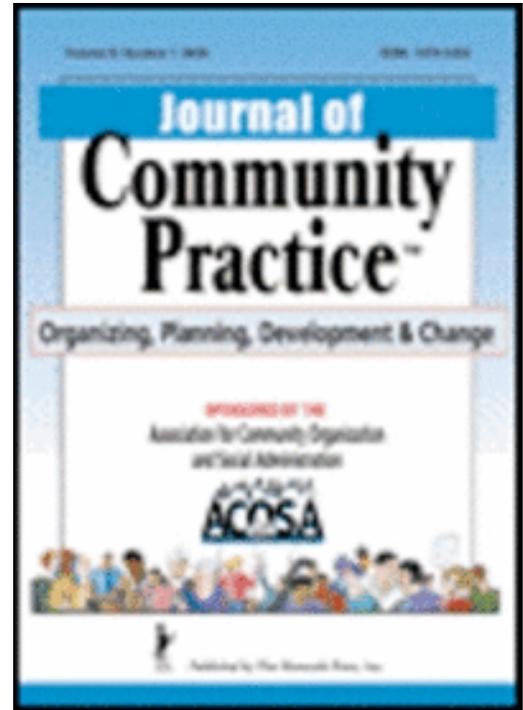# Human Behavior and the Social Environment: Models, Metaphors, and Maps for Applying Theoretical Perspectives to Practice, by J. A. Forte

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Human Behavior and the Social Environment: Models, Metaphors, and Maps for Applying Theoretical Perspectives to Practice, by J. A. Forte

Forte (2007) is a notable addition to the theory component of the Human Behavior and the Social Environment (HBSE) curriculum. This textbook presents a thorough, in-depth look at major HBSE theories, ranging from ecological, systems, and biological theories to applied cognitive science, psychodynamic theory, applied behaviorism, symbolic interactionism, and applied social role theory. The author also explores economic and critical theories, two models of significance to macro practice. In his examination of theories, Forte uses some of the common building blocks found in similar HBSE textbooks—concepts, core assumptions, practice application, and a critical appraisal or evaluation. What sets this book apart, however, is its emphasis on comparability of theories, and ecomapping as a primary tool for cross-theory comparison. Forte's is a dialogical approach that encourages "fluency" in multiple theoretical "languages," a theoretical "multilingualism" to enhance social work practice outcomes. Here, the familiar tool of ecomapping is used to facilitate learning, to "translate" or "convert the foreign language of [each] theory into the more natural social work language of the ecosystems paradigm" (p. 14). Use of ecomap is a creative way to enhance students' ability to integrate multiple theories into their knowledge base for a theoretically pluralist and dialogical practice that applies appropriate theories to particular client needs and practice goals.

In the general outline of the book, Forte is clearly an educator with students' comprehension as the primary goal in mind. The book starts with introductory conceptualizations (what is theory, the role of theory in social work, the role of social workers in relation to theory, and "theorizing skills" for social work). In the following two chapters, Forte discusses tools for

within-theory and cross-theory translation. The use of conceptual metaphors, and theorists as role models, are helpful ways of within-theory translation or facilitating one's understanding of a theory and its use in practice (chapter 2). Chapter 3 introduces ecomapping and the application of universal social work standards for theory evaluation, two tools for cross-theory translation or translation of the theory's terms into common social work language and ecosystems terminology. The tools introduced in chapter 2 and 3 become the core elements of Forte's organization of chapters 4 through 13, his description of the 10 major HBSE theories. Chapters 4 to 13 follow the same structure. The examination of a theory begins with a brief description of related theoretical models, and main theorists' biographies and contributions. Following, Forte accounts each theory's root metaphors for a person, social environment, and social worker; its core assumptions and perspective(s) on human development; an ecomap drawn for the theory; and translation of the theory into key ecosystems terms. Chapters 4 through 13 end with a critical appraisal, or an evaluation of the theory under discussion based on universal social work standards, and a case study for practice application. In addition, each of these chapters suggests learning activities and a Web site for online resources. The book concludes with a call for the use of the dialogical approach to theory understanding and cross-theory integration, a review of the within-theory and cross-theory translation tools and their application to the ten core HBSE theories (chapter 14).

