On critical thinking

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This paper begins by defining critical thinking and setting out a personal history of the author's journey toward becoming a critical thinker. It considers two common barriers to critical thinking: cultural disapproval of critique; and confusing critical thinking with criticism. In response, it argues that rigorous thinking offers benefits—and not only risks—to cultures as well as individuals. It considers where cultural resources supportive of critique might be found. Further, it argues that critical analysis should be understood (and undertaken) as a process of collaborative support for rigorous thinking rather than as a form of hostile criticism. Some dimensions of critical thinking are outlined, together with questions which might allow readers to apply them to specific contexts. The paper closes with some reflections on the process of writing in which some of these dimensions of critical thinking are applied to the paper itself.

Keywords: critical thinking, critical analysis, ethics, discrimination

INTRODUCTION

At its most basic, critical thinking can be defined as 'the art of analysing and evaluating thinking with a view to improving it' (Paul and Elder cited by hooks, 2010, p. 9). With a little more focus on the outcomes we hope for from critical thinking, it can also be described as: 'the habit of making sure our assumptions are accurate and that our actions have the results we want them to have' (Brookfield, 2012, p. 14).

This paper offers a short introduction to critical thinking, addresses some of the barriers to critical thinking and then sets out a number of approaches to undertaking critique of a particular argument, proposal or practice. In the beginning it was my own experience that convinced me that critical thinking skills could change lives and communities. So I'll begin by explaining how I encountered critical thinking—though no one used those words at the time.

A PERSONAL HISTORY OF CRITICAL THINKING

I was born into a rather conservative, white, Anglo-Australian family in the middle of the 1960s. My parents are good people, who have spent their lives caring for family and friends and volunteering their time to create better communities around them. However, white Australia in the 1960s was not a very reflective place. My parents had spent most of their lives in a country centre which is still well known for its racism toward Indigenous people, who make up a significant proportion of the population there. I grew up hearing adults around me speaking about Indigenous Australians in offensive, dismissive and overtly racist ways, often acknowledging that 'there is good and bad in every race' but usually doing so as an introduction to saying something critical or demeaning about an Indigenous person.

Recent immigrants were commonly referred to as 'new Australians'. We had friends who were 'new Australians'. But I still received the message that they weren't like 'us'. It was also a time in which it was taken for granted that women were less intelligent and less capable than men. The idea of a woman in a role of major public leadership would have been seen as laughable. I know now that gay and lesbian people existed, but 'they' were never mentioned to me as a child and homophobia was the rule and not the exception when I started to hear about 'them'. I didn't hear prejudice about Catholics in our Protestant home but I heard it at school, and it was a long time before I heard anything at all about Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus or people of other faiths. I learned in church that Jews had lived in biblical times (and that Jesus was a Jew), but no one mentioned that there might be Jewish people living in our suburb.

This is by no means a complete catalogue of the prejudice and ignorance I was steeped in as a young person who has not had their enthusiasm stolen right from the beginning of my life, soaking up what was going on around me like a sponge. I can only imagine that I acquired the casual racism, class perspectives, gender stereotypes, ignorance and silences of the adults around me along with all of the other new knowledge. I was lucky enough to be surrounded by people who were mostly caring, well intentioned and benign, but they were embedded in a culture that was prejudiced and ignorant about some things and they spoke and acted accordingly.

For a long time this was all I knew. I can keenly remember moments when I began to perceive that some of these things were not right or not the only way that the world could be understood.

I went to a high school where there were plenty of words everyone knew which were used on the significant proportion of children in the school who had Greek or Italian heritage. These words were used often and offensively. They were not compliments. I don't remember what I thought about that, but I also don't remember defending my Italian-background friends from this treatment or thinking it could be different. I studied Italian language at high school and eventually I was moved into a home class organised around all of the students in it studying Italian. I was one of three or four Anglo-background kids in a class of about forty, where all the others were of Italian-background. Many spoke Italian dialects at home. Some had parents who could not speak English. The Italian-background students would swear at us Anglo kids and use 'aussie'[1] as an insult when the teacher wasn't there. In that class I first had some insight into what it must have been like to face the abuse the Italian-background kids faced every day, because I realised that they were taking one of the few opportunities they had to dish out this kind of treatment instead of constantly having it turned on them.

