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James A. Forte

Human Behavior and the Social Environment: Models, Metaphors, and Maps for Applying Theoretical Perspectives to Practice

Belmont, CA: Thomson Brooks/Cole, 2007, 634 pp., including index, price not stated, ISBN 0495006599

On opening James Forte's volume on *Human Behavior and the Social Environment*, I had the pleasure of seeing that the Foreword was written by Francis J. Turner, whose own works I greatly value. He has indeed been a role model to many students and teachers of social work. He now shares with us his response to Forte's book, which is seen as a 'major contribution' of 'prodigious output'; 'scholarly', 'enthusiastic, and 'positive'. Students are kept in mind at all levels. Respect for Francis Turner leaves me in little doubt that I would agree with his evaluation. But this brings to mind Sidney Smith (1771–1845), who claimed: 'I never read a book before reviewing it; it prejudices [one] so'. Readers will need to bear with me and know, ahead, that I have left myself open to being influenced by the content of the Foreword.

Forte amply illustrates, by nature of the words that he uses in the first three paragraphs, that there is difficulty in understanding language. An immediate aim is to show that he will then act as a translator of the 10 developed and growing fields of study which underpin the practice of social work. These diverse, but complementary theories demonstrate schools of thought particularly relevant to courses concerning human behaviour and the social environment. Student social workers need to understand the language that stems from such theories when taking up placements – and, indeed, during their post-graduate employment, where other professional colleagues are drawing on different words and concepts which make up their language. The settings in which work takes place, whether hospitals, schools, courts, voluntary organizations, and others, are like 'trading zones created by nations that share a border' and such zones are 'like places where envoys meet to barter and trade their special goods'. From this, Forte concludes that social workers have developed a common language in order to communicate between one another, but it needs also to be used with other professional people.

A detailed contents section with a list of tables and figures, along with an appropriate full list of references, name and subject indexes, and learning points, make this an important source in relation to the ten theories. Models, metaphors, and maps as tools, both to understand their use and to apply in practice, are fully discussed. The relevant 10 theories then come into play with a chapter of around 40 pages devoted to each. Each field of study has a clear history along with the application and limits to its use. They are clearly set out and presented without bias, irrespective of whether they relate to theories that are more familiar to UK teaching and practice – such as schools of thought relating to systems theory, cognitive approaches, psychodynamics, and

behaviourism – or to those less developed or applied in the UK as a base from which to practise – ecology, biology, interactionism, role theory, economics, and critical theory. Both the theory and practice of what we know, or think we know, along with the newer concepts presented make this a time for consolidation, and for movement. Forte then takes on the task of demonstrating pathways to integration of these fundamental theories.

Applied ecological theory is the first to be discussed. This is seen as an inter- and multi-disciplinary approach set against a given social environment and peoples' behaviour within it. The social worker is metaphorically a gardener who, for instance, helps clients cope with feeling associated with 'pulling up roots' when moving to a care home or seeking asylum in another country.

Applied social systems theory is put forward as an organized set of assumptions which may be seen as building blocks. These make for a foundation – a philosophy – for social work practice, which provides a framework drawn from different disciplines. In particular, the social worker and client are seen to be affected by the function, expectations, and constraints of the social work agency. Each may experience these component parts differently whether within the probation service, hospitals, rehabilitation centres, and so on. Machine imagery is used to show that a system may be at the point of breakdown and that poor design, or well oiled parts, may affect performance of the agency.

Applied biology brings mixed reactions within the profession. Such approaches have been seen as political contrivances in order to categorise specific social groups, such as 'economically dependent' or, say, 'sexually different', seeing such groups as undeserving or unfit. Forte gives many examples. However, more, or less, provision may still be offered to, or withheld from, a person who is judged to be old or young or to be of a particular shade of skin colour or to have other kinds of personal attributes.

Applied cognitive science is considered next and Forte gives a thorough introduction into the way in which thinking affects the way we act, select, plan, analyse, and reflect. Within this approach is its use in therapy, where there is the aim to change a client's feelings and behaviour, for instance, where the client has misconceptions about the social world. This theory may be attached to behaviour therapy, although behaviour therapists may reject the full use of cognitive processes (but see later in the chapter on applied behaviourism). Cognitive science sees a person as an 'information processor' of events, of other people, and of their own behaviour. Forte nicely boils down the process of application to that helpful phrase – start where the client is.

