

Reviews

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

JAMES A. FORTE

Melbourne, Australia, Thomson, 2007

634 pp., ISBN: 0-495-00659-9 (\$66.56/£29.99) (pbk)

The overall style of this book is very American—big, bold and approachable. It begins with an illustration of how the Red Riding Hood story can be (and has been) interpreted differently, by applying different theories. Models, metaphors and maps are applied to the theories in 10 different chapters about ecological theory, systems theory, biology, cognitive science, psychodynamic theory, ‘behaviorism’, symbolic interactionism, social role theory, economic theory and critical theory. Each of these 10 chapters follows a similar pattern. They introduce the particular theory and then follow with nine or so sub-sections. These address ‘related dialects’ and associated schools of thought; applications—‘exemplary models’ and ‘root metaphors’; core assumptions; approaches to human development; mapping the theory; limitations of the theory; a specific practice application and finally, some learning activities. The final section of the book attempts to integrate some of these theories.

In each of the subsections about ‘mapping’, Forte asks the same series of questions of each of the 10 theories. How are connections conceptualised? How is the quality of connections differentiated? What is the typical focal system? How is the environment conceptualised? Is particular emphasis given to any systems? How are resources and their flow conceptualised? What descriptive words are used? How is change conceptualised? How are actual and ideal eco-maps contrasted? How are issues of diversity, ‘color’ and shading addressed? What would be added or deleted? This systematic and detailed analysis is interesting and may help the reader compare and more deeply understand different theories. However, they may also discourage many less determined readers and, although this enormous book is excellent value at only £29.99/\$66.56, its size is quite daunting.

Because of this, I approached it like an encyclopaedia and dipped in and out, following my own interests. I started with feminist theory, but was surprised to find no chapters or sections about it, the index only guiding the reader to three pages (out of 634), which were about different studies of preferred ‘theoretical orientations’—the most-used or most-referred-to by social workers (p. 23). Interestingly ‘feminist perspective’ was here, included in a list of 23 ‘theoretical orientations taught by social work educators’ ranging from Afrocentric and attachment theories to symbolic interactionism and systems approach (p. 21). Forte devises a ranking system from the different studies referred to, and concludes that ‘the winners are ... psychodynamic

and systems theories' (p.22); feminist theory is absent from the list of 19 'most preferred' and does not warrant further mention other than to wonder whether 'women prefer feminist approaches' (p. 24).

Other interests, sexuality and postmodernism, met with similar disappointments. The only listing about sexualities in the index refers to 'homosexuality' (despite most theories and theorists confining themselves to heterosexuality and hetero-normative models). References to postmodernism (other than appearing in a list of lesser 'preferred' theories like feminism), are made towards the end of the book when Forte attempts to pull theories together in a 'map of architectonics'. Forte suggests that postmodernists 'assume that there are multiple realities, that powerful groups are more often able to persuade or force others to accept their versions of reality, and that no versions of reality should be privileged' (p. 576). Apart from doubting the third assumption about no privileging, Forte says no more. Given that much of this chapter is about 'dialogical conversations' about theories, between and within different groups of professionals (and even 'within' individual practitioners), it seems remiss not to have considered postmodernism and notions of discourse further.

As the Red Riding Hood story at the beginning intimates, this text is full of colourful and meaningful illustrations and ideas. For example, to explain homeostasis, Forte refers to domestic heating systems and TV personalities (p. 197) and uses Easter parades and the Berlin Wall to elucidate ecological theory (p. 131). This style of writing increases the book's accessibility and adds to its charm. It is, however, very American in its context, style and reference. Although Payne (1997, 2002) and Fook (2002) are referred to, other key authors and texts are not (for example, Beckett, 2006; Dominelli, 2002a, 2002b, 2004; Healy, 2005; Munford *et al.*, 2005).

Though not indicated in the title, the book is designed for social workers, especially those who are beginning to work with and apply theoretical understandings to their practice, and seems quite useful for social work students. Forte carefully introduces the reader to the notion of key writers and eminent theorists as well as to mentors, instructors and even figures from history, becoming 'inner voices', 'heroes' and 'role models'. His statement about his own hero seemed rather mawkish and somewhat misplaced however.

