



## Human behavior in the environment: a justice for vulnerable populations approach

James Angelo. (2026). Maryland, Routledge, (464 pp., £41.99 (paperback), ISBN 9781041023531).

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## BOOK REVIEW

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Human Behavior in the Environment: A Justice for Vulnerable Populations Approach by James Angelo Forte offers a comprehensive and normatively grounded reorientation of Human Behavior in the Social Environment (HBSE) within social work education. Rather than approaching human behavior as an isolated psychological or developmental phenomenon, Forte situates it within broader structures of justice and injustice that shape the lived realities of marginalized and vulnerable populations. At a time when social workers increasingly confront complex social inequalities, environmental hazards, and systemic exclusion, this text provides a critical and practical framework for assessing populations “with a problem in a place” and for evaluating conditions against standards of justice what is, what could be, and what should be.

The book’s central argument is that understanding human behavior requires profiling injustice. Forte frames social work as a profession anchored in a moral imperative to advocate for unjustly at-risk populations. He introduces the concept of constructing an “(in)justice profile,” which systematically examines recognition, resource distribution, political representation, and rights protection. Drawing significantly on the multidimensional justice framework of Nancy Fraser, Forte expands these dimensions into operational tools for social work assessment and intervention planning. This integration of theory and method is one of the book’s strongest contributions, as it moves justice from abstract discourse into structured professional practice.

Structurally, the book is organized in a clear and cumulative progression. The opening chapters establish the moral and methodological foundations of injustice profiling, emphasizing critical empathy, imagination, and pragmatic problem solving. Forte rejects technocratic or purely procedural models of practice and instead encourages reflective analysis that interrogates power, hierarchy, and structural positioning. In discussing positionality within “rigged hierarchies,” he demonstrates how intersecting identities such as race, class, gender, disability, and immigration status shape differential exposure to risk and opportunity across the life course. Human behavior is thus framed as relational and structurally situated rather than individually determined.

Subsequent chapters elaborate on four primary forms of injustice: recognition injustice, resource injustice, representation injustice, and rights violations. Forte explains how processes such as stereotyping, stigmatizing, exploiting, dominating, and blaming operate to deny dignity, restrict access to material goods, silence political voice, and undermine fundamental protections. These discussions are analytically rigorous yet accessible, providing readers with conceptual clarity while maintaining practical relevance. Particularly compelling is the chapter on environmental injustice, which integrates ecosystems theory with justice analysis to show how marginalized communities are disproportionately exposed to hazardous intersections and perilous pathways, resulting in cumulative harm.

The later chapters deepen the discussion by examining privilege and penalty, vulnerability and resiliency, and plausible explanations for injustice. Forte avoids portraying vulnerable populations as passive victims; instead, he highlights creative agency, resistance, and protective factors that sustain well-being despite structural adversity. By synthesizing structural, cultural, psychological, and political explanations, he encourages readers to evaluate competing interpretations and to imagine realistic alternatives to oppressive and unsustainable systems. The emphasis on transformative possibilities reinforces the book’s normative stance that social workers must not only understand injustice but actively work toward systemic change.

From an academic perspective, the text’s strengths lie in its theoretical integration, normative clarity, and methodological utility. Forte successfully bridges critical social theory with day-to-day social work assessment, offering a framework that is both analytically sophisticated and pedagogically valuable. The injustice profiling method can serve as a unifying scaffold across HBSE modules in BSW and MSW programs. However, the conceptual density of the material may require careful instructional guidance, particularly for undergraduate students encountering justice theory for the first time. Additionally, while the book outlines transformative alternatives, more detailed macro-level case illustrations could further enhance its application to policy advocacy and systemic reform.

Despite these minor limitations, *Human Behavior in the Environment: A Justice for Vulnerable Populations Approach* makes a significant contribution to contemporary social work education and practice. It reframes HBSE not merely as a study of individual adaptation but as a justice-centered

inquiry into structural conditions shaping human lives. By equipping readers with tools to critically appraise injustice and plan transformative interventions, Forte strengthens the profession's commitment to ethical responsibility and social change. Overall, this book stands as an essential resource for students, educators, and practitioners seeking to ground their understanding of human behavior in a robust, multidimensional framework of justice.

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