Lynn Healy and Rebecca Thomas, *International social work: Professional action in an interdependent world*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020; 515 pp., ISBN 9780190922252, £33.99 (pbk)

**Reviewed by:** Mary S. Carlsen, St. Olaf College, Minnesota, USA

DOI: 10.1177/14680173211073556

Healy and Thomas provide the social work profession a tremendous gift with this book. Many recall how Healy’s first 2001 edition inspired professional action. This volume is thoroughly researched and meticulously referenced; it should be considered the definitive source on international social work. This text should be available in social work programmes and agencies worldwide. In-depth illustrations from Armenia, Costa Rica, Denmark, Ethiopia, Jamaica and Japan and the expanded content of additional global contexts often transport the reader to places outside North America.

The fifteen chapters are organized and accessible, written in clear, though sometimes very dense, prose. Sections cover key conceptual material, the profession’s global history, the United Nations and international non-governmental organizations, and professional action from micro to macro levels. Comprehensive multidisciplinary sources include government documents, and both peer-reviewed and popular literature from leading thinkers and researchers. Content spans the 1928 proceedings from the first international conference in Paris to present day global social realities and professional action. It includes gripping accounts of practice and education from courageous Argentinian, German, and Iranian pioneers, among others. Of particular interest is the detailed discussion of how social work, relief, and development relate and the argument for social work to use human rights frameworks more explicitly. Social work roles in global action – e.g., international adoption, casework, child abduction, border work, administrative opportunities, global policy advocacy – are covered in detail.

A leading premise of the book affirms that globalization is a reality – not neutral, but with positives and negatives all social workers should understand. The authors emphasize gender issues, human trafficking, increasing global diversity due to migration, and retrenchment of welfare states in underscoring issues for professional action. All issues cannot receive attention, of course; for instance, one notes scant mention of intersectional identity as a relevant construct for human concerns in social environments. In the Preface,
the authors acknowledge the dramatic challenges confronting humanity as the book came to press – a global pandemic, economic collapse, racial violence, the rise of populism – and rightly maintain that, though cannot address these, their frameworks for international action are even more relevant.

A text highlight is the authors’ germane discussion of ethical theory with pragmatic suggestions for navigating the challenges of distributive justice, individualism versus communalism and universalism versus cultural relativism, with thought-provoking, real cases. Through a rich discussion of ethics codes from varied contexts and international efforts to agree on principles, the authors present a valuable consideration of ethical discernment on a continuum. They discuss the concept of harm and its relationship to cultural respect using a business example – nepotism causes less harm than forced labour. They conclude that commitment to the inherent worth and dignity of people, equality and non-discrimination, multiple professional responsibilities, self-determination, and confidentiality are shared principles. They deeply examine conflicts that arise where self-determination is a core value for some, and others view it as anathema to a communalist society. They ultimately recommend that social work land on moderate relativism or moderate universalism (Donaldson and Donnelly, in Healy, 2001/2008) and suggest new professional values: world-mindedness and global competence.

While most prose is riveting, the sheer volume of content requires the reader to peruse in sections. Case illustrations help – e.g., an ethical dilemma from Zambia where confidentiality/privacy is juxtaposed with the community’s value that a young boy belongs to the village and his information is everyone’s business. The authors gently critique the profession’s weak engagement with global realities. They marginally reference the intertwining of social work and colonialism. They describe the decrease in social work influence on foreign policy, yet do not provide a persuasive case for change. They do admit to the profession’s historical western/northern bias and critique this frequently, noting indigenization as vital. They most vigorously argue for increased professional action in policy advocacy: “a strong global policy presence will be essential for the profession to maintain its viability in the twenty-first century” (p.403). Readers will feel proud of the profession and passionately encouraged to learn and act globally, yet a stronger plea for social work as the conscience of professional action would prove more compelling.

In conclusion, Healy and Thomas provide a seminal contribution to the subject of international social work. This is a comprehensive work on the international history and current context of social work efforts to improve human well-being. The profession owes them a debt of deep gratitude.

Reference
Healy, L. (2001/2008). *International social work: Professional action in an interdependent world*. Oxford University Press.