

Book Review *An Introduction to Using Theory in Social Work Practice*

James A. Forte

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REVIEWED BY WAYNE C. EVENS

This book continues James A. Forte's efforts to make theory accessible and usable in social work practice (Forte, 2001, 2006). The preface summarizes the importance of social workers understanding and being able to translate multiple languages (client language, theoretical language, and the languages of other professions). The book is composed of four sections.

Section 1 (Chapters 1 through 5) provides a very useful guide to using theories to guide practice. It includes practical ideas to guide the selection of theories and using multiple theories to guide practice. This section links theory to the problem-solving process within the context of the person-in-environment model. This section discusses how social workers choose their theoretical orientation, including the effects of mentors, teachers, and agency preference. The book presents the 14 theories to be addressed with important theorists related to each theory, the root metaphors for the theory, major terms or concepts used in the theory, and a suggestion as to how the theory might frame a person-in-environment issue. This chart clarifies the theories to be addressed and helps the reader understand the use of theory. It clearly links each theory to the person-in-environment model. The theories addressed are acting (behavioral), faithing (anthropological), feeling (psychodynamic), sensing (evolutionary biology), thinking (cognitive), transacting (symbolic interactionism), communal (strength–resilience), cultural (constructionist), economy (exchange), organization (role), physical environment (ecology), political–class (critical), political–gender (feminist), and social systems (pp. 13–15). Forte does not promote any particular theory but puts the reader in position to compare and contrast and select a theory or theories appropriate to the situation.

Section 2 (Chapters 6 through 14) contains the meat of the book. Each chapter addresses a step in the problem-solving process using the same 14

theories with charts that suggest how each theory conceptualizes the step and how each would suggest action. Chapter 6 deals with engagement and how each theory conceptualizes the “helper” and defines engagement tasks. For example, one chart indicates that behavioral theories see the helper as a laboratory scientist. The engagement approach would be to “orient to procedures and begin the scientific inquiry (p. 65).” Chapter 7 addresses the information-gathering process. It indicates the kind of information each theory would find important. For example, a cognitive approach would suggest that “attribution of blame, automatic thoughts, cognitive development, core beliefs or schemas (self, other, role, event), information processing, self-talk (p. 74)” would be important to understand in the assessment process. Chapter 8 indicates how each theory could be used to formulate questions to gather information in the assessment process. Chapter 9 suggests ways the 14 theories might guide the assessment formation process. It indicates the hypotheses each theory would formulate. Chapter 10 deals with the goal-setting portion of the intervention. Again, hypotheses are derived from each theory. These are general hypotheses that a social worker could use to develop specific hypotheses for a particular case. Chapter 11 deals with change theories and logic models. It provides ways that each theory would specify the expected change and how it is to be achieved. Chapter 12 addresses how each theory can be used to select and implement interventions. It can be very useful in helping the worker think about the appropriate intervention for a specific case. Chapter 13 provides very practical ideas of how each theory would develop evaluation. It identifies which issues each theory would show to be in need of evaluation. Chapter 14 deals with the “ending process,” about which the author indicates there is very little research. However, he does indicate how each theory could help conceptualize and guide the ending.

The final two sections encourage the social worker to develop the skills needed to use multiple theories. They contain very useful and practical suggestions and guides to developing a multiple theory approach. The idea of finding a theory to fit the particular client system rather than forcing the client system into a theory is of particular importance. Section 3 (Chapters 15 through 18) provides useful guidance to develop a multitheory approach to practice. This section encourages the social worker to develop a multitheory personal practice model and to participate in practices that support a multitheory approach. Section 4 returns to the idea of the social worker as a translator to argue that effective practice must include translation.

I found this an excellent book either for students and practitioners. I will use it with undergraduates because I believe they will find it very useful as they

strive to understand theory and practice. The book fills a real need to make theory accessible and usable for social work practice. Few students or practitioners are able to use multiple theories to guide practice. This book facilitates that process by showing in clear and practical ways how different theories can guide the process. Forte has provided a true service to the profession by making theory understandable and demonstrating how different theories might be used at various stages of the problem-solving process.

References

- Forte, J. A. (2001). *Theories for practice*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America,
- Forte, J. A. (2006). *Human behavior and the social environment: Models, metaphors, and maps for applying theoretical perspectives to practice*. Belmont, CA: Thompson Brooks Cole.

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