From its inception, the United States has been a land of immigrants. Likewise, the field of social work has a long history of working with immigrants and refugees. In the nineteenth century, charity organizations and missions assisted with social welfare services to immigrants and their families, and at the beginning of the social work profession, the “friendly visitor” helped families in need. The settlement house movement in the late nineteenth century focused on improving the environment and quality of life by teaching English and American values to the immigrant communities. Neighborhood centers were opened all over the United States, providing a variety of services.

During its first years, the majority of immigrants to the United States were from Europe, plus those individuals who were brought from Africa by force as slaves. The long-standing quota system regulating the number of immigrants from each country was finally abolished with the passage of the Immigration Act of 1965, resulting in increased numbers of immigrants from Asia and Latin America. Then the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 enabled illegal immigrants who had been in the United States for more than five years to claim legal residence.

The United States has long welcomed refugees fleeing persecution, war, or natural disaster. Historically, the expectation has been that immigrants and refugees would learn and adopt American values, norms, and the English language as their way of life. But this has been difficult for many people, and instead, a blend of new cultures has been the result. This idea of a “melting pot” is that the immigrants’ traditions are combined with Anglo-American customs to
create a new, and evolving, culture. The “Anglo-conformity” and the “melting pot” idea have not, however, resolved the ethnic tension, discrimination, and prejudice running rampant throughout American society. In ethnic relations, therefore, it is appropriate for social workers to promote “cultural pluralism,” which recognizes the uniqueness of different cultures and allows immigrants to retain their beliefs, customs, and values.

With the increase in migration between 1986 and 1989, when the number of refugees entering the country nearly doubled, the number of immigrant and refugees needing social work services also rose. The social problems that immigrants and refugees most frequently encounter are alcoholism, substance abuse, child abuse, juvenile delinquency, gang activity, physical and mental health issues, care of the elderly, and family conflicts, including domestic violence. Immigrants also face problems of housing, unemployment and underemployment, and, for Asians, the pressure of being a “model” minority. Accordingly, it is imperative for social workers to learn the knowledge and skills that will allow them to maximize the uniqueness of the immigrants’ culture while helping them adjust to American life.

Nationally, the cuts and changes in the health care and social welfare systems are affecting the immigrant and refugee populations. Indeed, legislation such as Propositions 187 and 209 in California is specifically aimed at discontinuing assistance to immigrants and refugees. Accordingly, the role of the social worker is expanding as immigrants and refugees feel the effects of these changes. We must remember that the new immigrants to America are extraordinarily diverse and culturally rich, and their strengths and social developments have given this country a global perspective. In fact, during the last two decades, immigrants have contributed more than $25 billion to the U.S. economy after the estimated costs of social services were deducted. In addition, the new immigrants have brought with them strong family, child-rearing, and cultural values.

This book takes an ecological perspective, examining social work practice, community work, policy issues, cultural diversity, multiculturalism, social justice, oppression, populations at risk, and social work values and ethics. The authors’ primary purpose is to explore ideas, concepts, and skills that will offer both a foundation and boundaries to social workers to help them work effectively with immigrants and refugees.

The book’s ecological perspective gives special attention to the relationship between individuals and their social and physical environment, implying that neither persons nor environments are inadequate but, rather, the fit between person and environment may or may not be in harmony (Rappaport 1977).
Among the many challenges of working with immigrants and refugees is the notion that Americans tend to view these people as “parasites,” thereby making their adjustment even more difficult. When applying this ecological perspective to the immigrant and refugee populations, therefore, workers must be ethnically sensitive and skilled in helping these groups adapt to their environment without losing their cultural heritage. The coping and adaptation of these “new Americans” need to be seen as a dual process—learning new customs and lifestyles while retaining old traditions and values. This book is mainly about the major immigrant groups who have come to the United States since the 1965 Immigration Act. It begins with an overview of the recent immigrant groups, followed by five chapters on immigrants and refugees from Asia, Latin America, Europe, and Africa. Each chapter examines the immigrants from a particular region and how their demographic and cultural characteristics affect their adaptation to the new environment. The authors look at these groups’ needs and how they could be addressed at both the micro and macro levels. Besides facing many of their predecessors’ problems, the immigrants of today also have special needs with which social workers should be familiar.

This volume is designed primarily for undergraduate and graduate students in social work. But because of the topics covered and their timeliness, it should be useful as well to social work practitioners, schoolteachers, and other helping service professionals who want to learn about the new immigrant and refugee groups.

REFERENCES
