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Critical Thinking Skills for your Social Work Degree

CRITICAL STUDY SKILLS

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Introduction

Critical Thinking Skills is the third book in the *Critical Study Skills for Social Workers* series. This series supports student social workers as they embark on their undergraduate degree programme. It is aimed at all student social workers, including those who have come to university straight from A levels, and those who have travelled a different route, perhaps returning to education after working and/or raising a family. The books will be of use both to students from the UK and to international students who are preparing to study in a new culture – and perhaps in a second language. The books also include guidance for students with specific learning requirements.

Critical Thinking Skills aims to remove some of the 'mystique' which often surrounds critical thinking – students sometimes hear that they are 'not critical' enough but may struggle to understand just what this means in practical terms. This book guides you towards an understanding of critical thinking and its role in academic and professional life, with plain-English explanations and practical examples provided throughout. It discusses the importance of questioning what you see and hear, and equips you with a range of analytical and evaluative tools. It places reflective practice at the heart of critical thinking and provides language tools which can help you express your reflections more precisely. It provides strategies to help you read and write critically, using the research and writing process to discover and develop your own voice, an essential part of being a critical scholar.

Between them, the authors have many years' experience of both social work practice and education, and academic study skills. All the information, text extracts and activities in the book have a clear social work focus and are often directly linked to the **Health and Care Professions Council** (HCPC), which is the regulatory body for the social work profession. There is also reference to relevant institutional bodies, books and journals throughout.

The many activities in the book include **tasks**, **reflections**, **top tips**, and **case studies**. There are also **advanced skills** sections, which highlight particular knowledge and skills that you will need towards the end of your degree programme – or perhaps if you go on to postgraduate study. The activities in the book often require you to work things out and discover things for yourself, a learning technique which is commonly used in universities. For many activities, there is no right or wrong answer – they might simply require you to reflect on your experience or situations you are likely to encounter at university; for tasks which require a particular response, there is an answer key at the back of the book.

These special features throughout the book are clearly signalled by icons to help you recognise them:


Learning outcomes;


Quick quiz or example exam questions/assessment tasks;


Reflection (a reflective task or activity);


Case studies;

 Top tips;

 Checklist;

 Advanced skills information;

 Answer provided at the back of the book.

Students with limited experience of academic life in the UK will find it helpful to work through the book systematically; more experienced students may wish to 'dip in and out' of the book. Whichever approach you adopt, handy **cross references** signalled in the margins will help you quickly find the information that you need to focus on or revisit.

There are two **Appendices** (Academic levels at university; Verb tenses in English) at the back of the book, which you can consult as you work through the text.

We hope that this book will help you to develop as a critical social work student and practitioner, and to become a confident member of your academic community.

Chapter 1
The foundations of critical thinking

Learning outcomes

After reading this chapter you will:

- understand what is meant by 'critical thinking';
- understand the relevance and importance of critical thinking in the theory and practice of social work;
- have begun to learn how to apply critical thinking to your studies and to your social work practice.

There are many books and courses in schools, colleges and universities entitled 'Critical Thinking' (like this book!), a fact which reflects its importance in education, particularly in universities. However, critical thinking is not a discrete study topic like those in other books and modules you may encounter (for example, 'child development for social workers' or 'asset based practice with older adults in the community'); critical thinking is actually threaded through every aspect of your studies and your practice.

CROSS REFERENCE
Chapter 2, Reflective practice

This chapter helps you begin to trace and understand this thread. It explores important aspects of critical thinking in academic study and in 'child development for social workers' or 'asset based practice with older adults in the community' practice, in particular, the importance of objectively and reflectively questioning the information and ideas you encounter. Chapter 2 explores reflective practice, which is closely related to critical thinking and is a key aspect of social work practice. Chapters 3 and 4 cover how to *apply* critical thinking skills in your academic reading and writing.

CROSS REFERENCE
Chapter 3, Critical reading

Of course, it is not possible to think critically about a social work topic if you are not grounded in the *knowledge* of your discipline, and all the guidance and tasks in this book will be rooted in your developing knowledge of social work theory and practice.

CROSS REFERENCE
Chapter 4, Critical writing

Reflection

1) What do you understand by the term 'critical thinking'?
2) Why do you think critical thinking, as you understand it, is so important across education and professional practice?
3) Have you ever received feedback from a teacher or lecturer which said you had not been critical enough? Did you understand what you had done wrong?

