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Theories for Practice: Symbolic Interactionist Translations

reviewed by Debra Anderson

Theories for Practice: Symbolic Interactionist Translations, by James A. Forte. 2001. University Press of America: Lanham, MD. 494 pages.

Theories for Practice: Symbolic Interactionist Translations represents the most ambitious and comprehensive account of symbolic interactionism (SI) I have encountered. Beginning with chapters one and two, the author establishes SI as a foundation language for sociological theorizing and social work practice. Symbolic interactionism, he argues, is ideal for joining theory to practice because it addresses micro, mezzo, and macro issues; is empirically sound; committed to the social work themes of diversity, internationalism, and empowerment; and is oriented toward social justice for vulnerable populations (p. 5). For novices of SI, chapter two is notable for its clear detailed explanation of this theoretical framework.

Each of the subsequent ten chapters examines a different theoretical tradition from the perspective of SI in order to "forge translations" and encourage conversations between interactionism and other theoretical frameworks (p. 19). The theories examined include social behaviorism, psychoanalysis, cognitive theory, role theory, systems theory, critical theory, feminist theory, evolutionary theory, ecological theory, and economic theories.

Each chapter begins with a history of conversations between the focal theory and symbolic interactionism, followed by areas of agreement and disagreement between the two. The history of conversations is beneficial as it enables readers to gain an understanding of the development of each theory as well as the ways in which each evolved over time.

The sections entitled "areas of agreement" and "areas of disagreement" compare SI with the focal theory along several dimensions, including the conception of the person, scientific inquiry, person-environment focus, and so on. Notable here is the author's balanced appraisal of SI. Although he supports its use as a master

language, he recognizes its weaknesses and encourages partnerships with other theories to strengthen its application.

Then, each chapter includes a section in which symbolic interactionist language is used to translate the major concepts of the focal theory. Although the author attempts to bridge the differences between SI and other theoretical traditions, readers unfamiliar with the concepts and language games used by each theoretical framework may become confused rather than enlightened by this section.

Each chapter concludes by offering illustrative exemplars that merge the focal theory with SI perspectives to address social problems such as prison conditions, homelessness, and domestic violence. This section is of particular value as the examples are based on problems and interventions familiar to social workers.

The text concludes by advocating that symbolic interactionism provides the "best master language" (p. 479) for a marriage between theory and practice and a partnership between sociology and social work.

Theories for Practice: Symbolic Interactionism Translations is useful to social work educators seeking to increase their understanding of symbolic interactionism. In particular, professors of human behavior and the social environment and/or knowledge development courses will appreciate the depth and scope of the author's coverage of SI and other theoretical traditions. Further, graduate and doctoral level social work students who desire to increase their theoretical proficiency will find the text challenging but informative. However, I would not use this text in undergraduate social work education as its dense nature requires that students come with a sophisticated level of theory that goes beyond most undergraduate curricula.

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