

## CRITICAL THINKING

For social workers the aim of learning to think critically is quite simple and practical, namely, to assist clients. Clients can include individuals, groups, families, organizations and communities. Do clients benefit or not from our policies and programs?

Critical thinking is an approach to existing knowledge, knowledge development and knowledge utilization. As an approach to knowledge it examines the evidence and the assumptions upon which claims are based. As an approach to knowledge development it is empirical and accumulative, building on what we know and do not know. As an approach to knowledge utilization it is parsimonious and efficient, in other words, what works.

The critical thinker operates with a healthy skepticism; knowledge claims, regardless of who makes them, are weighed exclusively against the evidence to support them. The critical thinker scrutinizes the legitimacy and utility of ideas, facts and opinions. Critical thinkers are neither deterred by ambiguity and complexity nor are they distracted by authority, dogma, popularity, jargon, tradition or any of the many other impediments to problem-solving.

One who thinks critically is always questioning and willing to be questioned. The critical thinker strives to understand and is accountable for presenting positions so that they are understood. These are not easy tasks because we tend to hold sacred our ideas, approaches, and practice wisdom.

Critical thinking is crucial at every stage of the change/helping process. Whether at the micro or macro level, it requires attention to what we know works in engaging, assessing, diagnosing, formulating, planning, intervening, evaluating and terminating with clients. Just as important is attention to what does not work and is not helpful. The critical thinker recognizes both the limits of professional knowledge and of his/her expertise. In all endeavors the critical thinker embodies humility and an openness to evaluating one's practice.

There are a number of components that comprise how critical thinkers approach problem definition, formulation, and intervention. These components include: clarity; precision; accuracy; relevance; depth; breadth; logic and significance. These features define the critical thinker's strategy for assessing any knowledge claim or problem. To think critically entails disciplining oneself to search rigorously for alternative explanations and solutions.

The ability to think critically is here broken down into knowledge, skills and values to be learned and demonstrated at the foundation and advanced levels of the master's curriculum.

### Foundation Level

*Knowledge:* Demonstrates mastery of foundation course content. Demonstrates the ability to examine and articulate similarity and difference, agreement and contradiction in content within and among the foundation courses (policy, practice, research, theory, and field). Articulates a theoretically-based, empirically grounded rationale in analyzing a problem.

*Values:* Demonstrates respect for clients. Acknowledges range of personal feelings and begins to examine them and their relationship to work with clients. Acknowledges anxiety inherent in assisting clients and takes steps to become a more effective social worker. Uses informed consent (NASW Code of Ethics, 1.03a). Uses the Code of Ethics to present and defend a position.

*Skills:* Translates the knowledge and value indicators above into foundation practice with clients in the field practicum. Inquires about missing information and alternative explanations. Identifies areas of weakness in one's practice, solicits feedback on such and develops and executes a plan of improvement. Uses criteria to evaluate cited sources and research studies. Uses research to inform practice. Distinguishes explanatory from applied research. Completes a comprehensive assessment.

### Advanced Level

*Knowledge:* Demonstrates mastery of advanced course content. Demonstrates the ability to examine and articulate similarity and difference, agreement and contradiction in content within and among the advanced courses (policy, practice, research, theory and field). Among alternatives, selects, defends and articulates a theoretically-based, empirically grounded rationale in analyzing a problem and developing a strategy.

Examines the pros and cons of policies, problems, interventions, etc. and presents a sound rationale for their equivalence or difference and uses that information as a basis for decision making. Synthesizes disparate information and sees a pattern. Develops a position and conclusion that are based on a comprehensive examination of the evidence, an exploration of reasonable alternatives, and an evaluation of consequences.

*Values:* Modifies approach as a result of feedback from supervisor, clients, data, classroom instructor, self. When faced with an ethical dilemma, uses the Code of Ethics to present and defend multiple positions then chooses a course of action.

*Skills:* Translates the knowledge and value indicators above into advanced practice with clients in the field practicum. Integrates multiple units of analysis (intrapsychic, developmental, interpersonal, familial, societal) into formulating and operationalizing an intervention. Bases treatment plan on priorities that increase the likelihood of clients' succeeding. Uses research as a basis for practice. Evaluates one's effectiveness dispassionately by using data, supervision, and feedback from classroom instructors, peers, clients, and self.