4) Have you felt that something you recently read or heard was lacking in critical thinking? Why?

5) In what ways do you think you can demonstrate criticality in your studies and your social work practice?

Asking the right questions

A good place to start with critical thinking is with the idea of asking questions in order to get to the truth. This idea can be traced back to the ancient Greek philosopher Socrates, who is said to have laid down the roots of western philosophy by questioning everything around him, and by demonstrating time and again that seemingly knowledgeable people, himself included, often didn't really know what they thought they knew!

> An example [of Socrates's questioning approach] was his conversation with Euthydemus. Socrates asked him whether being deceitful counted as being immoral. Of course it does, Euthydemus replied. He thought that was obvious. But what, Socrates asked, if your friend is feeling very low and might kill himself, and you steal his knife? Isn't that a deceitful act? Of course it is. But isn't it moral rather than immoral to do that? It's a good thing, not a bad one – despite being a deceitful act.
>
> (Warburton, 2012, p 2)

Socrates' thinking may seem like common sense: most of us can think of examples of 'deceit' – the telling of 'white lies', for instance – which are intended to help rather than harm people. But the important point is that Socrates was questioning received wisdom and relying solely on reasoned argument to arrive at the truth. The use of questioning and reasoned argument is central to academic and professional practice. This means, in essence, *not believing things merely because someone important says they are true*, and making sure your own beliefs are constructed around sound reasoning and credible evidence.

Knowledge and understanding in the social sciences are developing all the time. This inevitably means that practice changes over time. Ways of working that were considered best practice a decade ago can be different today. Changes in social work are linked to broader changes in society and social citizenship.

Task

Exploring changes in thinking

Look at the case studies below and answer these questions:

1) What are the key ideas underpinning 'co-production' as a way of thinking about – and doing – social work?

2) In what ways is this different from other ways of understanding the relationship between professionals and service users and their carers?

3) Why do you think 'co-production' has become increasingly important in practice?

Case studies

From participation to co-production: how social work practices have evolved

In recent years, the concept of 'co-production' has become increasingly popular as part of a strategy for reforming public services (Voorberg et al, 2014). The idea of co-production originated in the US and became adopted by community activists who wanted to encourage the use of individual and community resources. A key idea of co-production is that individuals, families, groups and communities all have resources which can be utilised alongside government services to maximise both economic and social contributions made as a whole in society. Boyle and Harris (2009, p 11) argued that '*co-production means delivering public services in an equal and reciprocal relationship between professionals, people using services, their families and their neighbours*'. It is the ideas of *equality, reciprocity* and *genuine power sharing* between professionals, service users and communities that underpin the value base of co-production. Over time, these ideas have become increasingly incorporated into social work practice.

Many social workers and user groups in the UK had raised questions about the tokenism of service user participation at times – where service users might have been asked to sit on a committee, for example, but not be fully inducted into the information they needed to have to fully participate in discussion and decision making. Needham and Carr (2018) argue that questions raised by the disability rights groups in particular effectively 'disrupted' existing assumptions about who was the 'expert' in social care practice and raised important questions about what genuine participation could look like. These questions resulted in a different way of configuring professional–service user relationships where genuine partnership is encouraged and the involvement of the service user in co-producing plans for their care is essential.

Within the UK, the term co-production was first used in UK social care policy in the government's *Putting People First* (DH) report in 2007. This report introduced personalisation measures as a key way of working within health and social care. The emphasis on the values of co-production has continued throughout recent government policies. The practice of co-production is enshrined in sections of the Social Care Act 2014 and included in its statutory guidance, where it states '*co-production is when an individual influences the support and services received or where groups of people get together to influence the way services are designed, commissioned and delivered*'.

For social workers, what this change in attitude and practice means is highlighted in the Social Care Institute for Excellence's (SCIE) *At a Glance* guide to co-production in social care, where the key focus is both what it is and how to do it. In summary, SCIE (2015) see the essence of the change as being to encourage greater equality in partnerships between people who use social work and social care services, their carers and professionals. The change is moving from service users and carers being involved or participating in services to having a more equal, meaningful and powerful role in all aspects of service delivery. Partnership in this context would mean involving everyone at the start of a process rather than professionals making decisions and seeking feedback or comments. All voices are heard equally in co-production and this is expected to happen throughout the decision-making process. SCIE (2015) also acknowledge that, for co-production to work effectively, organisations need to develop their cultures and structures to ensure co-production processes are embedded in their practices. The values of equality, diversity, accessibility and reciprocity are expected to underpin both organisational and individual responses to service delivery.