What are some of the strengths of this book? The book makes a significant addition to the textbooks on human behavior theory. It is a comprehensive text inclusive in its discussion and is well written. I especially enjoyed Forte's careful attention to the application of theories, his real-life (frequently biographical) illustrations of the concepts weaved throughout the book, and case studies offered in the end of chapters. His case studies (often drawn from the author's own practice experience) are illuminating, stimulating thinking toward the practical application of HBSE theories in field practice or social work education. For instance, the author relates how the concepts of the economic theory were applied to "save" an undergraduate social work program in his university, describing an online social action campaign to increase the costs and decrease benefits of program discontinuation. Forte used a practice model based on the psychodynamic attachment theory as the foundation of his grief work and bereavement counseling. The author also describes his interesting

application of social role theory to increase volunteerism among his undergraduate social work students.

What enlivens Forte's discussion is his writing style, learning activities, and metaphorical imagination. He uses first-person accounts and seeks to engage his reader in an imaginary dialogue and discussion. Forte clearly thinks of making theory learning exciting for his intended audience: students new to the social work profession. I liked the author's learning activities, thoughtful questions for facilitating theory discussion in the classroom. A special feature of this book is its use of metaphors to bring theoretical concepts to life and enhance reader's understanding. Forte's metaphors for person or client, environment, and social worker are creative, refreshing, and sometimes provocative. For instance, who would think of the social worker as a "tamer" of "beasts" or clients, and the social environment as a "circus" in psychodynamic theories (p. 563)? Or children as "rats with language" in applied behaviorism (p. 336)? Or, if the person is described as part of a "machine" in systems theory, the social worker is a mechanic and a systems analyst?

Forte's book is of main relevance to clinical social work practice, helping to build the micro and mezzo-level practice knowledge for the profession. Yet the author seems to make an effort to enhance the book's significance to macro (community and policy) practice as well. In his critical appraisal of theories, Forte often takes a macro lens and assesses whether the theory taps into societal and community-level processes. Whenever appropriate, the author uses examples and case studies from macro practice. For instance, Forte cites the applicability of ecological theory for disaster relief practice and describes a case study of an ecological intervention for building a homeless shelter (pp. 158-162). Interestingly, the book's inclusion of the biographical narratives of major theorists is of special import to macro practice, as many of these scholars are inspiring examples of promoting social justice and community development. Beyond Jane Addams, the author draws attention to George Mead, Talcott Parsons, Robert Park, and other theoretical "role models" whose work toward social change is exemplary yet often not widely known.

Further, what enhances the value of this book for macro practice is its inclusion of two theories: economic theory (with its emphasis on economic development) and critical theory. I found Forte's examination of social role

theory also a welcome contribution, given this theory's emphasis on mezzo-level factors and potential application to empowerment practice. From a macro practice perspective, I would suggest adding a brief discussion of some newer theories significant for community development and organization, including social capital theory approaches, which take a more explicit focus on community and neighborhood factors. Omission of organizational and group development theories found in some HBSE texts (e.g., **Schriver, 2001**) is a possible limitation of this book. Overall, I believe Forte could benefit from a clearer rationale for his theory selection.

A couple of small challenges could be noted with the book. First, the level of abstraction in some parts of the text may diminish the utility of Forte (2007) as an introductory book in HBSE theories. In particular, application of ecomapping to some theories may require high levels of abstraction and make it difficult for an average BSW or MSW student to grasp what is being described. For example, when ecomapping applied symbolic interactionist theory, person's unseen and seen memberships are viewed as a focal system; and a client is a "a miniature society," and along with his or her symbolic environment is a point of assessment and potential intervention (p. 397). Further, Forte's amount of detail can sometimes seem daunting. The extensive material covered in the first three chapters, though a necessary conceptual foundation for the theory-by-theory coverage in chapters 4 to 13, may interfere with the reader's focus and potentially limit the utility of the book for both students and social work professionals.

Forte compares "the social work knowledge base to a huge, ever growing library with hundreds of rooms, some dark corners, and a few poorly marked passages" (p. 584). His metaphor begs the question: "How might we make sense of and integrate the knowledge from this library that we need to do our social work job?" (p. 584). The author's response is simple. He suggests mastering the "language" of the major social work theories. Forte's book recommends and applies some theory mapping tools—ecomapping, metaphors, and role models—toward theoretical "fluency," practice application, and cross-disciplinary dialogue among students as well as social work practitioners. I would like to concur with the author's recommendation, and suggest his book as a resource and an important contribution.

REFERENCE

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