My final year English teacher in high school offered me more opportunities. She encouraged and modelled rigorous engagement with plays, poetry and novels. I thought she was extremely intelligent, full of wisdom and

big ideas about the world. I remember being amazed when she asked *our* opinions about some of the texts we studied. Her questions suggested that we might have opinions, and that our opinions might matter. I think she was one of the first people who ever pointed out to me that a certain perspective on the appropriate relationship between women and men was reflected in the poetry we were reading. She asked the class what we thought about that. This was a whole new way of thinking for me.

Gradually it dawned on me that the way my father saw the world was only one way to see the world, not the *only* way to see the world. I think this may be the biggest realisation I have ever had. For me this insight was necessary for to be able to think about the world from my own point of view — to think critically about the world. It was a realisation so big that it was as if the world cracked open and light shone in. From that point on there was more and more illumination.

When I finished high school I had the privilege of going to University and it was exciting! There was a whole section in the library full of books about feminism and I worked my way from one end of the shelf to the other, being shocked, delighted, appalled, affirmed and confused. I took subjects in politics, philosophy and logic and considered whether there was a God, whether it was moral to eat meat or have an abortion, whether revolution would be a good idea. I took these questions up with my friends and family and even with strangers who seemed to be interested. In short, I was excited by ideas and I realised there was a much greater variety of thinking in the world than I had been led to suspect. These ideas were not only in books: I went to a lot of meetings and began working with people who were trying to understand power, end the cold war, think about uranium, deconstruct dominant ideas about sexuality and relationships… in short, we questioned everything, and for me this began with questioning myself.

I think now that this was the beginning of my career as a critical thinker. I began to go beyond accepting the world as I found it and modelling myself on the people I saw around me without question (and even, without understanding).   If I want to lead an ethical life—and I do—then I need to be actively seeking to understand the ways in which I wield power, the places I hold unexamined privilege, the prejudices I have unthinkingly acquired. I also need to be able to think critically about the strategies I am employing or participating in as part of trying to create social change. In the places where I am subject to other people's prejudice or ignorance, I want to be able to think about what assumptions are

being made about me in order to minimise their impacts on me or to try to persuade people to abandon their prejudice. All of this requires critical thinking, and trying to understand the world is an invigorating pursuit. I think the immense diversity of ways that human beings find meaning and seek knowledge is fascinating.

And yet, not everyone embraces the idea of thinking critically. And even when we do, there are barriers and risks to consider.

BARRIERS TO CRITICAL THINKING

Critical thinking is not necessarily relaxing. Like any rigorous process, it can be demanding. Any serious moral inquiry can take time and involve risk. It may require learning which 'unsettles conventional ways of thinking or behaving and confronts people with various manifestations of power and their entanglement in them…' (do Mar Pereira, 2012, p. 129).

It is a mistake, however, to think that all the discomfort lies with taking up critical thinking. There are risks in relinquishing critical thinking in order to be 'relaxed and comfortable'.[2] Thinking critically, articulating those thoughts and acting on them all have potential risks and costs. However, passivity, collusion in unethical conduct and superficial understanding have costs too. Leaving dominant, mistaken, flawed or pathologising ways of thinking and acting unquestioned also holds risks.

In my opinion, two of the key barriers to taking up critical thinking are cultural disapproval and confusing critical thinking with criticism, so I shall now consider both of these in some detail.

CULTURAL DISAPPROVAL

Sometimes the information or tools needed to engage in critical thinking are not readily available. I grew up in environments where I received a lot of training designed to persuade or oblige me to obey rather than to question. I know I am not the only person who has lived in contexts where, mostly, inquiry is actively discouraged and passivity is rewarded. This kind of training didn't lead me to perceive critical thinking as inappropriate. It made the possibility of thinking critically invisible to me. In times when I have found myself fearful to follow my own thoughts to their conclusions and even more fearful to share those thoughts or act on them, I have

tried to figure out what resources my culture offers for critical thinking. I have asked myself where the critical thinkers in my culture are (in history, in the world of the imagination and in the present), and what the costs and benefits of the cultural predisposition not to question have been. In every culture there are people who resist passivity, whether in large ways or in small ways, whether in quiet, subtle ways or in overt, public ways. They may ask questions or offer critique through poetry, music, art, correspondence, public performance, running for parliament, community organising or revolutionary action. When I am participating in a social change project which is being called 'unAustralian' in the media, I think of these people, and of friends and co-activists who care about the issues I care about.