The case study you have analysed is a good example of how thinking is questioned or changed when ideas within society change. In earlier times, there was more of a tendency to treat professionals as 'experts' and people who saw them as benefitting passively from their expertise. Social work values have always been based around encouraging self-determination and self-help and social workers have always tried to work alongside service users. *How* this is done in practice changes over time as cultures change and ideas about levels of participation and equality of partnership evolve further. In previous years, it was seen as innovative good practice to invite parents to case conferences about them and their children. Nowadays, it would be highly unusual to feel it was not necessary for parents to be present in such meetings. The call of the disability rights groups '*nothing about us without us*' has been part of developing new, more equal relationships within the field of health and social care overall and particularly in the arena of mental health practice. As a social worker, it is important to be aware that practices develop and change over time and to be sensitive to such changes. As part of our professionalism, it is expected that we keep up to date with new academic studies and research reported in academic and practice journals. It is also important to keep an eye on how changes in practice are reported in the media as people who use our services may find out about changes in practice through these channels.

Task

Exploring changes in thinking

1) How, to your knowledge, has general thinking developed on the following topics over time?

   - Child protection practices
   - Fostering and adoption practices
   - Community care for people using mental health services
   - Assets based practices in adult social work

2) Can you identify any important academic studies in these areas?

3) How have these topics been reported on in the news media?

4) What impact do you think academic studies and media reports have had on social work practice in these areas?

Advanced skills

Hegel's dialectic

A philosophical process called Hegel's dialectic quite nicely describes the advancement of knowledge in an academic environment. (Hegel was a nineteenth-century German philosopher; 'dialectic' is a formal word that essentially means 'discussion'.)

As illustrated in Figure 1.1, the dialectic basically states that for every **thesis** (ie idea) there will be an antithesis or antitheses (alternative idea[s]). Following a period of debate (which can last years, decades or centuries), a **synthesis** (a merging or fusing) of these ideas emerges. However, this new synthesis becomes a thesis in its own right and the process starts all over again!

Students at Level 4 (first-year undergraduate students) should be able to demonstrate understanding of one side of the debate. Most students grasp this relatively easily and soon realise that they will get good marks at this academic level if they can convince the person reading (or marking) their work that they understand the concepts, ideas and theories they are writing about.

CROSS REFERENCE

Appendix 1, Academic levels at university

Level 5 (second-year) students are expected to be aware of the debate between ideas (thesis vs antithesis). Tied in with awareness of this debate is an understanding that there are alternative viewpoints, that there is

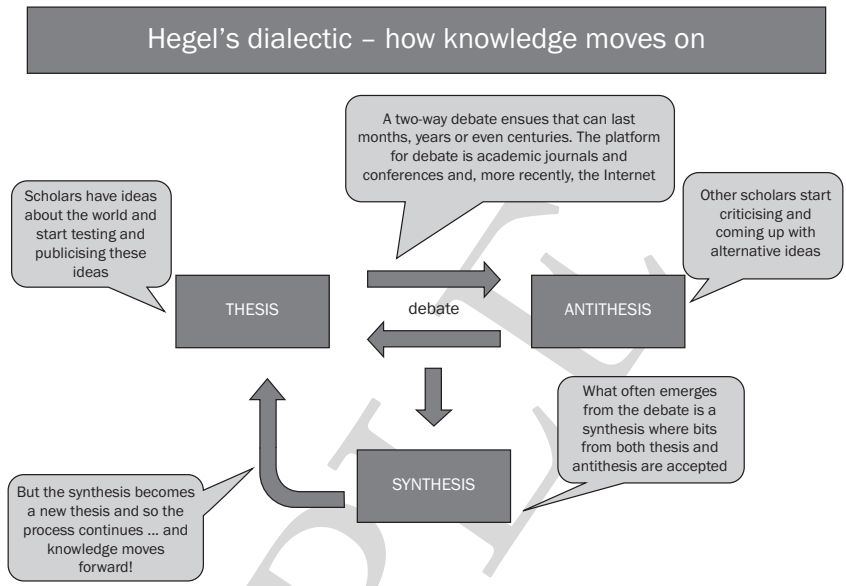

Figure 1.1: Hegel's dialectic

always another side to the coin, and that if you are going to argue your corner, you must have evidence.

