

Forte, J. A. (2007). *Human Behavior and the Social Environment: Models, Metaphors, and Maps for Applying Theoretical Perspectives to Practice*. Belmont, CA: Thomson. (512 pp., \$64.99 paperback, ISBN 0-495-00659-9)

DOI: 10.1177/1049731507313977

Human Behavior and the Social Environment (HBSE) is a complex subject area for teaching and research. Social work's multidisciplinary nature gives instructors, practitioners, and researchers the flexibility, but also the responsibility, to learn and integrate numerous theoretical perspectives—a daunting task. James Forte's text on applying *HBSE* theories to practice is a well-written and accessible guide to the field's core conceptual foundations.

The book begins with a brief analysis of the *Little Red Riding Hood* story using several theoretical lenses, which serves as a nice introduction to the remainder of the book and is likely to be inviting to theory-averse students. It then describes social work practice and how theory can and should inform it. The latter half of the first chapter proposes a new role for social workers as theory translators, defines theory translation, provides an overview of the levels of theoretical discourse, and discusses empirical research on the theories employed by social workers and other helping professionals in practice.

The second and third chapters offer an array of tools for making sense of and using theory. These tools include metaphors, concrete suggestions for applying theory to practice, theoretical maps, and a list of Internet, print, and other resources. The emphasis on engaging in an active dialogue with theory, rather than superficial learning of key concepts, is what makes this text stand out. This is accomplished in the first three introductory chapters, which serve as a foundation for the remainder of the book.

The majority of the text (chapters 4 through 13) is devoted to explicating several theories, including systems, ecological, biological, cognitive science, psychodynamic, behaviorism, symbolic interactionism, social role, economic, and critical models. Each of these chapters is organized similarly, making it easy to compare theories and to refer to specific sections for reference. Each theory chapter provides brief biographical information on the scholars who developed the theory, a description of the theory's major concepts, a critique of the theory, a discussion of the theory's relevance for diverse communities, and a case example, which applies the theory to a social work situation. The follow-up questions at the end of each chapter encourage students to use and extend the concepts.

The last chapter of the book grapples with the complexity of social work's theoretical pluralism. The discussion of theoretical eclecticism is especially helpful given that most social workers in practice prefer an eclectic approach. The author notes the utility of thoughtful eclecticism for selecting the most appropriate or most empirically supported strategies for meeting client's needs but humorously comments on the potential for eclectic social workers to "sound as though they are speaking gobbledygook" (p. 553) if they draw on theoretical concepts at random. The last chapter also summarizes some of the text's key points in tables for easy reference, including listings of the major theories with their founders and root metaphors.

One of the book's strengths is its first-person, engaging writing style, which is rare in a textbook about theory. Reading the text is like attending a good lecture—including discussion questions and activities, references to popular culture (the mention of *Star Trek* was particularly enjoyable), and bold comments that make the reader sit up and pay attention. An example of such a comment was in the critique of ecological theory in which the author noted that occasionally the problem does in fact reside within the client, not necessarily in the client's social environment. The author also candidly discusses issues of status in the social work profession, observing that some social workers may adopt a biological approach in an effort to gain standing relative to other professionals. While commenting on the value of biological theories, he suggests that social workers rarely gain professional status as a result of using this perspective.

The text's primary limitation is also one of its strengths. It is an ambitious work, rich in details, and students may find it a little overwhelming despite its inviting tone. The section on Internet search engines, and Web-based resources in general, could be updated. Given the emphasis on applying and interacting with theory, a discussion of Web 2.0 resources would be appropriate.

The book's principal audience is students, both upper-level undergraduate and graduate, and it would be an excellent text for any *HBSE* course. It would also be useful to doctoral candidates in reviewing theories (for oral examinations and beyond) and as a reference work for educators, researchers, and practitioners. The text is a welcome addition to the field of *HBSE*.

—Sarah Taylor
Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation,
Berkeley, CA