Critical Thinking in Social Work Education  
Created 2010, Updated May 2016  
Minnesota State University, Mankato  
Department of Social Work  
MSW Program

The purpose of this hand out is to help graduate students to recognize and further develop critical thinking capacities in social work. One very important aspect of graduate education in social work is the development of critical thinking skills. These skills are useful not only for academic or scholarly work, but also for social work direct practice, research, program planning, and policy analysis. While in your MSW courses you are likely to see the term critical thinking quite often, especially as a skill that you need to develop and demonstrate through assignments. While this is often used, it is not often defined in a way that helps you to work on these skills. This document and the assessment provided are being introduced here to help you both assess your own critical thinking and to help you work toward honing this set of skills.

Evidence-based practice requires social workers to utilize critical thinking skills so their practice reflects deep problem analysis and reasoned solutions for change in client systems. Evidence-based practice is now considered a critical paradigm-shift in social work education (Pollio, 2006). Though there are multiple definitions, evidence-based practice involves practitioners becoming critical, thoughtful consumers of the scholarly literature, systematically applying evidence to practice situations, developing effective practice, and evaluating their practices, policies, and programs. This type of practice requires well-honed critical thinking skills.

Scriven and Paul (1987) defined critical thinking as “the intellectually disciplined process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information gathered from or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, as a guide to belief and action” (para. 2). Critical thinking is not a singular skill,
but rather a set of interrelated skills. Brookfield (1987) identified four important components of critical thinking including:

1. Identifying and challenging assumptions;
2. Challenging the importance of context;
3. Exploring alternatives, and
4. Utilizing reflective skepticism.

In these and other ways, critical thinking is closely related to scientific reasoning (Gambrill, 1997). In learning to apply social work research to real world situations, critical thinking is essential. A student who has achieved the highest levels of critical thinking and inquiry will consistently do all or most of the following:

- Accurately interpret evidence.
- Identify salient arguments both for and against a position or plan.
- Thoughtfully analyze alternative points of view.
- Generate alternative explanations.
- Provide justification for results.
- Explain assumptions or rationale underlying beliefs or decisions.
- Follows a line of thinking where evidence leads them in a fair minded manner.
- Makes ethical judgments.

**MSW Program Definition of Critical Thinking**

Critical thinking is the process of actively conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, and or synthesizing information and evidence from a variety of sources (Scriven & Paul, 1987 as cited in The Foundation for Critical Thinking, n. d.), as well as challenging assumptions,
exploring alternatives, utilizing reflection and considering context [e.g., setting, historic, and cultural] (Brookfield, 1987) as a guide to decision making and social work practice.

A Critical Thinking Scoring Rubric

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Critical Thinking Component</th>
<th>1 Emerging Skills</th>
<th>2 Moderate Skills</th>
<th>3 Skill Mastery</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Identifies and summarizes <strong>problem or question</strong> at issue and/or the source’s position.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identifies and presents own <strong>hypothesis, perspective and/or position</strong> as important to analysis.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identifies and considers OTHER salient <strong>perspectives and positions</strong> important to the analysis</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identifies and assesses the key <strong>assumptions</strong> underlying the problem or question.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identifies and assesses the quality of <strong>supporting data or evidence</strong> and provides additional data or evidence related to the issue.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identifies and considers the influence of the <strong>context</strong> on the issue.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identifies and assesses <strong>conclusions, implications and consequences</strong>.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Adapted from Washington State University Critical Thinking Project, 2001)
References


Appendix

Critical Thinking and Evidence-Based Practice Bibliography