Being able to see how a compromise (synthesis) might be arrived at is a skill that Level 6 (third-year) students need to work towards and it is certainly a skill expected of postgraduate students. This skill is one that few beginners at university have – it's something most acquire as they climb the academic ladder.

At postgraduate level, synthesis is expected to a large extent in that most postgraduate work needs to be underpinned by original thought. This doesn't mean that you spontaneously make up your own theories; it usually means that you've appraised the viewpoints on a specific issue or topic and come up with your ideas about that issue or topic based on what you've read, digested and been convinced by.

Fake news!

The case study previously discussed is important in showing how knowledge and understanding change over time. It highlights how social work evolves as societal practices and values shift, and illustrates that, as practice does not stand still, we all have a duty to avoid complacency keep asking questions and consider how we can improve what we do. What we think of as innovative good practice today may evolve to be a baseline expectation of the future. By the same token, practice we

regard as acceptable today may not be regarded as being so in the future. These are good reasons for us all to keep an open mind and to always think critically about what we are doing.

In social work education, students are encouraged to think critically and to examine and assess arguments or claims made in relation to practice. They are encouraged to interrogate the source of the information they are evaluating and to use critical appraisal skills to determine the worth and reliability of the information. Scholarly articles in peer-reviewed journals are often seen as one of the most reliable sources of information as the information has been assessed by appropriate experts in the field prior to publication.

However, information comes to us from many other sources which are not constrained by the rules of academic inquiry, including from the press, television and social media. The concept of 'fake news' has come to the fore in recent years. Its influence was recently highlighted when the *Collins Dictionary* named 'fake news' as the 2017 'word of the year'. This concept comprises stories that have little or no basis in fact, but are nevertheless presented as factually accurate, often in order to benefit a particular person or organisation but sometimes merely to cause mischief and controversy. Partial information can also be presented which appears linked to factual information but with certain issues distorted or inaccurate. Such news can appear in any medium but is particularly common on social media. Fake news stories often focus on politics and celebrity but social work is certainly not exempt from being misreported.

Reflecting on the relationship between social work and the media, there have been concerns about the misrepresentation of facts and the distortion of information for a very long time. In a classic text by Nigel Parton in 1985, *The Politics of Child Abuse*, the role of the media was argued as playing a significant role in how social workers experienced their practice and how they related to the wider society. Parton (1985, p 83) argued: '*Essentially many social workers feel that they and the work they are involved in receive very rough handling, particularly by the popular press*'. Parton explored how child abuse was 'discovered', defined, presented to the public and made the subject of state intervention. The tragic death of Maria Colwell, a seven-year-old child killed by her stepfather in 1973, was explored as being a key part in the history of the emergence of child abuse as a social problem. The case of Maria's death received extensive coverage, and Parton argued that the media ignored the complexity of issues and '*tended to over-simplify, sensationalise and personalise the problem*' (1985, p 2). Parton argued that a '*moral panic*' developed and this sense of pervasive panic set the scene for how other tragic child deaths would be reported in the media in coming years.

Many commentators argue that over the following decades much of the media has continued to engage in an overly negative and distorted presentation of social work. Following the tragic death of 17 month-old Peter Connolly in Haringey in 2007, parts of the media personalised and even named and blamed

individual social workers for the child's death. One experienced social worker who had worked in Haringey for over 23 years was subjected to 80 articles written about her in the popular press. *The Sun*, the *London Evening Standard*, the *Daily Mirror* and *The Independent* were all subsequently instructed to pay compensation and to make public apologies to the social worker when the allegations against her were found to be false (The Guardian, 2011). Social work is no stranger to fake news.

So, the current era, where fake news appears to more widely experienced, may be a time for social workers to be even more alert to misrepresentation.

Task

Scrutinising the media

Look at the headlines below, taken from a newspaper article. Do you know the background behind this heading? Do you think this story could be classed as distorted reporting or 'fake news'? What questions could you ask to help you get to the bottom of what happened in this case?

Christian child forced into Muslims foster care: concern for girl who had cross removed and was encouraged to learn Arabic

(*The Times*, 28 August 2017)

Discussion of task

When you read headlines like this as a social worker, it is wise to pause and consider what might lie behind such a statement. It may be a correct interpretation of an event, of course, but before accepting this as 'truth', it may be helpful to do some detective work to determine if the issue may have been misinterpreted or even distorted in the media. You might begin by questioning whether the newspaper has a particular political reason (most newspapers have a political stance) or financial reason (controversy can breed publicity!) for running the headline. If you see that a story has attracted the attention of particular social groups, you may want to consider the possible reasons behind their interest. For example, this story – which was also picked up by the *Daily Mail* – received interest from far-right political groups such as the National Defence League and Britain First.

