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Policing  
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STUDY SKILLS**

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**JANE BOTTOMLEY, STEVEN PRYJMACHUK AND MARTIN WRIGHT**

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*Jane Bottomley, Steven Prymachuk and Martin Wright*

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# Introduction

*Critical Thinking Skills* is the third book in the *Critical Study Skills for Policing* series. This series supports policing students and other law enforcement professionals as they embark on their undergraduate degree programmes. It is aimed at all policing degree students, 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 policing practice, education and academic study skills. All the information, text extracts and activities in the book have a clear policing focus and are often directly linked to the **Police Code of Ethics**. 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 and policing. 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 policing student and practitioner, and to become a confident member of your academic community.

## A note on terminology

In the context of this book, the term 'policing' should be taken to include 'policing and allied law enforcement professions', wherever this is not explicitly stated.



# 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 policing;
- have begun to learn how to apply critical thinking to your studies and to your policing 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, 'Criminology' or 'Criminal Law'); critical thinking is actually threaded through every aspect of your studies and your practice.

This chapter helps you begin to trace and understand this thread. It explores important aspects of critical thinking in academic study and in policing practice, in particular, the importance of objectively 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 policing. Chapters 3 and 4 cover how to *apply* critical thinking skills in your academic reading and writing.

Of course, it is not possible to think critically about a policing 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 policing theory and practice.

CROSS  
REFERENCE

Chapter 2,  
Reflective  
practice

CROSS  
REFERENCE

Chapter 3,  
Critical  
reading

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) Which parts of the Code of Ethics (2014) make reference to aspects and characteristics of critical thinking?
- 4) 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?

- ↑ 5) Have you felt that something you recently read or heard was lacking in critical thinking? Why?
- 6) In what ways do you think you can demonstrate criticality in your studies and your policing 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 policing 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 science and policing are developing all the time. This inevitably means that sometimes there are instances of received wisdom which turn out to be wrong. This may be because not enough was known about a particular thing at a given time, or it may be that people did not ask enough questions – or at least the *right* questions.

### Task



#### Exploring changes in thinking 1

Look at the case study below and answer these questions:

- 1) What was the current knowledge or 'received wisdom'?
- 2) How was this challenged?
- 3) What, if anything, do you think should happen now?

## Case study



### Mythical numbers

A group of researchers from Cambridge University (Stang et al, 2014) investigated the often-quoted claim that women suffered an average of 35 assaults before calling the police. They found that the only related study had been undertaken in a small town in Canada and that it was both methodologically flawed and did not in and of itself support the claim. While it must be stated that any form of domestic abuse and interpersonal violence is not only abhorrent but also a crime, the research found that there was no evidence to support the claim that victims had suffered 35 assaults prior to reporting it to the police. This is important for policing practice and policy, which should always be research-informed.

This case study provides a good example of how experts question or change their thinking when confronted with new research evidence. There are many other areas of policing where similar developments have occurred, some of them widely publicised in the media, and some of them leading to significant changes in policy by governments and police forces. Some of these cases cause great controversy and even end up in court! As a policing degree student and police officer, it is important that you not only follow academic thinking on police matters as reported in textbooks and journals, but that you also keep an eye on how these issues are reported in the media. This may enable you, for example, to put yourself in a victim's or offender's shoes and understand how their perception of an issue or policy may have been influenced.

## Task



### Exploring changes in thinking 2

- 1) How, to your knowledge, has general thinking developed on the following topics over time?
  - Child sexual exploitation
  - Stop and search
  - Routine arming of police officers
  - Digital investigation
  - Privatisation of policing
  - Police mental ill-health
- 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, if anything, do you think needs to happen now in each case?

