

Book Review

Forte, J.A. (2014). *Skills for using theory in social work: 32 lessons for evidence-informed practice*. New York, NY: Routledge.

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Forte is professor of social work at Salisbury University in Maryland. He has written extensively on many subjects and in particular on issues regarding the development and use of theory in social work. His books on this topic include his 2006 book *Human Behavior and the Social Environment: Models, Metaphors and Maps for Applying Theoretical Perspectives to Practice* and his 2001 book *Theories for Practice: Symbolic Interactionist Translations*. He also has written many articles on this topic.

This book consists of what the author terms lessons and each lesson is essentially a chapter. The book is divided into four sections. The first section has “chapters” (i.e. lessons) devoted to what the author sees as the role of social workers in engaging in theorizing, and he asserts that this is an essential professional role for them. The second lesson presents what a theory is. He divides theory into “empirical theory,” which conceptualizes things as they are and “normative theory,” which conceptualizes things as they ought to be (p. 50). Theories are further classified as to whether they arise from a positivist approach, an interpretive approach, or a critical approach, and these are defined. The next lesson focuses on the special aspects of theorizing in social work. The major point is that the practitioner should choose knowledge that is consistent with the mission of social work. He particularly favors Falck’s (1988) membership approach, which sees social work’s mission “to understand and help members of various-sized groups and social organizations improve the quality of their membership experiences” (p. 63).

The next lesson in this section discusses the sources of knowledge for social work. These sources are theoretical, research, practice, and what he calls

“everyday” bases. The latter is knowledge drawn from what we learn from our culture as well as so-called “common sense.” The following lesson discusses differential use of knowledge based on the “level of abstraction.” He presents a “ladder of abstraction” which consists of eight levels ranging from paradigms and meta theories to “grand” and “middle range” theories, to practice theories, and ending with “observations.” The next lesson presents differences in theories related to the system levels of practice.

In the next section, Forte presents theory as “puzzle solving.” One of the first lessons in this section presents the kind of theory needed to solve a social work puzzle such as a paradigm, a school of thought, an explanatory theory, a practice theory or a theoretical orientation.

The next lesson presents the names of “exemplary” theorists and 56 are listed. The list consists of such people as Bandura, Foucault, Germain, Marx, Skinner, and Freud. Succeeding lessons present the key elements of a theory—essentially the “deconstruction” (a word used frequently in this book) of the theory into assumptions, concepts, and propositions (e.g., hypotheses) and the relationship among them. The processes of deduction and induction are also analyzed in several lessons.

The next section of the book helps readers to construct practical theories in the middle range. Succeeding lessons divide such construction into theories about causes and theories about processes. The last section focuses on critical thinking about theories. Of special relevance to this journal is Lesson 24, which enables readers to critique theories in terms of ethics

and values. Lesson 25 emphasizes the standard of evidence with reference to theory. Lesson 27 further reflects the author's commitment to value issues as he looks at theory in relationship to justice. Lesson 28 furthers this emphasis with regard to diversity issues in the use of theory and Lesson 30, which emphasizes moral issues. The author sees a strengths perspective as the one that is most consistent with his approach to the profession, and this is dealt with in Lesson 29.

Lesson 31 examines the historical and social context in which a theory is formulated and Lesson 32 considers the long-term impact of a theory. The book concludes with what the author calls a "coda," which summarizes the main principles developed through the previous 32 lessons.

As the reader of this review can tell, I am impressed by the scope and depth of the book. If there is anything else one can explore about theorizing in all its aspects, I don't know what that would be. The author, as I have stated, is deeply aware of ethics and value issues and in addition to lessons devoted to these, such issues are raised in almost every lesson as appropriate. He also wishes to facilitate the reader's learning from the book through exercises and discussion questions after every lesson.

The author also has his biases and admits to these. For example, I don't see in the same way as he does, contemporary Marxist theory. He also sees classic behaviorism, if applied in practice, as reducing people to animals. I don't know of social workers who apply behaviorist ideas as expressed by Pavlov or Skinner, for example, but rather use theories which relate these "classical" ideas to theories that embody social work ethics and values.

My final thoughts deal with how this book may be used in teaching social work courses. I believe that all faculty should study this book and use it selectively in teaching. The book in its entirety might be a text for a doctoral course in theory building for social work. Specific lessons might be used in bachelor's and master's courses to teach students what theory is, as described in the book's first section. This material could even be presented in first sessions of methods or human behavior courses.

If the book is revised, and I imagine it will be, the author might consider some devices to assist the reader such as a flow chart that incorporates all the lessons or a glossary of the major terms in the book such as deconstruction and construction. Overall, as I have implied, along with many other books and articles cited by the author on theory in social work, this book should become a "classic" social work text.