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Book Reviews

THEORIES FOR PRACTICE: SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONIST
TRANSACTIONS. James A. Fort. 2001, 512 pp., \$68.00.

In our role as teachers, most social work professors understand that one of our key tasks is to keep our students interested. All too often, in our roles as writers and scholars, we forget the importance of engaging our audience, and create scholarship that rivals the best sleeping medications. Fortunately, James Fort, in his comprehensive and rigorous work, *Theories for Practice: Symbolic Interactionist Translations*, pays attention to his audience. Rarely does one see an author with the ability to write in a style that is as clever as it is thorough in its analysis of theoretical material. In his discussions of social interactionism and its relation to other theoretical orientations, Fort uses the metaphor of the conversation as a dominant theme for structuring his work. To Fort and other proponents of the symbolic interactionist perspective, it is through conversations between scholars, and between scholars and practitioners, that we expand the depth and utility of our theories. Throughout the book, the reader is invited to read conversations constructed by the author between symbolic interactionism and several important theories of human behavior.

Fort is a social worker who has immersed himself in the theoretical world of the sociologist in order to reveal the merits of symbolic interactionism. From the outset, Fort attempts a hard (yet witty) sell of the theory. He explains the congruence of the theory to social work values and aims. He exhorts the reader to buy the theory by discussing how and why many of its esteemed proponents have done so. He might have stuck to his analysis of the interesting points between the theory and the profession, and left out ad hominem arguments. The author does such a good job of helping the reader understand the merits of the theory in the second chapter; the first chapter's exhortations may be a little overkill.

The second chapter and its discussion of the symbolic interactionist perspective are excellent, clear and thorough. It provides enough discussion of the theory to help the reader utilize the theory in one way a good theory should be used: as a lens through which to view the human condition. The middle chapters of the book consist of discussions of the relationships between the interactionist perspective and several important theories including social behaviorism, psychodynamic, socio-cognitive

science, role, systems, critical interactionism, pragmatic feminist, and ecological. Fort carefully explores key concepts of the theories, areas of agreement, conceptions of scientific inquiry, and areas of disagreement. Most of the content in each chapter is theoretical and seems more suited for the academic than for the practitioner. The author does a masterful job of deconstructing each theory. The last several pages of each chapter are dedicated to demonstrating practice implications. While Fort does a fine job of exploring the utility of each theory, he does so in a manner that is still somewhat theoretical, and highly useful. Practice themes are carefully tied to research. In each chapter, he discusses the application of the theories presented to populations such as alienated workers, depressed women and the homeless. These discussions are valuable, and should have been longer.

In the closing chapter, the author argues for greater communication and collaboration between practitioners and scholars. He provides several valuable recommendations for doing this, including increasing collaboration between both groups in journals and at conferences, through joint research ventures, and through an increase in journals that possess appeal to both.

What this fine book makes clear, however inadvertently, is how difficult it is to meet the needs of both constituencies. As much as the author has attempted to provide a conversation that is valuable to both, his text may be of less interest to the practitioner than to the scholar. This does not make it less valuable; it is extremely well written and illuminating. Zone appreciates theory that has excellent explanatory breadth and depth for many social problems. If the author were to write specifically for the practitioner, he could change the focus of attention more towards discussions of actual application of the theory and away from such rigorous details of the architecture of the theories.

There are several valuable uses for this text. It would be invaluable to the doctoral student seeking an in-depth exploration of a unifying theory for social work practice. Its chapters on the relationships between symbolic interactionism and other theories provide a good depth of knowledge about each theory discussed. Fort's exploration of the points of commonality between theories can help budding scholars in their development of analytical skills. The book is not particularly useful for most MSW students. While interesting and well written, it is too theoretically dense for most MSW students. It is a book by a

scholar, for scholars. That said, the author should be commended for his attempt the difficult task of meeting both the needs of the scholar and the practitioner. This book is must reading for any social work scholar who wishes to increase his or her depth of understanding of social work theory.

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