

A Look at Maryland Author James A. Forte

This is a little different than my usual column. It is the first of what will be an occasional report designed to bring a Maryland author to the attention of the NASW membership. In this instance, it is a text book on human behavior by James A. Forte (Forte 2007). It has a short and simple title, *Human Behavior and the Social Environment* and a longer and more complex subtitle, *Models, Metaphors and Maps for Applying Theoretical Perspectives to Practice*. It is the subtitle that conveys the import of this work. The social work curriculum has broad requirements for human behavior knowledge. The latest revision, 2004, of the CSWE Educational and Policy Standards says, "Social work education programs provide content on the reciprocal relationships between human behavior and social environments. Content includes empirically-based theories and knowledge that focus on the interactions between and among individuals, groups, societies, and economic systems. It includes theories and knowledge of biological, sociological, cultural, psychological, and spiritual development across the life span; the range of social systems in which people live (individual, family, group, organizational, community; and the ways social systems promote or deter people in maintaining or achieving health and well-being."

Putting aside its questionable syntax, this statement is quite a mouthful. Most schools offer a two semester course either with the title "Human Behavior and the Social Environment" or a variation on this name. The content of these courses differs from school to school and professor to professor. Since this is not designated as a practice course, this means many non-social workers often teach it. All of this combines to make the human behavior course one of the more problematic ones in the social work curriculum.

Forte's book brings provides an orderly and social work practice focus to this subject matter. He puts his educational bet on theory and ways to relate it to practice. There are three sections: (1) Understanding Theories and

Tools for Translation; (2) Models, Metaphors, and Maps Applied; and (3) Theoretical Integration. The chapters in part one provide epistemological tools. He considers the nature of theory, models and metaphors for practical theorizing and the theoretical and ecosystem maps which are the tools used for translating theory into practice principles. The material in these chapters is rich. If I were still teaching, this is a book I would use. I am not sure how well these chapters would go at the masters level but they are definitely needed at the doctoral level.

Part two is the book's heart. It covers the theories that Forte considers central to social work. Each chapter title is preceded by the word applied and most are followed by the word theory. They are ecological, social systems, biology, cognitive science, psychodynamic, behaviorism, symbolic interaction, social role, economic, and critical. These chapters are an important and original contribution to teaching and learning human behavior.

In a brief column I can only show this fruitful material's bare outlines. The chapters are parsed with orientation to the theory under consideration, a brief description of its subject major proponents, a section on metaphors which help locate the theory in the real world, core assumptions, the way human development is viewed from the theory's perspective, critical comments, an eco-map of the theory, a discussion of limits, and a model for the way the theory is used in practice. There are several outstanding things about this structure. Foremost is that the book is not advocating but teaching. Presenting brief intellectual biographies of the theory's proponents is an important aid in remembering the theory. Taking the reader from a theory's initiating ideas to seeing it reflected in practice is exactly what is needed to make this subject matter interesting, alive, and relevant. Often the practice illustration's come from Forte's own work. It is this quality that makes this work immediately applicable to what social worker's do. This is rare in any book on this subject.

Starting with the BA and going through the PhD, most programs in the social sciences offer required courses in the history and ideas of the great people in their field. Social work doesn't. Forte's ability to summarize each theory in its own terms is exceptional. This also holds for his presentation of critical comments and limitations associated with a theory. Not mixing description with critique enhances both the readability of this work and the reader's ability to remember the content. Material in this concise and objective format recommends these chapters as study guides in preparing to take licensing exams and as resource references for

practitioners already in the field. Part three consists of one chapter that integrates the two prior sections of the book. This is a short chapter and there are several charts that reduce key elements to lists. This too is useful for learning, but only if the prior ideas have been understood.

Forte argues for multitheory integration. He sees the practitioner as an eclectic not committed to one theory but using techniques from any theory as appropriate. I take a different approach. I think it is necessary to know one theory well. It is not easy to learn theory and mastering one is usually enough for a lifetime. A theory is ultimately a point of view, a way of looking at the world. One needs to be securely grounded in their world view to be able to create new knowledge and to accurately select techniques that stem from other theories. It is necessary to do this because no theory completely explains behavior. The difference is only in emphasis since we both agree that practice requires drawing techniques from many theories.

Forte identifies the ecosystem perspective as the dominant paradigm in social work and uses this throughout the book to frame much of the presentation. I have always had question about this because it uses interaction loosely and talks of interacting with the environment. You respond to the environment but you interact with people. Interaction requires mutual awareness and shared social norms; in other words, people.

Another question I have concerns his emphasis on Hans Falck's membership concept. Falck, a former Maryland faculty member, wrote a memorable book on the subject (Falck 1988). Forte identifies him as a symbolic actionist. While he denies dichotomies in the way that pragmatists do, he also denies the individual. The dichotomy that Mead disposed of was that between mind and body. To him the self was a distinct entity, a product of interaction. He states this in an interesting way, "There are all sorts of different selves answering to all sorts of different social reactions. It is the social process itself that is responsible for the appearance of the self; it is not there as a self apart from this type of experience. A multiple personality is in a certain sense normal ... (Strauss 1964, p. 207)." Falck maintains that membership is the issue and that one cannot conceive of the individual as an entity. In his distinction between the me and the I, Mead makes specific allowance for the individual. The me is the membership response since here the person responds to the other in terms of known social expectations. When the I responds it is in an unexpected way, that is, it is an individual response. Without this there would be no social change at any level. Life might be predictable and secure but very dull.

But enough of that, the main point of this column is that Forte's Human Behavior and the Social Environment is a wonderful book. It can be used by beginning and advanced practitioners and by beginning and advanced students. It is relevant to theory and practice and is model text for a professional course on human behavior and the social environment. Forte's methodology in this book holds the promise of solving a major problem in social work education and in making the social relevant to practitioners in ways that they can use. He is at Salisbury University. I would hope that schools, NASW, and agencies can find ways to explore his ideas with him.

References

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Strauss, A., Ed. (1964). George Herbert Mead on social psychology. Phoenix Books. Chicago, The University of Chicago Press.

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Column

By Harris Chaiklin