools of social work are to increase international curriculum content, they need to know what this content should comprise. At present, as Healy (1995) points out, social work educators have a poorly defined conceptual and practical subject terrain on which to build an adequate curriculum. Nagy and Falk (2000) point out that the failure to resolve the issue of definition is a formidable barrier to internationalizing the curriculum.

One way to address this is to formulate a broad definition of international social work that incorporates different approaches. Instead of juxtaposing different definitions, it is possible to recognize that they all have merit. Beginning with a broad, encompassing perspective based on a global consciousness, it is possible to recognize different dimensions of internationalization that focus,

in turn, on comparative enquiry, professional collaboration and specific forms of practice in international agencies that requires appropriate knowledge and skills. A comprehensive synthesis based on this hierarchy of interests can be constructed to accommodate and reconcile diverse approaches and create a viable understanding of what international social work entails. It remains to be seen whether social workers involved in international social work will accept a synthesis of this kind.

The Globalization Debate

Although the term 'globalization' is widely used today, it is still poorly defined. In the media and popular literature, the term is associated with the activities of organizations such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Trade Organization, and the efforts of protesters to disrupt their meetings. This usage emphasizes the negative economic aspects of globalization, with the contention that increased world trade, economic integration and speculative investments have weakened domestic economies, undermined the autonomy of national governments, retrenched social programmes and harmed the welfare of ordinary people. However, more serious social science analyses of globalization recognize its multifaceted dimensions. While globalization does indeed involve international economic integration, it also has demographic, social, cultural, political and psychological dimensions. In this broader interpretation, globalization is viewed as a process of rapidly increasing human interaction within a 'one-world' system that transcends previous political, spatial and temporal boundaries (Giddens, 1990; Harvey, 1989; Robertson, 1992).

Despite this broader view of globalization, most writings on the subject by social work and social policy authors focus narrowly on international economic activities and generally conclude that enhanced economic integration has negative consequences for human well-being. For example, Dominelli (1999) believes that globalization has dramatically affected countries such as the United Kingdom where the 'market discipline' accompanying globalization is now no longer confined to economic matters but to the activities of government, the social welfare system and even to human relationships. Social work has also been affected by this development. Its caring commitments have been replaced by a crass commercialism that imposes business ethics on the helping process, technocratizes service delivery and weakens the profession's ability to serve those in need. In addition, social work has suffered from the deprofessionalization of the social services and has lost control over its own affairs.

Mishra (1999) provides an equally pessimistic analysis of the impact of globalization on social policy, arguing that it has undermined the ability of governments to pursue full employment policies, created pressures to cut social expenditures and debilitated the ideological consensus that legitimated the welfare state. He believes that the logic of globalization is diametrically opposed to the logic of social policy (p. 15).

Although other social work and social policy writers agree that economic globalization driven by speculative capitalism has caused serious harm, they emphasize its multifaceted dimensions and stress the opportunities globalization affords of enhancing international collaboration, promoting peace and increasing cultural understanding. Inspired by the ideology of internationalism, they also take a more optimistic view of the prospect of regulating global capitalism and of renewing collective responsibility for social welfare.

For example, Midgley's (1997a) more comprehensive definition of globalization suggests that enhanced global human interaction has positive implications for social welfare. Although critical of the ravages of speculative finance capitalism, he argues that international efforts to regulate the global economy can succeed. Deacon et al. (1997) also take a more positive view, that it is possible to formulate a 'global governance reform agenda' that will result in the regulation of international economic activities, increase the accountability of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, strengthen the United Nations, empower international non-government organizations and popular movements, and advocate the adoption of a global system of political, legal and social rights. In this new global environment, they believe, social policy will increasingly be formulated at the supranational level.

Although it might appear that pessimistic accounts of the impact of globalization are irreconcilable with the more optimistic assessments of what can be achieved in a dynamic global world system, greater clarification of the issues suggests that there is consensus among international social work scholars on several important issues and that the tendency to polarize different approaches can be transcended. First, there is universal agreement that international speculative capitalism has had a negative impact on social welfare. Unlike the economic literature, no apology for international capitalism has yet appeared in social work publications. Also, many social work and social policy writers who define globalization narrowly in economic terms would not reject a broader view that includes its other dimensions. Finally, most would agree that steps need to be taken to address the negative impact of economic globalization.

