



An Introduction to Using Theory in Social Work Practice and Skills for Using Theory in Social Work by James A. Forte

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BOOK REVIEW

James A. Forte. (2014). *An Introduction to Using Theory in Social Work Practice and Skills for Using Theory in Social Work*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Social workers routinely call on some combination of theory, research, and experience to explain what causes or continues a problem and to organize interventions. As familiar as this process is, and in spite of the very good efforts of advocates for evidence-informed practice, social workers' assessments are still unconscious, suspect, intuitive, systematically biased, and uninformed more often than we care to admit.

James A. Forte's *An Introduction to Using Theory in Social Work Practice* and *Skills for Using Theory in Social Work* are honest efforts to work on this problem. The former is a "practice" book while the latter might be best thought of a "human behavior and social environment" or "research" book. Both concern selecting, translating, and applying theory and knowledge to practice. Both usefully illuminate, simplify, operationalize, and work through the nuances of scientific language, logic, and methods and the implications of using findings developed in an academic or research context rather than in practice, and each is explicitly and helpfully connected to the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS).

The books are excellent resources for faculty, especially faculty seriously engaged with developing curriculum responsive to the CSWE EPAS. However, in spite of good, clear writing, thoughtful examples, and useful exercises, the books are not compelling narratives. I suspect undergraduate students would struggle to appreciate the scholarship and pedagogy these texts call upon, and in this regard they seem more appropriate for graduate students and thoughtful practitioners.

In the preface to *An Introduction to Using Theory in Social Work Practice*, Forte develops an effective frame for theoretical pluralism. Forte presents science as a language and practice as fluency in that language (as well as the language of values and the clients' languages, among others). He combines semiotics and symbolic interactionism (what he calls *semiotic interactionism*), makes the case for translational theory and research, and connects these disparate elements to the process of planned change. What he has in mind is an ambitious deconstruction of assessment and intervention planning and a platform that supports an evidence-informed, competent, multi-theoretical professional practice. Stated differently, he writes in support of the reflective, competent practitioner who engages in the kind of planned change imagined by the CSWE.

Forte acknowledges, appropriately, that social workers and clients co-create the meaning of their work together, but this book is focused on what the social worker brings to this transaction. It uses a person-in-environment (PIE) perspective, and each chapter is organized as a lesson—a structure that faculty who are teaching practice might appreciate—about an aspect of planned change. The chapters concerning the relationship between theory and practice, theoretical pluralism, and metatheory are brief, sensible, and useful elaborations, thought-provoking and efficient elaborations of relevant issues and concepts.

The chapters dissecting planned change are short, with a minimum, almost cursory, mention of various theories. For example, Chapter 9, The assessment formulation process, describes how a social worker could use various theories to generate explanatory and intervention hypotheses, and it provides brief examples of the middle-range implications of various theoretical orientations (e.g., cognitive, psychodynamic). The author successfully

illuminates the process, but the illustrations in the chapter will not satisfy students interested in theory or in need of a full case example. The Lesson Activities and Reflections box at the close of the chapter directs readers to apply the logic to a client system, friend, or family member, and this useful activity provides structure and case-like data for additional thought and discussion. Each chapter is relatively brief and focused, so the book might best be thought of as providing a useful structure for a practice course that also makes extensive use of other, richer narrative materials.

Skills for Using Theory in Social Work focuses on critical thinking and applying knowledge—the interaction between a “questioner and the world.” It is an ambitious, detailed consideration of theory and theorizing. While not as visibly connected to the interactional aspects of social work practice as its companion text, it is relevant insofar as professional behavior is conscious and purposeful. However, as we know, not all professional behavior is rational or conscious, but that is a problem beyond the Forte’s purview.

Forte’s experience in teaching is evident throughout this text. He imagines practitioners’ inner conversations integrating personal experience and scientific knowledge as they ponder a practice puzzle. He suggests that students develop profiles of major theoreticians in the learning activities so as to appreciate how the life projects of major theorists are similar to the practitioners’ professional lives. He uses metaphors to capture theoretical complexity and to provide a basis for comparing theories. I like, for example, the way he uses thinking metaphorically to engage a film such as *American History X* in Chapter 10.

The two middle sections of the book, chapters dealing with deconstructing theory and using middle-range concepts for sense making in service of practice theory, are especially strong. In Chapter 20, Forte treats practice theorizing as being analogous to grounded theory. The discussion is wise, parsimonious, and clear. The graphics work well (this is generally true throughout the text) and, again, it is easy to imagine using this text as a scaffold to support a discussion of other, more data-rich materials such as case reports, behavioral descriptions, and films.

The concluding chapters—translating and speaking theory with clients and colleagues, critique theory using a professional standard of justice, and critique theory using professional standards of sensitivity to diversity, among others—sound ambitious, but they are just summative hints at issues and include little substantive discussion. On the other hand, the Coda in the conclusion is a well-organized and efficient recapitulation.

No one knows whether evidence-informed practice will ever become the professional norm. However, the movement is well served by these two books.

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