Critical Social Work

An interdisciplinary journal dedicated to social justice.

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Critical Social Work
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Critical Social Work, 2008 Vol. 9, No. 1

Book Review

Human Behavior and the Social Environment: Models, Metaphors, and Maps for Applying Theoretical Perspectives to Practice. James A. Forte. Belmont, CA: Thomson Brooks/Cole, 2007. 634 pp. Paper: ISBN 0-495-00659-9, $80.95.

by

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This textbook is a helpful addition for Social Work curriculum. It highlights the application of theory to practice and chooses some interesting theoretical models that support social work practice. The book is divided into three parts: Understanding Theories and Tools for Translation; Models, Metaphors, and Maps Applied; and Theoretical Integration. Like many HBSE texts, this one begins with a discussion of theory and theorizing. In addition, Forte adds a number of methods for understanding or translating theoretical models, including the use of core metaphors, theoretical maps, and role models from theorists and practitioners associated with each model. This introductory section describes the theoretical foundation for the discussion that follows. Ten theoretical models are presented: Ecological, Systems, Biology, Cognitive, Psychodynamic, Behaviorism, Symbolic Interactionism, Social Role, Economic, and Critical theories. The chapter titles all start with the word 'Applied' denoting the emphasis of understanding each model as a framework for social work practice. Each model is presented using the same structure: Introduction, Exemplary Models, Root Metaphors, Core Assumptions, Approach to Human Development, Selective Propositions, Mapping, Limits, and an example of Theory Application to a problem area of interest to Social Work. In addition each chapter ends with a number of Learning Activities suggestions which could be used for in-class exercises or for homework assignments. The final part of the book discusses a number of methods for integrating theoretical models and describes the author's preference for a Dialogical Approach in which theoretical discussions compare, match, challenge, sequence, or synthesize different approaches.

This is an easy to read text that uses metaphors, maps, case examples, and short biographies of theorists and social work practitioners to assist the student's understanding of the content. Metaphors include the environment as a machine in which persons are parts and the social worker is a mechanic (systems theory) or the person as an actor in a theater (environment) with the social worker as director (social role theory). Eco-maps graphically present how the model conceptualizes the relationships between factors influencing human behavior. The case examples at the end of each chapter help students make the link between theory and practice. There are also additional advantages in this text. Limitations of each theory are acknowledged, which encourages students to critically think about the strengths and challenges represented by each perspective. The final chapter offers suggestions for comparing theoretical models. It contains methods for integrating different approaches and for using combinations of models in order to understand the complexities of human behaviour. Furthermore, the range of theories supports a broad range of social work practice. Biological and psychodynamic theories focus on individuals; social role and economic theories provide foundation for macro social work practice, and ecological concepts explain the importance of interactions between individuals, families, and communities.

On the other hand, the author is American and the text does include examples that are specific to the U. S. social welfare system. Theories that explain oppression and social tension related to diversity are not included as a theoretical perspective but only presented when the chosen theories address them, as when the chapter on Applied Social Role Theory discusses diversity and color as a role determinant. Oppression is only discussed in a section on critical feminist theory in the Applied Critical Theory chapter, and this limited presentation of feminist theory does not well represent the richness of the feminist perspectives. Lastly, the separation of assumptions and propositions occasionally interrupts the expected learning flow. For example, Erickson's stages of development are mentioned in the assumptions section but not described until the propositions section.

However, the focus on application and multiple methods for clarifying theories is a welcome addition to the HBSE literature. Overall this text offers provides a helpful approach to the study of human behaviour in the social environment.