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Nadia Yakoob on Best Practices for Social Work with Refugees and Immigrants by Miriam Potocky-Tripodi. New York: Columbia University Press, 2002. 538 pp.

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Best Practices for Social Work with Refugees and Immigrants by Miriam Potocky-Tripodi. New York: Columbia University Press, 2002. 538 pp.

It has been estimated that within a few decades, immigrants and refugees will account for approximately sixty-five percent of the population in the United States. Awareness of and sensitivity to these groups' particular psychosocial, political, and economic needs in becoming members of the American polity will require further public attention. The necessity for such understanding is particularly acute in the administration of public services and benefits since the foreign-born tend to have lower earnings and higher poverty rates than the native-born. To date, a well-defined and particularized model for delivering social services to immigrant communities has been lacking. Professor Miriam Potocky-Tripodi's compilation of "best practices" for social work with refugees and immigrants offers an important and thoughtful work that successfully addresses this gap.

Potocky-Tripodi divides her work into two parts. Part I presents valuable background context and information that establishes the foundation for practices with refugees and immigrants. She provides an overview of immigrant and refugee communities in the United States, describes immigration laws and policies, and delineates the service delivery systems. Part I exposes the reader to various theories of migration and the impact of immigration on a host society, thereby challenging conventional and often negative stereotypes of immigrants and refugees. It navigates through the complex body of laws that relate to immigrants and refugees, revealing the harsh measures frequently taken by government agencies in response to anti-immigrant public sentiment. Part I ends with a description of the myriad actors involved in serving immigrants and refugees in the United States, ranging from the United Nations to local municipal organizations.

In Part II, Potocky-Tripodi catalogues "best practices" for social work with refugees and immigrants, based on available empirical evidence. She begins by defining culturally competent social work, which she explains is "a set of attitudes and beliefs, knowledge, and skills that a social worker must possess in order to work effectively with clients who are from a different culture than the worker" (123). In order to achieve such cultural competence, she emphasizes the need for social workers to explore complicated and difficult concepts such as race; culture; ethnicity; ethnic identity; psychological, behavioral, and structural acculturation; prejudice; stereotyping; xenophobia; racism; and discrimination. In each of the following chapters, she identifies relevant issues and best practices in the areas of health; mental health; family dynamics; language, education, and economic well-being; and interethnic relations. Each chapter thoroughly addresses the specific challenges immigrants and refugees face in the areas enumerated above and how social workers can most effectively serve and empower their immigrant and refugee clients. She separates her recommendations into three levels: the macro or structural, the meso or relational, and the micro or individual. In so doing, she enables social workers and social service organizations to pursue a multi-pronged and broader approach to facilitating the self-sufficiency and successful empowerment of immigrants and refugees.

While Potocky-Tripodi offers an expansive range of best practices for social workers whose clients have diverse cultural backgrounds, she overlooks two important issues that surface regularly in service work. First, a discussion on issues of fraud or misrepresentation to procure immigration benefits—and how a social worker should best handle such information—was not included. Service providers are faced with fraudulent claims for political asylum, protection under domestic violence provisions, and public benefits—claims that lead to abuse of the service delivery systems. Second, she does not adequately address personnel fatigue, and the attendant high turnover rates within

social service agencies. Although the author makes reference to the tendency of certain social workers to excessively identify with the immigrant and refugee clients they serve—and how such tendencies may be draining—suggestions for dealing with such “burnout” would be extremely useful. Exhaustion and discouragement regularly affect service providers, leading to adverse consequences to the quality and continuity of services.

Writing as a lawyer who works with immigrant and refugee communities, it is clear to me that we have a tremendous amount to learn from the field of social work and its professionals. Highly sensitive issues surrounding mental health, family dynamics, and language—complicated by the stresses of migration—affect the client’s ability to communicate his/her needs and responsiveness to legal advocacy on his or her behalf. While lawyers may recognize these issues, they may not fully appreciate the necessity for professional services that can address them. Furthermore, Potocky-Tripodi’s chapter on cultural competence is required reading for any type of service provider—including the lawyer—who works with immigrants and refugees. Professor Potocky-Tripodi brings together the various issues confronting immigrant populations, presents practical and constructive methods to address them, and offers the tools for working toward a healthy pluralist society in the United States.

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