

## REVIEW ESSAY

### **Review of Theories for Practice: Symbolic Interactionist Translations**

By James A. Forte

Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2001

494 pp. \$77.50 (cloth)

Reviewed by J. I. (Hans) Bakker, University of Guelph

In thirteen excellent chapters James Forte presents an overview of the various interactionist approaches in the social sciences, with an emphasis on the usefulness of those approaches for practitioners in such fields as social work. Forte does not concern himself with the more contentious aspects that divide different research paradigms. Instead, he presents a masterly overview of the salient characteristics. After introducing the idea of “translation,” or interpretive analysis, he begins with symbolic interactionism. His discussion of the framework for SI theory, inquiry, and practice is very useful and would serve as an excellent introduction to SI for anyone. In the next chapter he discusses G. H. Mead’s “social behaviorism.” Since so many sociologists conflate Mead’s views with SI, it is analytically heuristic to have this clear presentation of Mead as separable from SI. The order of subsequent chapters is a bit random, but in each case there is a comprehensive bibliography. Some of the subtypes of interactionism are well known (e.g., critical interactionism, feminist pragmatism), while others are less well known (e.g., psychodynamic interactionism, interactional naturalism). The book’s thrust is to recommend that multiple theories be used when relevant for practical purposes. Distinctions are sufficiently clear to allow the discerning reader to see where certain approaches may be at odds. Forte is particularly adept at translating the jargon of research paradigms into language that everyone can understand. Some might object to the lack of full reference to phenomenological sociology, existential sociology, queer theory, or ethnomethodology and conversation analysis. There also does not seem to be any attempt to integrate the general notion of interactionism with semiotics or hermeneutics. A more complete index would have been useful.

In general this work is a sophisticated and authoritative summary of many of the interactionist approaches. It makes it abundantly clear that the term *symbolic interactionism* can refer to only one research paradigm or can be used to represent all of the interactionisms, some of which diverge from SI in either the narrow or the general sense. In a short foreword David Franks points out that people in SI will learn from this book how vast their “field” really is. I completely agree. Although I thought I had a broad grasp of interactionism, this book has opened my eyes to other possibilities. For example, I was unaware that such a significant literature exists in symbolic ecology and economic interactionism. What Forte describes as symbolic

ecology also touches on the semiotics of nature, but the two academic literatures are quite far apart.

Particularly helpful for teaching purposes are the various tables summarizing aspects of each research framework. For example, Table 2.1 presents building blocks of symbolic interactionism: root metaphors, assumptions, concepts, deductive and inductive explanations, and theories. Those topics then become the outline of the discussion. We are told that SI has as a master assumption that a dialectical approach to self, society, science, and practice should be utilized. Despite Forte's focus on social workers, the argument can be more generally applied to all those interested in theory and practice. I particularly like the overview of criticisms of SI (e.g., possible neglect of macro structures, lack of methodological rigor, excessive optimism, etc.). Forte presents such criticisms briefly and then provides references to rebuttals. Unfortunately, the book's other tables do not all take the same form, and the structure of each chapter is not parallel. The book would have been an even better guide if the same topics had been discussed in the same order and with the same attention to critics and rebuttals. Instead, each chapter seems to follow a different organizational structure, making comparisons among the different research paradigms more difficult for beginning students or practitioners with little social science background. A chapter on the historical origins of interactionism would have been helpful for pedagogical reasons. Also, the title is somewhat misleading. Many people may not realize that a book titled "Theories for Practice" includes such a comprehensive analysis of different versions of the overall interactionist (interpretivist) paradigmatic tradition.

One last wish: I hope that the publisher will supply a paperback version of this book so that it is more likely to be used in classrooms on sociological theory and methods.