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**Review of *Theories for Practice: Symbolic Interactionist
Translations*. James A. Forte. Reviewed by Daniel Coleman.**

Daniel Coleman
Boston University

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of particular national policies and programs, but they show the importance of referencing cultural factors when seeking to understand and interpret welfare. Gould's emphasis on national cultural preferences in Sweden, and Peillon's account of the Irish welfare field, reveal an innovative and impressive application of theory. Peillon's analysis role of the Catholic Church in influencing social welfare policy in Ireland is particularly interesting at a time that religious involvement in social welfare is again being recognized and appreciated. Both books should be essential reading for anyone engaged in international and comparative social welfare today.

James Midgley
University of California, Berkeley

James A. Forte, *Theories for Practice: Symbolic Interactionist Translations*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2001. \$68 hardcover

Forte's *Theories for Practice* is a sprawling and comprehensive overview of the intellectual spheres touched by symbolic interactionist thinkers. These include many of the intellectual watersheds of the past 100 or so years: psychoanalytic theory, Marxism, and evolutionary psychology, to name only a few. The names associated with early symbolic interactionism, including George Herbert Mead and John Dewey, are certainly major intellectual figures if not superstars like Marx, Freud or Darwin. Symbolic interactionism emphasizes that humans invest the world with meaning, meanings that evolve through interaction and are continuously interpreted and reinterpreted. This framework has inspired much social science research and is resonant with qualitative, interpretive inquiry. As the title suggests, this book examines theories from economics, psychology and political science and translates them into the sociological symbolic interactionist perspective.

Social work, psychology, and sociology have a long history of mutual influence, and social work has been poised between sociology and psychology for much of its history. In several chapters Forte traces the history of sociology and social work, and points

out the often unrecognized contribution of social work to sociology. Part of the vision of social work is understanding the social determinants of individual lives, and working sensitively with social conditions to assist our clients to live more full, meaningful lives. A symbolic interactionist analysis is particularly helpful for aiding social workers to see our clients and ourselves in the context of larger sociopolitical systems and their related complexes of meanings.

The book is clearly a product of devoted and thorough scholarship with the typical chapter having 3–5 pages of citations. With the exception of introductory and concluding sections, the book is structured around 10 chapters that each focus on a theoretical domain. Each chapter traces the history of a specific theoretical strand, the relationship with symbolic interactionist thought, and how this theory informs or translates to practice.

The social psychologist Kurt Lewin said: “Nothing is as practical as a good theory.” Forte’s book raises the question: how practical for social work are sociological theories? These theories do not generally provide specific, clear statements of how intervention should proceed, making them useful more to analyze social situations but not to guide intervention. This is reflected in Forte’s sections in each chapter that focus on translating theory to practice. Many of these sections report on sociological analyses that have practice implications; very few describe specific interventions designed around these theoretical analyses. It could be argued that the failure of applied or clinical sociology reflects the low utility of sociological theory by itself for direct practice.

As a contrast, consider the Empirically Supported Treatment (EST) movement in psychology. ESTs are manualized therapies with demonstrated efficacy through randomized clinical trials. Many of the therapies with adequate research support to be considered “Well established” or “probably efficacious” are cognitive-behavioral, but the lists also include brief psychodynamic therapy, and a narrative reminiscence therapy for elders. Not only are there specific guidelines on how to conduct the treatment, but these interventions have been shown to work. These are more clearly practical theories.

As suggested earlier, the strength of symbolic interactionist thinking is in understanding the context of social work practice, in

understanding the rich narratives that play out between workers and clients. These narratives contain all the motifs of our culture: gender, class, race, and so on. Perhaps a better title for this book would be "theories *about* practice," as the symbolic interactionist perspective renders a worker who is more reflective, more aware of the multiple influences and meanings that construct the worker-client interchange. However, this same worker also has to know what to do, has to have guidance from experience and research about what helps a client in a major depression, or what contributes to bonding between a parent and a child.

Clearly social work practitioners need theories about practice, as well as theories for practice. It is important, though, for the field to maintain clarity about the strengths and limits of different theory groups. This reviewer was not convinced that symbolic interactionism provides a useful root language for understanding the multiplicity of practice theories. The comprehensive survey of symbolic interactionist thought that Forte provides would be very useful in a doctoral course in a sociology program, or in a joint sociology and social work program. In its breadth of scope, and careful delineation of different intellectual movements, this book would be a useful reference for doctoral students and other scholars. Most MSW students and MSW practitioners, however, would stumble over the density of theoretical material and would be skeptical of the practical utility of the theoretical material.

Daniel Coleman
Boston University

Nel Noddings, *Starting at Home: Caring and Social Policy*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002. \$35.00 hardcover, \$19.95 paperback.

Since Carol Gilligan first put forth an alternative theory of the moral development of women and girls in 1977, the field of feminist ethics has mushroomed. Indeed, as a result of the groundbreaking work of Gilligan and educator/philosopher Nel Noddings, the concept of a relationally-based ethic of care today stands in juxtaposition to traditional theories of moral philosophy focused on rights and justice. Thanks to Gilligan, Noddings and many others, developmental theory has had to make room for