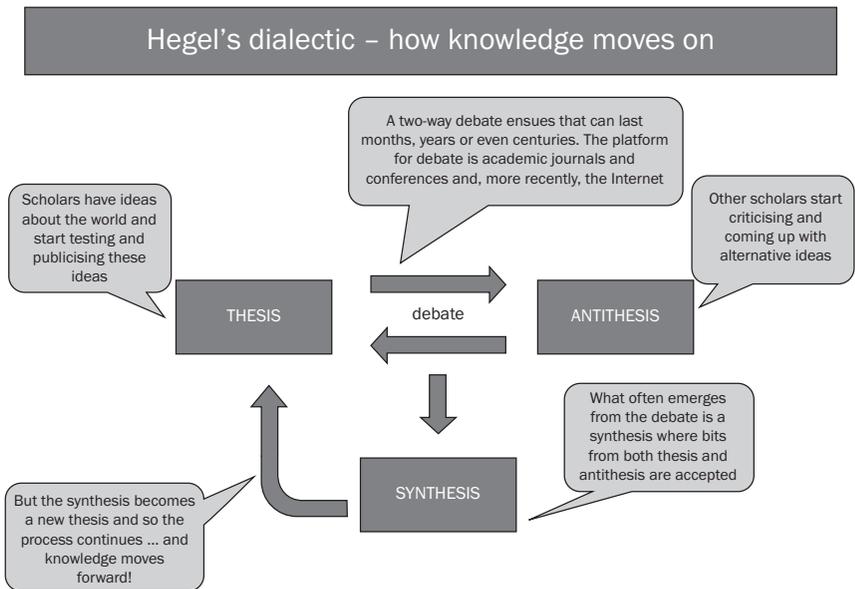
## Advanced skills



### 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!



**Figure 1.1: Hegel's dialectic**

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.

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

CROSS  
REFERENCE

Appendix 1,  
Academic  
levels at  
university

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 in the section on mythical numbers is important in that it shows how knowledge and understanding change, and how academics, students and practitioners have a duty to avoid complacency and to keep asking questions. In the case of domestic abuse, new evidence emerged which changed the picture somewhat; the supposed evidence was there, but was in fact incomplete and unreliable. 'Wrong turns' are part of academic life, and mistakes are made, but in this case, the parties involved were ostensibly constrained by the rules of academic enquiry, primarily that claims should be *based on evidence*. However, this is not always the case! The concept of 'fake news' has come to the fore in recent years. This concept comprises stories that have 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. They can appear in any medium but are particularly common on social media. Fake news stories often focus on politics and celebrity, but they sometimes involve policing issues. The influence of this concept was recently highlighted when the *Collins Dictionary* named 'fake news' as the 2017 'word of the year' (Flood, 2017).

### Task



#### Scrutinising the media

Look at the headlines below, taken from news media. Do you know the background behind these headlines? Do you think the stories could be classed as 'fake news'? Why? What questions need to be answered to get to the bottom of the story in each case?

Knife crime: Should stronger stop and search powers be used?

(BBC, 8 November 2018)

↑ Met police push ahead with armed patrols despite backlash: Force sparks rift with London mayor over plan to counter knife crime and violent gangs  
(*The Guardian*, 1 December 2018)

'County lines' drug gangs spread knife crime epidemic to shires: City drug gangs bring bloodshed to counties  
(*The Times*, 6 May 2018)

## Discussion of task

As with most media headlines of this nature, there is actually a grain of truth in the ones cited above. Asking the right questions, however, means doing some detective work to determine if the underlying study or research may have been misinterpreted, or even distorted, by journalists. You might even question whether the journalist or newspaper has a particular political reason (most newspapers have a political stance) or financial reason (controversy breeds publicity!) for running the headline.

One way of probing headlines (or any other statement or claim) is to look for authoritative information on the subject. You might do this by checking out positions from legitimate scientific or professional organisations, or even consulting the original research that led to the headline. Indeed, as you progress through your policing degree, you will find more and more that this is what you are expected to do.

Knife crime: Should stronger stop and search powers be used?

This headline (Edgington, 2018) puts two demands on a critically thinking police officer. Firstly, they should be aware of the common bias in human thinking (connected to anecdotal thinking – see case study on page 8: Scientific versus anecdotal thinking) of assuming that an outcome for one specific and controversial policing approach will apply more generally. Secondly, evidence from reputable sources should be tracked down. In this case, there are a number of studies related to the effectiveness or otherwise of stop and search; see for example the analysis undertaken by the College of Policing (2019) which endorses the Home Office *Best Use of Stop and Search Scheme*.