However, there may be less consensus about how best to resolve the problem. Some writers believe that the challenges of economic globalization can be met through concerted international effort, but some favour a greater emphasis on local activities (Ife, 1998; Wagner, 1997). This strategy offers an alternative to the proposal that governmental action should be mobilized at the supranational level, but there is a shared belief in the need for more effective political mobilization to combat unregulated financial speculation. Mobilization will be needed not only at the global level, but at the local and national levels as well. All agree that social work has a vital role to play in promoting political action of this kind.

Remedial, Activist or Developmental Social Work?

Since its founding in the late nineteenth century, social work has used different practice methods to apply the skills, knowledge and values of its professional personnel to the task of enhancing human well-being. These methods include social casework (or clinical social work as it is now more widely known), group work and community work. Although there is general agreement that these different methods form an integral part of the profession's activities, preferences for these practice methods give rise to different conceptions of social work's wider commitments, roles and functions. While most social workers believe that the profession should be primarily concerned with treating the problems of needy people, others contend that it should be actively involved in social reform. Some stress the need for preventive forms of intervention, and others believe that social work should seek to promote development and progressive social change. Although these different views on the profession's proper role and function find expression in domestic debates, they are particularly marked in international circles, particularly with reference to the developing countries of the global South.

Most social workers today engage in direct practice, working with individuals and their families and treating the personal problems of their clients. This reflects the dominance of a remedial orientation within the profession and the widespread use of psychological behavioural and treatment theories. In the industrial countries, social work has become heavily involved in psychotherapy, resulting in criticisms that it has abandoned its formative mission to serve the poor and oppressed (Specht and Courtney, 1994; Lowe and Reid, 1999). In developing countries, social workers are also primarily engaged in remedial practice but their interventions often focus on the material needs of their clients. Although relatively few engage in psychotherapy, professional education in these countries often relies heavily on Western textbooks that emphasize the acquisition of psychotherapeutic skills. The result is a mismatch between the professional education these social workers receive and the tasks they are required to perform.

Criticisms of social work's concern with remediation have been expressed by many social work writers from the developing countries, who claim that the profession's individualized, therapeutic approach is unsuited to the pressing problems of poverty, unemployment, hunger, homelessness and ill-health that characterizes the global South. For example, Bose (1992) writes scathingly about the irrelevance of much social work in India to its pressing development needs. Professional social work in India has remained committed to remedial practice with individuals and families and has failed to contribute to wider efforts to address the problems of mass poverty and deprivation. Other social work writers from the developing world have previously made the same argument (Khinduka, 1971; Midgley 1981; Nagpaul, 1972; Shawkey, 1972).

These criticisms have enhanced awareness of the need for social work to

play a more significant role in development, and in more recent years evidence of a greater commitment to developmental forms of social work practice has emerged both in the developing and the industrial countries. Community work principles have been applied not only to mobilize and organize local people but to promote their involvement in community projects that improve health, nutrition, literacy and infrastructure. Social workers have also become involved in productive activities through the creation of agricultural and manufacturing cooperatives and through the use of micro-credit and micro-enterprises (Else and Raheim, 1992; Gray, 1996; Livermore, 1996; Midgley, 1993; Midgley, 1997b). These activities are compatible with international efforts by the United Nations to promote social development and they suggest that social work can make a useful contribution to addressing the pressing material needs of hundreds of millions of poor people around the world today.

But some writers believe that developmental forms of social work do not address underlying social inequalities and injustices, and that they fail to challenge the pervasive exploitation of the poor, women, gays and lesbians, people with disabilities and other oppressed groups. They argue for a more activist commitment that challenges oppression and promotes liberation. They point out that social work has in the past done little to contribute to this goal. Indeed, its commitment to remediation has deflected attention from these issues.

