

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

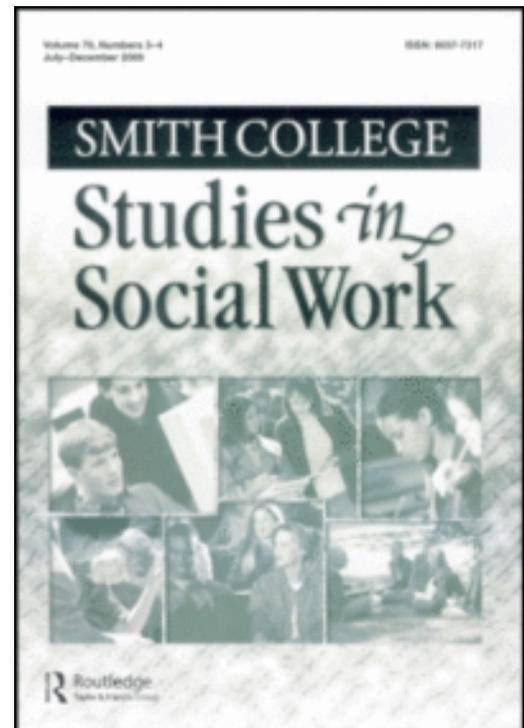
Author: Susan P. Robbins ^a

Affiliation:^a University of Houston, Graduate College of Social Work, Houston, TX 77204-4013

DOI: 10.1080/00377310903504916

Publication Frequency: 4 issues per year

Published in:  **Smith College Studies in Social Work**, Volume 80, Issue 1 January 2010 , pages 88 - 91



J. A. Forte. (2007). Independence, KY: Brooks Cole.

In the fields of psychology and sociology there have traditionally been numerous competing textbooks written for students at the graduate and undergraduate levels that discuss and analyze various psychological, personality, developmental, and social theories. Surprisingly, this has not been the case for social work, particularly in the realm of human behavior theory. This comparative theory textbook by Forte is a welcome addition to the social work literature.

Forte's book is divided into three sections: The first section (chapters 1-3) provides an introduction to the scope of the book and the novel framework the he uses to present, discuss, and analyze each theory. Chapters 4 through 13, the second and largest section, cover the theories themselves, many of which are found in other social work textbooks, but some of which are unique to this book. The final section, chapter 14, provides a detailed discussion on integration in multitheory practice.

In the first three chapters, the author introduces the reader to the "world" of theory and offers a new and exciting way to approach theory for students who seek to apply theory to their practice as well as those who want to learn to theorize. Unlike other texts that are most concerned with the analysis and application of theory, Forte proposes a new and distinctive method that is based on a dialogical approach in which theories are seen as languages to be translated.

Chapter 1 opens with a synopsis of the classic fairy tale about Little Red Riding Hood, and Forte uses this to show how theorists from varying perspectives can observe the same phenomenon and, by applying different theoretical concepts, arrive at different interpretations and conclusions. He then links this directly to social work practice, demonstrating the importance of understanding the way in which theory can frame a client problem or situation, dictate what is and is not covered in assessment, and influence the types of services that are provided.

Forte presents theories as “tools” for social work practice and elaborates on the role of the social worker as a theory translator. He makes a compelling argument about the importance of social workers understanding and being conversant with multiple theories, which he refers to as being “theoretically multilinguistic.” He also provides a very detailed analysis of the theoretical orientations that are taught and preferred by social workers, delineates specific competencies for theorizing and suggests concrete ways that theory might be used by students in bachelor's, master's, and PhD programs.

Elaborating on the dialogical approach and the social worker as a theory translator, chapter 2 introduces the reader to specific tools for learning, translating and theorizing, and using theoretical metaphors and theoretical modeling. Importantly, he also provides a model for connecting theory to practice for individual practitioners and interdisciplinary teams.

Chapter 3 further expands on these themes, introducing the way in which theoretical mapping can assist the reader in analyzing the structure and content of theories through an understanding of a theory's root metaphors, assumptions, and concepts as well as the explanations that it offers. Building on this, Forte proposes that ecosystems mapping (rooted in systems and ecological theory) be used as a universal translator for other theoretical languages. In this vein, he provides 11 specific eco-map questions that can be used to analyze other theories, and these questions are utilized throughout the book. He concludes this section with a discussion of standards for evaluating theories for use in social work practice.

