

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

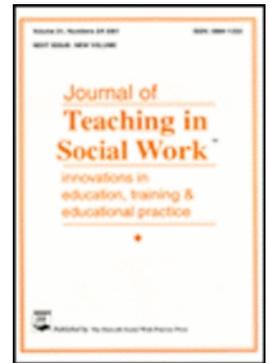
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**DOI:** 10.1080/08841230903256682

**Publication Frequency:** 4 issues per year

**Published in:**  **Journal of Teaching in Social Work**, Volume 29, Issue 4 October 2009 , pages 474 - 477



James A Forte (2006). Belmont, CA: Thomson Brooks/ Cole (640 pp., \$96.95, softcover, ISBN# 978-0495006596).

*Human Behavior and the Social Environment* is a theory-based textbook that provides three major tools for theory-by-theory comprehension: models, metaphors, and maps. These tools are designed to help students to compare and contrast human behavior and the social environment (HBSE) theories as well as apply these theories to practice.

The book is comprised of three parts. Part One contains the first three chapters and presents a new way of understanding theories by using a set of tools to translate “theoretical languages” (p. 14). Chapter 1 introduces a dialogical approach to scientific knowledge development and problem solving that are critical to contemporary social work practice. It also discusses the need for “theory translation” in social work (p. 12-13), and describes “theorizing competencies” (p. 34) for successful multicultural social work practice. Chapter 2 introduces the first set of theory translation tools: exemplary role models (influential theorists and practitioners), root metaphors, and theoretical modeling. These three tools help social work practitioners better understand different theoretical frameworks and how they could communicate and collaborate with professionals of the same or other disciplines who speak different theoretical languages. This chapter also offers a model for connecting theory to practice and provides ways to learning different theoretical languages. Chapter 3 introduces another set of translation tools: theoretical mapping, ecosystems mapping, and universal social work standards. Theoretical mapping helps identify a theory’s basic building blocks which includes root metaphors, assumptions, concepts, and explanations. Ecosystems mapping uses eco-map and systems thinking to facilitate communication of different theories across disciplines (p. 105). Universal social work standards facilitate cross-theory comparison and appraisal by evaluating how well each theoretical language fits with social work’s values and ethical standards that include strengths perspective and commitment to justice and appreciation for diversity.

Part Two of the book describes 10 HBSE theoretical languages. It demonstrates how to apply translation tools (models, metaphors, and maps) to understanding theories and how to translate theories into ecosystems concepts. These 10 theories include applied ecological theory (chapter 4), applied systems theory (chapter 5), applied biology (chapter 6), applied cognitive science (chapter 7), applied psychodynamic theory (chapter 8), applied behaviorism (chapter 9), applied symbolic interactionism (chapter 10), applied social role theory (chapter 11), applied economic theory (chapter 12), and applied critical theory (chapter 13). To help readers to better understand these theoretical languages, each of the theories is presented in a similar structure. Each chapter follows the same format of outlining bibliographies of major contributors to the development of the theory and their associated schools of thoughts, root metaphors, core assumptions, a theory-specific eco-map, compare and contrast of different HBSE theories using eco-map terminology (Table 3.1, p. 111), a critical appraisal of the theory based on social work ethical and value standards, and a brief exemplary model of practice specific to the theory.

Chapter 14 in Part Three 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 scholarly practitioners, root metaphors, conceptual models of planned change process, and translation of theories into ecosystems language by referring to these tables and diagrams.

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 particular 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.

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 readers 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 multitheory 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 taking on the 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.