While it is true that social and political activism has not been a primary preoccupation in social work, the profession has since its early days advocated social reform and engaged in activist forms of practice. In the United States, many social workers associated with the settlements at the turn of the century campaigned for progressive social improvements, and in the 1930s the rank and file movement was inspired by socialist ideology. These social workers collaborated with the labour movement to advocate for progressive change. In the United Kingdom community work has long been identified with a vigorous form of local activism that challenges established political and social practices. In the 1970s many social workers in Latin American countries were inspired by the writings of Paulo Freire, and sought to apply his ideas in social work practice (Resnick, 1976). Activism also found expression in the efforts of some social workers to challenge oppressive dictatorship in countries such as Chile and South Africa (Jimenez and Alwyn, 1992; Mazibuko et al., 1992; Patel, 1992).

However, it cannot be claimed that social activism has been popular in social work or that it has inspired many social workers. In fact, few social workers pay much attention to these activities and some even regard them as inappropriate. In turn, social workers who are committed to social action often regard therapeutic practice as little more than a tool for perpetuating entrenched inequalities and supporting the vested interests of elites.

It will be difficult to reconcile these different views about social work's proper role and function in society. Disagreements on this issue have been vigorously expressed for many decades and no real accommodation has yet been

forged. Nevertheless, it is possible to conceive of a situation where the profession recognizes and institutionalizes its different commitments and places appropriate stress on their application in different situations. Obviously, the social needs of prosperous middle-class communities in the United States or other advanced industrial countries are not the same as those of impoverished slum-dwellers in Africa. Accordingly, social workers in these and other communities will emphasize different approaches when seeking to meet their needs. Also, remedial, preventive and developmental functions are not mutually exclusive and, as social workers in many developing countries are now demonstrating, it is possible to integrate these different functions within the same practice setting. For example, they have shown that the problems of child abuse and neglect can be managed more effectively within a wider developmental setting that promotes community involvement in pre-school education, child and maternal health, nutrition and greater economic independence for women. However, if these different functions are to be effectively integrated, social workers will need to recognize the value of the profession's diverse commitments and appreciate the extent to which they can all contribute to human welfare. This will, in turn, require a greater commitment from the profession's leadership to build consensus and end the internecine disagreements which have plagued social work since its formative years.

Universalism, Diversity and Internationalism

A final issue in international social work concerns deeply rooted beliefs about values, cultural diversity and national identity. At first glance, the rhetoric attending these terms would suggest that the topic is uncontentious. It is widely believed that social workers share a common set of universal values, respect cultural diversity and recognize national rights. However, a more incisive analysis suggests that these issues are not as straightforward as they appear.

The social work profession has historically been committed to formulating a set of universal value principles. In the United States, the generic principles were formulated in the 1920s to provide a common base for diverse forms of social work practice. However, they were eventually institutionalized as a set of ethical precepts. As is well known, they included concepts such as individuation, self-determination, non-judgmentalism and confidentiality. They exerted a powerful influence in social work, and shaped the attitudes of generations of social workers, not only in the United States but in other countries as well. While they have now been superseded by more sophisticated explications of social work values, they continue to be relevant today.

Although these principles attained canonical status, their ideological derivation was often criticized in the 1960s and 1970s. Some experts pointed out that social work's values were rooted in an individualistic culture derived from Western liberalism and, as such, were not universally shared (Council on Social Work Education, 1967). Also, while most social workers took it for granted that

social work's commitment to individualism was highly desirable, Briar and Miller (1971) showed that it was problematic. Internationally respected scholars such as Friedlander (1958) applauded the fact that social work's values were derived from American ideals such as equality of opportunity, freedom and individual responsibility.

The question of whether social work's liberal values are relevant to societies with very different value systems gradually became an issue in international social work. In response to criticisms that social work's values were not relevant to culturally different societies, some scholars sought to demonstrate that there was a high degree of congruity between the profession's values and those of other cultures. As Midgley (1981) revealed, a plethora of publications appeared in the 1960s and 1970s claiming that the values of Islam, Buddhism and Zoroastrianism were compatible with those of Western social work. These publications concluded that social work values had universal applicability and were not a Western import unsuited to the cultural realities of other societies.