Met police push ahead with armed patrols despite backlash: Force sparks rift with London mayor over plan to counter knife crime and violent gangs

The article (*The Guardian*, 2018) relating to this headline refers to a controversial police tactic introduced within London in response to the tragic deaths through knife crime of a number of young people. As part of your policing degree studies, you will become familiar with the theory of 'Moral Panics' (Cohen, 1972). It is recommended you consider the media reporting of knife crime when studying this theory. The number of murders associated with knife crime, gangs and drugs provides a rich source of material for sensational media headlines and reporting, especially when conjoined with the routine deployment of armed police officers. The headline further situates the operational deployment of armed officers

as being the cause of a 'rift' and 'backlash' in connection with the Mayor of London, which may or may not be associated with the political persuasions of the newspaper. A critically thinking policing degree student or police officer would wish to study the research and literature related to gang violence, knife crime and the effectiveness or otherwise of armed interventions before drawing any firm conclusions.

'County lines' drug gangs spread knife crime epidemic to shires: City drug gangs bring bloodshed to counties

This headline (Collins and Ramzan, 2018) was featured in *The Times* newspaper in May 2018 and has been highlighted here as it again refers to the issues related to knife crime, gangs and drugs. As with *The Guardian* newspaper cited above, the political persuasion of the newspaper needs to be considered as well as the demographics of the readership. Both of these newspapers are termed 'broadsheets' and are usually considered to be more authoritative than tabloids. However, both adopt a particular approach to their reporting that is politically orientated. The headline again contains a number of spectacular claims – 'epidemic' and 'bloodshed' – which merit a critical review and investigation as to the source of the information or evidence.

## Case study



### Scientific versus anecdotal thinking

In many countries there has been a marked decrease in the overall crime rate over the last decade or so. This reduction has occurred during a time when the same countries experienced a quite marked economic recession and a subsequent reduction in the number of police officers. For many observers, these factors – recession and fewer police officers – would have been considered to have naturally led to an increase in crime rates. This can lead to the emergence of narratives and 'anecdotes' in newspapers, in public life and among the general public which run counter to the facts, ie that crime is actually reducing. These narratives may centre around crimes committed by poor people suffering from the economic situation, or criminals left to thrive because there are no police on the streets. This is symptomatic of the power of what Shermer calls 'anecdotal thinking'.

These anecdotes are so powerful that they cause people to ignore contrary evidence ... The reason for this cognitive disconnect is that we have evolved brains that pay attention to anecdotes because false positives (believing there is a connection between A and B when there is not) are usually harmless, whereas false negatives (believing there is no connection between A and B when there is) may take you out of the gene pool.

(Shermer, 2008)

# Appendix 1

## Academic levels at university

<b>UNDERGRADUATE STUDY</b>		
<b>England, Wales, Northern Ireland</b>	<b>Scotland</b>	<b>Award</b>
Level 4	Level 7	Certificate of Higher Education (CertHE)
Level 5	Level 8	Diploma of Higher Education (DipHE) Foundation Degree (FdD)
Level 6	Level 9	Ordinary Bachelor Degree eg BSc Policing
	Level 10	Bachelor Degree with Honours eg BSc (Hons) in Policing
<b>Postgraduate study</b>		
Level 7	Level 11	Masters Degree, eg MSc, MA, MPhil Postgraduate Certificate or Diploma (PGCert; PGDip)
Level 8	Level 12	Research Doctorate (PhD) Professional Doctorate

# 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.

My pocket notebook **is kept** up to date.

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 pocket notebook which is important, not the person making the notes (and who we can deduce), 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 neighbourhood policing team.

Attitudes towards mental health among police staff **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 probation in June.

An abusive shoplifter **was arrested**.

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 arrested the shoplifter) 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:

HMIC (2015) **found** that scrutiny of intrusive searches was inadequate.  
The suspects **were interviewed** over a period of six months.

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 improved funding to tackle knife crime.

(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.

This policy **will have** an adverse effect on the recruitment of police officers.

(a prediction)

**I'm meeting** my tutor next week.

(an arrangement)

**I'm going to** contact a PSLO nurse to find out more about how police officers can support children with mental health issues.

(an intention)

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

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## Further reading

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Bottomley, J (2014) *Academic Writing for International Students of Science*. London: Routledge.

Caplan, N (2012) *Grammar Choices for Graduate and Professional Writers*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.

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