HUMAN BEHAVIOR AND THE SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT: MODELS, METAPHORS, AND MAPS FOR APPLYING THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES TO PRACTICE

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DOI: 10.1080/08841230903256682

In the Human Behavior and the Social Environment, the author explains in great length why theoretical pluralism has become a necessity for contemporary social work practice. First of all, the social work knowledge base is enriched by the diverse and different theoretical orientations and paradigms which were developed to meet the challenging demands in social work practice. Secondly, transactions between human beings and their environments are multidimensional and require the ongoing development, accumulation, and integration of multiple theories into practice. This book will be especially useful to social work educators and practitioners who were trained in a specific theoretical framework but realize that no single theoretical framework can adequately explain the complexity of human behaviors and practice issues. The author, in presenting tools that compare theories, points to the importance of developing broad and diverse theory base to support social work practice.

In Human Behavior and the Social Environment, in Part Three Chapter 14 introduces two major concepts, “theoretical pluralism” (p. 544) and “theoretical integration” (p. 548), which purposefully blends and integrates different theoretical languages necessary for various professional tasks in social work practice. This concluding chapter also includes a set of tables and diagrams comparing the 10 theoretical frameworks. Readers can easily compare these frameworks by their representative theorists and scholar practitioners, root metaphors, conceptual models of planned change process, and translation of theories into ecosystems language by referring to these tables and diagrams.

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Being that contemporary social life is very complex and no metaphors or models can capture all aspect of this reality, this book develops many creative tools of models, metaphors, and maps to help understand different theoretical languages. These tools bring the technical description of human behavior theories to life. The author uses everyday life metaphors to illustrate his point, making it easier to read and understand. For example, in illustrating the concepts in cognitive theory, he compares the human brain to a computer and patterns of human thinking to the software that a computer uses. In explaining how critical theorists conceive of all social processes as manifested by contention, he uses the metaphor of a battleground to describe the environment where different groups fight for territory, wealth, prestige, and control of the media.

The 10 theories in Part Two are presented in a well organized way with an abundance of illustrative examples and reference materials. The tables and maps provided in the book help readers visualize and better understand these theories. This book also includes economic, exchange, and critical theories, which are very important in social work practice but rarely covered in major HBSE textbooks. Economic theories help social workers understand the dynamics of economic processes and how decisions on the allocation and provision of scarce resources and services are made (p. 454). Critical theory approach explains influencing community relationships, social inequality, public deliberations about policy and problems, and collective social action. Such an approach offers a set of tools for social workers to use for promoting social, political, and economic equality (p. 497). In each theory, a specific model of practice is presented to illustrate the relevancy of theory to social work practice. Each chapter also contains a cluster of learning activities which is helpful to beginning students.

The author suggests that human behavior courses should prepare students and practitioners for theorizing. Although the book is targeted for social work students as its primary readers, jargons, specific languages, and terminology in the first three chapters will be difficult for beginning social work students to digest. Terms such as root metaphors, theorizing competencies, metaphorical imaginations, theoretical mapping, and theory translator, for example, are difficult to comprehend. The author sometimes provides too many examples to illustrate a single concept, as in the case of metaphors of a multithery social worker (p. 63-65) and different ways of understanding the meaning of integration (p. 542-543). Such digression dilutes the focus of inquiry and distracts readers from grasping essential materials and information in the book. In future editions, it will be helpful to readers to condense overlapping materials in the first three chapters and perhaps move part of the materials, especially tables and diagrams in the concluding chapter, to the beginning chapters. This will help the readers to understand the theoretical frameworks better.

By and large, the author should be commended for doing a daunting task of presenting a comprehensive human behavior textbook that emphasizes the important and complex topic of a dialogue approach to theoretical pluralism, a much needed orientation for contemporary social work practice in a complex service environment. This book is highly recommended for scholars, practitioners, and students who wish to enrich their depth of understanding of human behavior theories and advance their theorizing competencies to integrate theories and tools in their work as a social worker.