

Book Review *Skills for Using Theory in Social Work: 32 Lessons for Evidence-Informed Practice*

James A. Forte

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REVIEWED BY WAYNE C. EVENS

This is the next in James A. Forte's series seeking to make theory understandable, accessible, and useful for social work students and practicing social workers. The book focuses on understanding theorizing and theories in 32 lessons that explicate theorizing and the practical use of theory. In some ways it expands Polansky's (1986) argument for the practicality of theory.

Forte begins with an introduction that explains the importance of theories and stresses the need not just to memorize theories, but also to engage in active interaction with theories. "The book provides lessons that will increase your ability to apply knowledge, critique knowledge using evidence and other standards, and use knowledge to guide the planned change process" (p. 12). Forte acknowledges the importance of practice knowledge and ethical standards as one analyzes and applies theories.

The book contains four major sections: theorizing basics; applying theory (deconstructive and reconstructive theorizing); constructing practical theories; and critical thinking about theoretical knowledge using scientific, practical, and professional standards. Each section contains lessons to help students and/or practicing social workers develop skills to effectively create and use theories. The book concludes with a summary of practical theorizing.

Section 1 contains six lessons on theorizing and understanding theories:

- Identify and Act as a Theorist Engaged in Theoretical Thinking
- Identify and Use Purposefully Different Styles of Theorizing
- Identify and Use the Social Work Approach to Knowledge Selection
- Identify and Use Knowledge From Varied Sources
- Identify and Use Theory Differentially by Level of Abstraction
- Identify and Use Theory Differentially by System Level

Section 2 contains 11 lessons to help the practitioner assess and understand theories:

- Identify Theoretical Aspects of the Practice Puzzle
- Identify and Borrow From Relevant Theoretical Frameworks
- Identify and Learn From Relevant Exemplary Theorists
- Check on and Imagine Puzzle Patterns Using Theory's Root Metaphors
- Check on and Specify Theory's Assumptions
- Identify and Adapt a Theory's Concepts
- Identify and Reformulate a Theory's Concepts
- Identify and Re-organize a Theory's Deductive Argument
- Identify and Reorganize a Theory's Inductive Argument
- Summarize the Relationship Between a Theory's Elements
- Display a Theory's Elements

Section 3 includes four lessons to guide the practitioner in constructing usable theories:

- Construct Practical Theories in the Middle Range
- Construct a Middle Range Theory About Causes
- Construct a Middle Range Theory About Processes or Themes
- Translate and Speak Theory With Clients and Colleagues

Section 4 provides ways to critically assess and apply theory to practice. It contains 11 lessons:

- Think Critically About Theory
- Critique Theory Using Scientific and Practical Standards
- Critique Theory Using Professional Standard of Ethics and Values
- Critique Theory Using Professional Standard of Evidence
- Critique Theory Using Professional Standard of Holism
- Critique Theory Using Professional Standard of Justice
- Critique Theory Using Professional Standard of Sensitivity to Diversity
- Critique Theory Using Professional Standard of Strengths
- Critique Theory by Reference to Moral and Technical Uses
- Critique Theory in Historical and Cultural Context
- Critique Theory Considering Long-Term Impact

Section 5 presents a systematic way to approach practical theorizing.

The book provides practical guidance to approaching theory and a systematic way to use theory in practice. The lessons in each section give clear and useful approaches to understanding theory and using theory in practice. They walk the

reader step-by-step through understanding, analyzing, assessing, and using theory. I am impressed by the systematic and practical approach, which includes practice wisdom and professional standards. The book would be very effective with students and very helpful to practitioners.

Reference

Polansky, N. A. (1986). There is nothing so practical as a good theory. *Child Welfare*, 65(1), 3–15.

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