Jesus is one of my heroes, too, and his teachings remind me of the importance of accepting people who are different, fighting for the down-trodden, and showing compassion to all. (p. 55)

Given that the text contains an abundance of complex and critical ideas from key academics and scholars of crucial significance to the social work knowledge base, it seems over-simple and rather clichéd to refer to Jesus Christ.

Unfortunately, there is rather too much material to look at for this review to do justice. Overall, *Human Behaviour and the Social Environment* is approachable and wide ranging in scope. It could easily be used as a university text in social work, social care and human services. It provides background information which will acquaint

readers with current thoughts about social work theory and practice in the American context.

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Transforming Society? Social Work and Sociology

VICKY PRICE and GRAEME SIMPSON

Bristol, The Policy Press/British Association of Social Workers, 2007

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This ambitious book encourages the reader to define social work as broadly as possible, and certainly not as something limited to the individualised interventions which typify much of current statutory provision. The authors are, moreover, keen to ensure that social work students approach their professional practice from a theoretical perspective which draws on the sociological tradition. They present this approach as one which emphasises the need to understand social structures and social interactions, in contrast to psychological perspectives which are less likely to take account of the social and economic conditions that contribute to the creation of individual problems.

The book is divided into six sections. The first, *Social exclusion, 'the poor' and social work*, sets up the authors' main premise—that, in reality, most social work interventions are focussed on individuals, families and communities which are economically deprived. Therefore, they argue, an understanding of how poverty affects the lives, life chances and (social) aspirations of poor people is key to social workers being able to understand the people they work with. In contrast to many recent social work texts, which address social inequalities from the viewpoint of a variety of minority groups, this book places *poverty* centre stage. The authors

demonstrate how poverty is a problem which intersects with and amplifies other forms of oppression—such as discrimination on the basis of age, gender, ethnicity, disability, religion, sexual orientation, and so on—but which is now all too often overlooked. The book does not ignore other forms of oppression and disadvantage, but the reader is gently reminded that not *all* women, people from ethnic minority communities, people with disabilities, etc., are socially disadvantaged—but those who are also poor undoubtedly are.

The next four sections each address different aspects of modern society: ‘Production’ (work), ‘Reproduction’ (relationships), ‘Consumption’ (what we buy) and ‘Community’ (social networks). Each of these sections introduces a range of classic and modern sociological theorists and demonstrates how their ideas can be brought to bear on the topic in focus. The ideas are illustrated through the use of both case studies and suggested activities for students/readers.

Production focuses on theories of work. It explores how patterns of employment and unemployment shape social expectations and contribute to patterns of poverty and deprivation. Next, *Reproduction* looks at how society ‘creates, maintains and recreates the conditions for it to continue’. This section discusses the family, in all of its guises, and places particular emphasis on the gendered aspects of unpaid care-giving. The section on *Consumption* then sets out debates which have arisen in more recent sociological thought concerning patterns of consumption of goods and services; how these can create inequality and exclusion (for the poor) or a sense of identity and inclusion (for those with the wherewithal to participate). The last of these four sections, *Community*, examines changing communities and asks whether Thatcher’s infamous declaration that ‘there is no such thing as society, only individuals’, has truly come to pass. It examines the evidence that communities are becoming more geographically fragmented—perhaps weakening the social bonds which tie people to places, jobs and family—and asks what impact this is having on social work.

The final section, *Transforming society: social work and sociology*, revisits some of the challenges set out in the opening pages and asks what the social work profession can contribute to social change. It reminds the reader of the interplay and interconnections between each of the areas previously addressed and suggests how the sociological ideas presented throughout the book can be used to inform social work practice. It also encourages attention to be paid to the dilemmas which continue to plague all thoughtful social workers: namely, whether they are agents of state control or activists in the fight against social inequality and injustice.

