

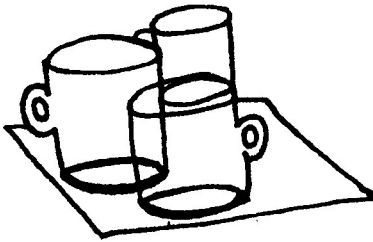
BOOK REVIEW

HUMAN BEHAVIOR AND THE SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT: MODELS, METAPHORS, AND MAPS FOR APPLYING THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES TO PRACTICE

BY JAMES A. FORTE

Reviewed by

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There are some books that you are supposed to read, big books like *War and Peace* and *Moby Dick*. This is a big book, and as Dr. Forte might say metaphorically, a “whale of a book.” The number of pages (640 total) which first roiled my attention, I soon forgot due to the nature of the material and the contribution to knowledge that is encompassed within those pages. Hesitant at first to try the waters, I was soon into it hook, line, and sinker. His suggestion that it had value for the social work student at the Bachelor, Master, and doctoral levels was not an overstatement. In fact the experienced educator and practitioner have much to gain if they approach the book willing to examine their own models of practice in the context of his ideas.

The first hundred pages or so are related to various tools for critical thinking, particularly models, metaphors, maps, and theory building. They serve as a lengthy introduction to the major portion of the book. That section consists of four hundred pages divided into chapters in which he discusses the major theories in use by social workers and, I would add, related helping professions. The first chapter in the series is entitled “Applied Ecological Theory,” the metaphor of the organism in the environment. This is followed by the chapter “Applied Systems Theory,” the machine or interacting parts metaphor. The two joined together make up the much used ecosystems approach to practice. There are eight other chapters related to theoretical approaches to practice: Biology, Cognitive Science, Psychodynamic, Behaviorism, Symbolic

Interaction, Social Role, Economic, and Critical Theory. Each contain the ideas basic to the theory, several leaders of each approach, ideas as to how they are applied in practice, and how each might be mapped. Each theory, one might assume, has something to offer in its time and place.

In the final portion of the book Dr. Forte gets to the heart of the matter. And I would agree that his heart and head are in the right place. He is recommending an integration of knowledge, suggesting “Theoretical Pluralism.” There is no one theory, model, or paradigm that can do the job with the universe of persons our profession serves. He notes that in all of the theories there is knowledge that can be used or borrowed as if it was all in a library available for our use. Augmented by “Dialogical Conversations” with those who are familiar with or promote this knowledge, we can expand our own preferences, with a multi theory or “theoretical integration.” There is at least one map for the pluralist: the “eclectic” map.

“The eclectic map for the theoretical integration directs the practitioner to add many techniques to his or her toolbox and to use techniques that work for the particular helping job whatever the original theoretical language of the technique” (553).

Of course this presents a challenge to all of us. But each of us can raise the question to ourselves, quietly. Is our preferred theoretical application “all there is?”

I am still left with the nagging question I had when I first saw the book. It is big, and gets even bigger when you read all a student might need to learn in an HBSE course. With such a wide range of theoretical content, would concepts such as culture, age related development, diversity, or whatever else might be deemed vital, have sufficient space?

I gladly recommend this book to every social work educator, every practitioner and scholar. There is a great deal to be learned from it. When it comes to use in the HBSE course, the instructors, knowing their subject, and the nature of the student body, will have to make their own decisions. They have nothing to lose by examining Dr. Forte's book, and an awful lot to gain.

- Forte, James A. (2007) *Human Behavior and the Social Environment: Models, Metaphors, and Maps for Applying Theoretical Perspectives to Practice*. Thomson Brooks/Cole: Belmont, CA .

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