

Psychology in Action

Second Edition



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Psychology in Action

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Prologue

CRITICAL THINKING — Psychology in Action

*A great many people think they are thinking
when they are merely rearranging their prejudices.*

WILLIAM JAMES

Think critically? That's what others don't do, isn't it?

KIRK MONFORT

Although the ability to think critically has always been important, it is now imperative. For the first time in history, the human race has the capacity to destroy itself. The choices we make regarding nuclear weapons, preservation of the natural environment, and the world's rapidly expanding population will affect future generations and all people who currently inhabit this planet.

On a more personal level, people today are facing choices about such life and death matters as surrogate motherhood, sustaining coma patients on respirators, and fetal tissue transplants. Even when relaxing with a snack in front of the television set, viewers are bombarded with misleading statements by advertisers and politicians and by emotional appeals on subjects ranging from racism and homelessness to the latest carcinogen.

There is no shortage of information available on many of these issues. Today's college student has easy access to mountains of information. When assigned a research project, students can go beyond traditional local library resources by using a personal computer and modem to search thousands of daily newspapers, research journal articles, and encyclopedia services.

The problem for modern college students is not a lack of data but knowing what to do with the "information explosion." Information must be interpreted, evaluated, digested, synthesized, and applied in a logical, rational manner. In short, the student must be a critical thinker.

What is "critical thinking"?

Critical thinking has many meanings, and some books have dedicated entire chapters to its definition. The word *critical* comes from the Greek word "kritikos," which means to question, make sense of, to be able to analyze. *Thinking* is the cognitive activity involved in making sense of the world around us. *Critical thinking* is "thinking about our thinking so that we can clarify and improve it" (Chaffee, 1988, p. 29).

To understand critical thinking better, study the following list of processes that comprise it. As authors of this text, we have incorporated many of these elements into every facet of this book. Each of the critical thinking exercises is devoted to step-by-step training in one aspect of the process. *Psychology in Action* invites active use of this list as a way to improve critical thinking.

While all of us employ some form of these intellectual behaviors, the list can be used to identify areas that need strengthening through practice. They may also suggest additional opportunities for critical thinking in aspects of life where strong emotional reactions to the issues have previously hampered the application of the critical thinking process.

THE CRITICAL THINKING PROCESS

Affective Components—the emotional foundation that either enables or limits critical thinking.

- *Valuing truth above self-interest.* You must hold yourself and those you agree with to the same intellectual standards to which you hold your opponents.
- *Accepting change.* Critical thinkers remain open to the need for adjustment and adaptation throughout the life cycle. Because critical thinkers fully trust the processes of reasoned inquiry, they are willing to use these skills to examine even their most deeply held values and beliefs, and to modify these beliefs when evidence and experience contradict them.
- *Empathizing.* Noncritical thinkers view everything and everyone else in relationship to the self. They fail to understand or appreciate another's thoughts, feelings, or behaviors, as critical thinkers do.
- *Welcoming divergent views.* Since critical thinkers value examining issues from every angle, they know that it is especially important to explore and understand positions with which they disagree.
- *Tolerating ambiguity.* Although formal education often trains students to look for a single "right" answer, critical thinkers recognize that many issues are complex, intricate, and subtle, and that complex issues may not have a "right" answer. They recognize and value qualifiers such as "probably," "highly likely," and "not very likely."
- *Recognizing personal biases.* Using your highest intellectual skills to detect personal biases and self-deceptive reasoning, you can then design reasonable procedures for self-correction.

Cognitive Components—the thought processes actually involved in critical thinking.

- *Thinking independently.* Critical thinking is autonomous, independent thinking. You do not passively accept the beliefs of others and are not easily manipulated.
- *Defining problems accurately.* A critical thinker identifies the issues in clear and concrete terms, to prevent confusion and lay the foundation for gathering relevant information.
- *Analyzing data for value and content.* By carefully evaluating the nature of evidence and the credibility of the source, you will recognize illegitimate appeals to emotion, unsupported assumptions, and faulty logic. This will enable you to discount sources of information that lack a record of honesty, contradict themselves on key questions, or have a vested interest in selling a product or idea.
- *Employing a variety of thinking processes in problem solving.* Among these are the ability to use each of the following skills: *inductive logic*—reasoning that moves from the specific to the general; *deductive logic*—reasoning that moves from the general to the specific; *dialogical thinking*—thinking that involves an extended verbal exchange between differing points of view or frames of reference; and *dialectical thinking*—thinking conducted in order to test the strengths and weaknesses of opposing points of view.

- *Synthesizing.* Critical thinkers recognize that comprehension and understanding result from combining various elements into meaningful patterns.
- *Resisting overgeneralization.* Overgeneralization is the temptation to apply a fact or experience to situations that are only superficially similar to the original context.
- *Employing metacognition.* Metacognition, also known as reflective or recursive thinking, involves a review and analysis of your own mental processes — thinking about your own thinking.

Behavioral Components — the actions necessary for critical thinking.

- *Delaying judgment until adequate data is available.* A critical thinker does not make “snap judgments.”
- *Employing precise terms.* Such terms help you to identify the issues in clear and concrete terms that can be objectively defined and empirically tested.
- *Gathering data.* Collecting up-to-date, relevant information on all sides of an issue is done before making decisions.
- *Distinguishing fact from opinion.* Facts are statements that can be proven true. Opinions are statements that express how a person feels about an issue or what someone thinks is true.
- *Encouraging critical dialogue.* Critical thinkers are active questioners who challenge existing facts and opinions and welcome questions in return. Socratic questioning is an important type of critical dialogue where the questioner deeply probes the meaning, justification, or logical strength of a claim, position, or line of reasoning.
- *Listening actively.* Critical thinkers fully engage their thinking skills when listening to another.
- *Modifying judgments in light of new information.* Your previous judgments can be abandoned or modified if later evidence or experience contradicts them.
- *Applying knowledge to new situations.* When critical thinkers master a new skill or discover an insight, they are able to transfer this information to new contexts. Noncritical thinkers can often provide correct answers, repeat definitions, and carry out formulae, yet remain unable to transfer their knowledge to new situations because of a basic lack of understanding.

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