Applied psychodynamic theory is characterized by conflict and the shifting around of inner processes. A clear picture is offered through the use of maps and metaphors, along with a detailed picture of its history and the longstanding use of psychodynamic terms over some 60 years of application in the 20th century. Particularly drawn upon is Erikson's ego psychology and Bowlby's attachment theory. A research study is offered from Forte's own team, nicely illustrating grief work. A social worker's place in historical development is

described and Florence Hollis's contribution is noted, which placed psychoanalytic concepts in social work practice.

Applied behaviourism gives special attention to social factors where clients adopt abnormal or ineffective ways to deal with demands within their environment (see the earlier chapter for links with cognitive science). In behaviourism, the social worker may collect a group of clients and offer an educational programme for addiction to drink or drugs, or anger management, in order to reshape behaviour. Forte gives many examples and again designs an eco-map. He describes his own practice-oriented research project which evaluated an approach to change.

Applied symbolic interactionism – an extensive account is given of the long-standing history of interactionism, which advocated the improvement of living conditions and sought humane laws and policies at the turn of the 19th century. The adoption of pragmatism shows that social action can encourage communities to solve the problems of living together. People themselves can be active agents in community care. The social worker, as interactionist, is a 'persistent and versatile interpreter', aiming to enhance communication between different sections of the community in order to achieve communal ends.

Applied social role theory is a set of ideas where Forte draws on his use of the metaphor in that a person's social life is likened to drama, whether seen in the client, the social organization, or the social worker. Roles are created to deal with problems and their solution within the agency, which is seen as a theatre with the stage set, the location, times, and cost of performance, for instance, where the social worker acts as a director responding to and influencing changes in the cast. An apt illustration is given of the career development of a social worker with the sequence of related roles from student novice to the doctoral student and going on even to retirement.

Applied economic theory has Forte strongly pointing out that social work texts rarely include economic theory, despite the basic human needs of food, clothing, and shelter, within the context of distribution and allocation of resources. Different schools of thought are clearly presented, arising from both American and British statistics. Criticism of the theory and the application of the central concepts into social work language are frankly given.

Applied critical theory – the aim here is to show that critical theory may provide a way for social workers to promote social, political, and economic equality. The theorists 'contribute to social change and to the reduction of the destructive consequences of unjust social arrangements'. Exemplary models include Bertha Reynolds (1885–1978), the American social worker who shaped the theory of radical and short-term case work. The feminist approach to human development is also considered.

In the final chapter – The Afterword – Forte reviews the theories and their application and limits, providing a pathway through the field of human growth and behaviour against the background of the social environment. He reminds the reader that the landscape has many paths and in the scene there are many

people from different cultures, who professionally and personally speak many different languages.

Travelling with him through the book, and listening to his commentary, makes one endorse Professor Turner's views expressed in the Foreword. This book is indeed a major contribution and should become an integral part of degree courses in social work. Each chapter is of value, but the whole volume offers an enlightening journey for students and teachers alike at each stagepost in their professional career.

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Owen Gill and Gordon Jack

The Child and Family in Context: Developing Ecological Practice in Disadvantaged Communities

Lyme Regis: Russell House/Barnardos, 2007, 164 pp., £18.95, ISBN 978905541157

Given that a substantial amount of work takes place with children from disadvantaged communities, this book explores the impact of living in such communities from a child's perspective, by making the links between a child's development and the community's social problems. It outlines a holistic approach to understanding and working with families who are vulnerable and who live with the effects of poverty and disadvantage.

The book could be used by students, lecturers and various practitioners to reflect on the current trends of disadvantage and the wider implications of these when working in a social context. It reminds us that although we may conceptualize the significance of the social process of disadvantage such as poverty for disadvantaged groups, we can somehow lose the ability to transfer the influence of it when working directly with an individual child.

The Child and Family in Context outlines the meaning of poverty and the implications which have affected children and families throughout the last century to the modern day. It connects and explains the political and social policy context of poverty and thus how these influences have had a significant impact on the UK's current understanding and governmental responses. The book examines the risks for children and their families, while it also compares and contrasts the UK picture with the European one.

By utilizing the information in this book practitioners can determine patterns of poverty and deprivation and the connections to the environment in which a child lives. It enables reflection on the associations of these aspects with the overall development of a child. It reminds and encourages us to see beyond practice with individual children and to make connections between human