Others expressed doubts about social work's value universality. For example, Almanzor (1967) drew attention to the disjunction between Western social work precepts and the realities of her own Filipino culture which, as she pointed out, made the implementation of Western social work practice methods very difficult. Some writers such as Wijewardena (1967) were even more critical, insisting that the value precepts of Western social work were totally inapplicable to other cultures.

As a result of these debates, social workers engaged in international activities began to reflect more critically on the relevance of Western social work to the cultural as well as economic and social realities of other societies. Much of the discussion focused on the developing countries of the global South, which were characterized by a high degree of cultural diversity and also by pressing problems of poverty and deprivation. Some writers argued that these problems required new forms of social work practice that focused directly on the needs of the developing societies (Khinduka, 1971; Nagpaul, 1972; Shawkey, 1972). As a result of these debates, notions such as 'indigenization' and 'authenticization' emerged in international social work circles to connote the need for appropriate theories and practice approaches suited to other cultures (Midgley, 1981; Walton and El Nasr, 1988). These ideas have gained wider acceptance and there is today, as Midgley (1989, 1994) suggests, a greater appreciation of the need to respect differences and develop indigenous forms of social work practice that address local cultural, economic and social realities.

Nevertheless, there are still many examples of the uncritical transfer of Western social work approaches to other nations. Western experts have played a major role in the recent creation of new schools of social work in the Russian Federation and the other states of the former Soviet Union. As Kendall (1995: xiv) notes, it is not clear whether 'myopic culture bound assumptions' about social work practice have been transcended to facilitate the formulation of appropriate educational and practice models in these countries.

It is in the context of these developments that some writers have asked whether social work's apparent acceptance of cultural and social diversity is, in fact, the best posture to take. They believe that social work does have universal values which all social workers should respect. For example, Otis (1986) criticizes the acceptance of cultural relativism in international social work, claiming that it is philosophically flawed and fails to address the complex issues of transferring social work to other societies. Although Otis writes from a minority perspective, his observations have implications for the position social work should take on difficult issues such as arranged marriages and dowry, the genital mutilation of children and the use of harsh physical punishments in some societies. Should the profession respect these practices because they are institutionalized in other, different cultures, or should they challenge them?

The issue of universalism is related to the question of social work's commitment to internationalism. Internationalism is an ideology which, in contradistinction to nationalism, advocates greater international integration, the abrogation of national identity and the dissolution of the nation state. Internationalists also favour the replacement of national governments by some form of global governance. Supporters of internationalism believe that transcending the nation state will foster social integration, enhance cooperation between peoples of different cultures and end international conflicts. Some social workers such as Estes (1992) believe that it is only through the adoption of internationalism as a belief system that humankind can solve its pressing social problems.

Like other people, many social workers will be uneasy about abandoning their national identities in favour of membership in some amorphous global society. Despite the gradual emergence of a global consciousness, most people are closely identified with their countries and many are proud of their ethnic identity. Indeed, in keeping with trends elsewhere, social work has made a commitment to respect and appreciate ethnic and cultural identity.

It is extremely difficult to reconcile these different positions. However, it is possible to recognize the centrality of ethnic and national identity in many people's lives, and to respect these sentiments within a wider recognition of the role that international collaboration can play in promoting mutual understanding, tolerance and an appreciation of cultural difference. Given the need to address the prevalence of ethnic and racial hatred in the modern world, an accommodation of this kind is urgently needed. However, it is clear that these difficult issues need to be more widely debated by the social work profession. The challenges of accommodating diversity within a wider internationally shared value system can only be met when the profession as a whole makes a commitment to discuss and understand the issues involved. This will also require that more social workers are exposed to these issues and that international social work becomes a more integral part of the profession's discourse.

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JAMES MIDGLEY is Harry and Riva Specht Professor of Public Social Services and Dean of the School of Social Welfare, University of California at Berkeley. He has published widely on issues of international social work, social policy and social development. His most recent books include *Social Welfare in Global Context* (Sage Publications, 1997) and *The Handbook of Social Policy* (with Martin Tracy and Michelle Livermore) (Sage Publications, 2000). Address: School of Social Welfare, University of California, Berkeley, 120 Haviland Hall 7400, Berkeley, CA 94720–7400, USA. [email: midg@uclink4.berkeley.edu]