One way of probing headlines (or any other statement or claim) is to look for authoritative information on the subject. If you can, it is helpful to refer back to legitimate scientific or professional organisations or, if appropriate, to look at the original research that led to the headline. As you progress on your social work course, you will find that 'looking behind the headlines' and thinking critically about information you are presented with is what you are increasingly expected to do. So, what might you do to look behind this headline?

Appendix 1
Academic levels at university

UNDERGRADUATE STUDY			
England, Wales, Northern Ireland	**Scotland**	**Award**	**Notes**
Level 4	Level 7	Certificate of Higher Education (CertHE)	
Level 5	Level 8	Diploma of Higher Education (DipHE) Foundation Degree (FdD)	Up until 2009, minimum academic qualification for social workers
Level 6	Level 9	Ordinary Bachelor Degree eg BA/BSc Social Work	Minimum academic qualification for social workers
	Level 10	Bachelor Degree with Honours eg BA or BSc (Hons) in Social Work	Usual academic qualification for social workers
Postgraduate study			
Level 7	Level 11	Masters Degree, eg MSc, MA, MPhil Postgraduate Certificate or Diploma (PGCert; PGDip)	Common qualification for social workers who had a first degree prior to their professional training
Level 8	Level 12	Research Doctorate (PhD) Professional Doctorate	Becoming more common in the profession

Appendix 2
Verb forms in English

As you write, your choice of verb form will provide important information for your reader as regards when something occurred, how this occurrence is or should be viewed, and how it relates to the current time and context.

Verbs in English possess three important elements:

- **tense** (past, present, future), indicating the time or period in which something occurred;
- **aspect** (simple, continuous, perfect), indicating how the occurrence is perceived;
- **voice** (active, passive), indicating whether the focus is on the action itself or on the agency of the action (ie the person or thing doing it).

Some examples of common uses in academic writing are presented below with explanations as regards usage.

1) Present simple and continuous

The present simple is used for facts:

> Most people **feel** anxiety at some point in their lives.
> The amygdala **is found** in the brain's temporal lobe and is connected to triggering our 'flight or fight' response when we sense danger.

In the first sentence, it is important that we know who feels something (people), so the active voice is used. In the second sentence, it is the location which is important, not a hypothetical 'finder', hence the passive voice. The passive is common in academic writing as it allows for an impersonal style, eg 'it is believed that' rather than 'people believe'.

The present continuous describes current actions or developments:

> I **am** currently **working** in a voluntary agency which advocates for improvements in services for carers.
> Attitudes towards carers **are changing**.

2) Past simple

The past simple can be used to narrate a series of events, and so is commonly used in the descriptive sections of reflective writing:

> I **started** my practice placement in January.
> Sam, an elderly service user, **was admitted** to hospital in March.

In the first sentence, the agent of the action (I) is important, reflected in the active verb form; in the second sentence, the exact identity of the agent (the person who admitted the patient) is unknown or unimportant in this case, hence the passive verb form.

The past simple is also common when reporting on particular studies or methodologies when reviewing the literature, with the passive voice frequently occurring in the latter, as agency can be presumed:

> Graham et al (2015) **found** that following participation in the support programme, parental confidence had increased considerably.

3) Present perfect

The present perfect relates an action or a state to the present in some way.

> There **has been** a great deal of research in this area.

(This has happened over a time period stretching to the present time.)

> The government **has committed** itself to improve funding for health and social care.

(This happened some time before the present moment, but we are not concerned with the precise time – we are more concerned with *what* has happened, not *when*.)

4) Future verb forms

There is no single future verb form in English; many forms are used to refer to the future, depending on how the action is viewed.

> The policy **will have** a positive effect on the recruitment of new social workers..

(a prediction)

> **I'm meeting** my Practice Educator next week.

(an arrangement)

> **I'm going to** contact the service user group to find out how co-production is working in practice.

(an intention)

These verb forms are very common in the concluding sections of reflections, when considering planned actions and future practice.

Further reading

Bottomley, J (2014) *Academic writing for international students of science.* London: Routledge.

Caplan, N (2012) *Grammar choices for graduate and professional writers.* Ann Arbour, MI: University of Michigan Press.

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