In chapters 4 through 13, Forte presents and analyzes 10 theories, alternately referred to as “theoretical languages,” consistent with his basic tenet of social workers as theory translators. Chapter 4 on applied ecological theory includes the works of Robert Park, Rachael Carson, Carel Germain, and Uri Bronfenbrenner. Applied systems theory (chapter 5), most often closely associated with ecological approaches, covers the writings of Ludwig von Bertalanffy, Talcott Parsons, and Gordon Hearn. In a departure from most social work textbooks, chapter 6 on applied biology incorporates works by Charles Darwin, Gregor Mendel, Harriette Johnson, Arnold Gesell's biological model of human development, as well as evolutionary theory and a discussion of the use of the medical model in social work practice. The content in applied cognitive theory in chapter 7 is quite diverse and includes authors such as Jean Piaget, Aaron Beck, Albert Ellis, Sharon Berlin, and Paula Nurius. Applied psychodynamic theory is presented in chapter 8, as embodied by the works of Sigmund Freud, Erik Erikson, Florence Hollis, and John Bowlby. Chapter 9 on applied behaviorism discusses the behavioral approaches of Ivan Pavlov, John Watson, B.F. Skinner, Bruce Thyer, and Albert Bandura.

Applied symbolic interaction (chapter 10) includes the works of John Dewey, George Herbert Mead, Jane Addams, and Hans Falck; and, in contrast to the medical model discussed in chapter 5, Forte presents labeling theory as a sociological alternative to seeing people primarily in terms of illness, pathology, or psychiatric diagnosis. Chapter 11 introduces a closely related set of theories, applied role theory, much of which is an offshoot of symbolic interaction. The overlap is clear with his inclusion of George Herbert Mead and well-known symbolic interactionist Erving Goffman, in addition to authors Robert Linton, Jacob Moreno, and Helen Harris Perlman. Chapter 12, applied economic theory, covers content rarely found in social work Human Behavior in the Social Environment (HBSE) textbooks, including writings of Adam Smith, John Maynard Keynes, Jane Addams, and Harry Lloyd Hopkins. The final theory chapter on applied critical thinking (chapter 13) addresses a diverse group of authors such as Jurgen Habermas, C. Wright Mills, Bertha Capen Reynolds, and Carol Gilligan.

In his concluding section, chapter 14, Forte discusses the challenges and benefits of theoretical pluralism, further expounds on the dialogical approach that social workers can use to integrate theory, and offers concrete strategies aimed at improving fluency with theory.

Each of the above theory chapters uses a clear and consistent framework for the presentation and analysis of the theory under consideration. The chapters contain a brief introduction, a discussion of related dialects and schools of thought, and introduce the reader to the exemplary writers in each theoretical tradition. This latter section contains a brief biographical sketch of the author and her or his important contributions. I consider it to be quite significant that Forte has made it a point to include seminal social work authors and theorists in this discussion. In keeping with the framework described in the first section of the book, each theory is discussed and analyzed in terms of its root metaphors, core assumptions, a mapping of the structure and content of the theory, and a social work appraisal of the theory's limitations. In addition, each chapter contains a section that demonstrates the ways in which the theory can be applied to practice as well as learning activities to enhance student learning.

This is an ambitious book that certainly offers a new and refreshingly unique approach to the way that social workers can learn theory. However, the introductory material in the first three chapters and parts of the last chapter are quite laborious to read, and I believe that this would be extremely challenging for most undergraduate and even master's level students. This is significant because Forte intends this book to be used at both levels, as well as for PhD classes.

In contrast, the subsequent theory chapters are well organized, beautifully written, and should be easily accessible to the full spectrum of students for which the book is intended. Further, his use of an eco-map to provide an overarching model to analyze other theories is most appropriate for social work. I believe, however, that he underestimates the capabilities of undergraduate students in his position that the primary competency that they should strive to achieve is the mastery of the ecosystems paradigm and its related language. Similarly, his expectation that master's level students should only master ecosystems plus two other theoretical languages also appears to be an overly conservative expectation. He, of course, is not alone in these assumptions, as social workers have been overly reliant on systemic and psychodynamic theories, as he so aptly demonstrates in his analysis in chapter

1.

Although the breadth of theory encompassed in this textbook is impressive, there is no clear rationale provided for how these particular theories were chosen or what criteria were used to decide which specific authors in a given theoretical tradition were included or excluded. Most notably absent are any works reflecting theoretical models based on humanistic theory or social constructionist theory that is not rooted in sociological thought. In addition, the inclusion of Albert Ellis and Aaron Beck in chapter 7, for example, blurs the distinction between human behavior theory and practice theory.

These criticisms, however, are quite minor and are not meant to detract from an otherwise stellar book that will undoubtedly make a significant contribution to the study of comparative theory in social work. Forte is to be applauded for the development of a unique and eminently useful framework that distinguishes this textbook from the others in the field.