I wholeheartedly believe that the sociological perspective on social work offered by this book is one which needs to be re-asserted in the current social work climate of individualised casework approaches and target-driven interventions. Social work students need to understand the dynamics of poverty and the impact of this on the service users with whom they will be working. That said, the book only partially succeeded in its ambitious agenda. One of its key problems was the constant variation in pace and tone, which the authors themselves refer to in their introduction; they present this as a strength, suggesting that the text reads like an argument whose

intensity ebbs and flows. However, rather than finding the changes in style stimulating, I sometimes found myself rather disoriented—one minute a paragraph which read like a cosy chat, the next paragraph an intense theoretical debate. This sometimes made it difficult to get into the flow of reading or following a particular line of argument. Furthermore, despite the book having been derived from the authors' teaching, the level at which the writing was pitched was not always clear. In particular, the more theoretical interludes often assumed a depth of knowledge which I am not convinced many students possess. It would have been helpful if some of the more important theories could have been explained more directly—perhaps in place of some of the 'activity' boxes, which were scattered liberally throughout.

Despite these limitations, however, I have no hesitation in recommending this text. It provides a concise introduction to key sociological debates relevant to social work and puts sociology and poverty back at the heart of the social work endeavour.

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Research as Resistance—Critical, Indigenous, and Anti-oppressive Approaches

LESLIE BROWN & SUSAN STREGA (Eds)

Toronto, Canadian Scholars' Press, 2005

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This book is described as a collection of pieces by practitioners and researchers 'who position social justice as necessary for research processes as well as outcomes' (p. 1). The book aims to present approaches to research that are at least unconventional, if not radical; and as befits any resistance endeavor, the goals of the text reach beyond the bounds of research or education toward political and social change.

The themes address a wide range of issues related to 'transforming and transgressing' research (p. 2), including theoretical underpinnings, research design, innovative qualitative data collection and analysis techniques, and pragmatic and ethical matters when conducting research with marginalized individuals and groups. This permits the selection of chapters that describe real-life examples of how researchers have deliberated over and worked out these issues in their research practice. For example, Meemoona Moosa-Mitha locates anti-oppressive research within critical and difference-centered perspectives, and critiques liberal theories, Marxism, White-feminism, and postmodernism in a challenging but well-written and thoughtful discussion of the ontological and epistemological assumptions of anti-oppressive theories. Applications of less conventional research designs—including narrative studies of experiences as a (disabled) graduate student, and one researcher's Aboriginal heritage; and participatory action research with youth in government

care—engage the reader in questions of responsible methodologies of knowledge production and ethical research practice. Rena Miller presents a compelling, rigorous, and personal institutional ethnographic study of a palliative health care system through her experience as a spouse and care-giver of a dying person.

One of the most unique features of this collection is the thoughtful attention given to the nature of the researcher–researched relationship, and understandings of social location in the research process. For example, Kathy Absolon and Cam Willett assert that it is essential for the researcher to consciously locate him- or her-self, and to actively work at earning trust. Perhaps pushing into a relativist postmodern mindset, they also argue that the only thing we can write about with authority is ourselves. Fairn Herising also writes about location, calling into question all kinds of social and interpersonal boundaries and, in attempts to render questions of difference and power, she emphasizes that simply stating one’s social location is not sufficient.

Karen Potts and Leslie Brown offer a general overview of the concept of anti-oppressive research and the practicalities of becoming an anti-oppressive researcher. It is written in such a way that the reader is invited to not only engage with anti-oppressive ideas, but to consider the role and identity—to ‘try it on for size’. The articles are quite accessible for MSW students, and cover a variety of topics that allow selective reading for specific needs and interests. Students approaching research from a critical position feel an affinity for the challenge to positivism and rejection of the objectification of research ‘subjects’, and are invigorated by the pragmatic invitations to privilege the voices most often kept at the margins. Furthermore, students setting out on their own research projects may find themselves stymied by institutional rules and ethical standards that do not permit the realization of their anti-oppressive ambitions. I do not regard such dissonance and idealism as weakness, as they are precisely the channels through which important questions and meaningful discussions are launched.

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