



Skills for using theory in social work, 32 lessons for evidence-informed practice, by J. A. Forte

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BOOK REVIEW

Skills for using theory in social work, 32 lessons for evidence-informed practice, by J. A. Forte, New York, New York, Routledge, 2014, 328 pp., \$145.00 (hardcover), \$51.95 (paperback), ISBN 0415726840.

In this book the author takes an innovative stance on theory, focusing on the process of selecting and applying theory, instead of describing the content of various theories. Theory is reframed as “competent theorizing” and is divided into eight advanced skills including such abilities as applying theory differentially and deconstructing theory. Those advanced skills are then broken down into a collection of 32 lessons for the readers to more actively use theory in their professional lives. The author strengthens the usefulness of his material by linking these theorizing skills to the Council for Social Work Education (CSWE) competencies and practice behaviors,

In the introduction the author articulates the social work profession’s ambivalence around theory and theorizing. He claims there is a distinction made between academic theory that is typically learned in the classroom and practice knowledge gained in the field. He points to the lack of content on theorizing in social work journals including *Social Work with Groups*. He suggests there is much overlap between the theorist and practitioner roles, having the common goal of contributing to the common good. The author argues that these roles are on a continuum and that social workers need to develop skills as a “theorizing practitioner.” He also makes the distinction between the pedagogy of theory, where educators lecture on what theorists have written, compared to the pedagogy of theorizing where students are taught a collection of skills. The author then proceeds to demonstrate this pedagogy of theorizing throughout the book.

The book is divided into four sections starting with theory basics, that is, defining theory and its importance, how theory is selected, and ending with critical thinking skills. The fifth section provides a brief summary of the book and Coda, a collection of guiding principles to help the readers apply these skills to their work. Each section is broken down into a collection of lessons with each lesson identifying the CSWE competences it addresses, content on the skill articulated, and several learning activities and reflections to help the reader integrate the material.

In Section 1, six lessons are presented. The author first articulates the value of using theory, that is, increasing our flexibility in using interventions with clients and better understanding other professionals on interdisciplinary teams. He breaks down “theoretical thinking” into a continual pattern of immersion and distancing in our work as social workers. He views the competent social worker as always critically analyzing their work. The author offers a variety of ways of defining theory and identifies the different categories of theory, such as formal and informal, explanatory (why) and practice (how to). He lays out the different approaches to theory building including the positivist, interpretive, and critical approaches. He suggests that a competent social worker combines styles in using theory with clients which he calls “syncretic theorizing.” The author then examines the process of knowledge collection and the uniqueness of the social work lens. He suggests social workers, using the person-in-environment frame, examine and make efforts to improve individuals’ membership in society including their relationship with family, peer groups, and society. Theory selection involves collecting knowledge from research and practice, and learning from mentors who use a particular theory.

He identifies the importance of evaluating the credibility of the theory selected, as well as knowing one's bias in the theory selection.

In Section 2 the process of applying theory to social work practice is broken down into 11 lessons. The author articulates the challenge of applying general theory to specific client situations, within the frame of the person and environment. This application requires social workers to have skills in deconstructing theory, using elements of a theory and reconstructing theory, modifying it to fit the person and environment situation. The author suggests a variety of ways of addressing this "practice puzzle." In applying his experience with the theory of symbolic interaction, he points out the importance of seeking consultation from theory role models or mentors. He suggests that as we gain experience we are able to integrate the voice of key theoretical mentors as we apply a particular theory to our work. He points out how to deconstruct a theory by identifying its "root metaphor" as applied to the person and environment frame; such as, the person is seen as an animal within a laboratory for behavioral theory. The deconstruction process includes skills in identifying explicit and implicit theoretical assumptions, worker's own assumption (bias), and articulating theory propositions or the relationships between concepts. Reconstruction skills include operationalizing concepts, adding hypotheses, and modifying the theory to fit the person and environment situation. He examines both the deductive and inductive process in examining theory and applying it to case situations. Finally in this section the author identifies the importance of social workers being able to articulate a narrative summary of a given theory, including a visual display to build their understanding as well as communicating with other professionals.

In Section 3, though the title of this section *Constructing Practical Theories* suggests generation of new theory, it appears to present more of the same in deconstruction and reconstruction of current theory. This collection of four lessons starts with providing a description of middle range theory. The author reintroduces the components of the deductive process in quantitative research applied to social work practice. Concepts are transformed into independent and dependent variables, transforming theory propositions into hypotheses, and examining causal relationships between variables. The author then reintroduces the inductive process in qualitative research, starting with case situations to transforming qualitative findings into useful practice guidelines. He articulates the importance of translation skills in using different types of theory and communicating with clients and other professionals. He suggests, for example, the ability to generalize findings in quantitative research is similar to the "transferability" of findings in qualitative research.

In Section 4, the author in a collection of 10 lessons provides a variety of evaluative lens by which to assess a given theory and its application including a collection of questions to use in the critique. Scientific standards are discussed, that is, clarity, internal consistency and testability, and practical criteria such as consequences of theory application and relevance to practice. Social work values and ethics are presented as an evaluative lens applying the NASW code of ethics. Another critical lens is the standard of evidence. The author articulates a variety of sources that can be used in assessing the evidence for application of a given theory, that is, systematic reviews, social work journals, and textbooks. He points out a number of websites that may be useful in assessing evidence. He proposes standards examining holism, social justice, sensitivity to diversity, and the degree strengths are focused on in the theory. He finally proposes assessing the cultural and historical context of a given theory and its application. By comparing the context of a theory's development with the context of where the theory is applied, including the professionals, client population, and treatment process involved

the utility of the theory is better assessed. Finally in Section 5, the author offers a Coda that consists of an elaboration of a mnemonic phrase (I Theorize) that summarizes the key points of the book.

As a group worker with more than 30 years of experience, the book offers a framework for theorizing that can easily be applied to group work theory and practice. Teachers of social group work as well as practitioners can use the book to deconstruct, reconstruct, and critically assess group theory applied to social group work. The reflective activities at the end of each chapter could also be applied to group work case examples.

The major contribution of this book is the author's focus on the process of theorizing and breaking this down into a collection of teachable skills. The author also provides a variety of lens by which to critically analyze theory and its application. Readers may find the book a bit dense with lots of terminology, and it appears the author assumes a foundational knowledge base in quantitative and qualitative research. Although the author provides a wide range of suggestions for using and evaluating theory in practice, the context of practice settings are not addressed. For example, the author proposes a practitioner conduct literature reviews or set up a research project on a given theory without acknowledging the time constraints and lack of support many practitioners may find themselves in. There was a lack of practice examples using common practice models such as cognitive-behavior therapy or solution-focus therapy. Although the author argues for the importance of integrating researcher and practitioner roles, there is no discussion about the practice context that can undermine this integration process.

In summary this is a book that makes a strong argument that the competent social worker needs to have a collection of active skills in theorizing. The theorizing process is broken down into a group of skills that are practiced in a collection of 32 lessons. I see the value of this text fitting most likely in a social work theory course or as a supplement for a practice course. It is less likely to be a text practitioners would pick up to read.

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