I have found a good deal of inspiration in figures from history. Women who worked for the vote and for the right to stand for parliament. Activists who opposed war even in circumstances of great danger. Jewish people who resisted persecution and gentiles who hid Jews from persecution. People who opposed colonisation and slavery despite brutal repression and being themselves colonised, dispossessed, enslaved. Poets who wrote about lesbian lives in code decades before I was born. I draw on the stories of people of privilege who set out to try to end the oppression of others (as well as seeking to learn from their mistakes) because I have privileges and would like to follow their example. I also draw on the courage of people who resisted their own oppression, because I would like to resist the places where I face bad treatment or prejudice. History is not my only resource: fictional characters of courage in novels, plays and songs have inspired and heartened me. There are people all over the world today who are working to end poverty, discrimination and abuse, and I draw on their preparedness to confront power, to question and to take action even when all around them people are telling them they should remain silent and comply with the dominant power in their culture or in their country.

I also like to notice how critical thinking has improved the culture I live in. I am only one of the people who have benefited from the critical thinkers and social change activists of the past and the risks they were prepared to take. In my culture, advocating for equal rights for women or even suggesting women were as intelligent and capable as men was a scandal in the past. Now equal rights are largely taken for granted, even if they have not been completely achieved. In my own society, in my own lifetime, racism and homophobia have become far less socially acceptable. When I was a child, advocating for the participation of Indigenous Australians and openly gay people in Australian public life attracted ridicule and condemnation. Now we assume that these people will participate in public life and these kinds of prejudice are much less acceptable.

CRITICAL THINKING IS NOT THE SAME AS CRITICISM

Some people resist critical thinking because they believe critical thinking is the same as *criticism* — criticism of others, or criticism of oneself. There is no necessary relationship between critical thinking and criticism. As bell hooks has said: 'there is a useful distinction to be made between critique that seeks to expand consciousness and harsh criticism that attacks or trashes' (hooks, 2010, p. 137).

It is entirely possible to communicate feedback (to oneself or others) in ways which are personally damaging and intended to undermine the confidence and enthusiasm of the recipient. Many people have had experiences of being treated in this way, and it has led some of us to wonder whether anything other than praise or affirmation could ever be appropriate. Praise and affirmation can certainly result from critical thinking. If I am not communicating what is functional, delightful, elegant or effective about someone else's thinking, writing or action, this should cause me to reflect on the quality of what I am offering to the collaborative process. Yet if only praise and affirmation are offered, sometimes the person who asks for feedback is being left in isolation. They are being left alone in the places where their struggles may be at their most difficult, rather than being offered support and assistance in addressing those difficulties or even identifying them.

We need seriously to consider how we can communicate critical responses in ways which build relationships rather than damaging them; which expand consciousness rather than causing it to constrict under the influence of shame, fear or humiliation. My efforts to do this have benefited from thinking about how I undertake self-reflection. I certainly feel pride and delight when my efforts to act ethically and effectively go well. Self-reflection should not be an opportunity to be hard on myself to no useful end. Yet, if I stop at self-affirmation and never investigate the places where I have acted on my privileges, wittingly or unwittingly; if I never ask myself about the times when I may have acted unethically; if I never inquire into whether I could have acted differently in contexts where I have caused hurt or harm to others, then my level of self-reflection remains low. My capacity to act as an ethical agent and my resources for making a difference to my own life and those of others is accordingly limited.

In my relationship to myself, I have seen the places where constructive self-reflection has slipped into self-loathing or into an unhelpful degree of self-reproach. Most of us have places inside where we are, as yet, unable to let go of beliefs about ourselves that limit our lives, our relationships and our thinking, and I am no exception. I sometimes speak to myself in ways that I would recognise as rude, inappropriate and vicious if I were considering directing them toward another person. 'Critical thinking' should not be used to dignify these ways of relating to oneself or anyone else. A rigorous approach to self-reflection as a critical practice needs to focus on self-reflection which can support awareness and function, rather than merely eroding our capacity for ethical action and constructive thought.

Sometimes acknowledging to myself that I have acted in ways I am not proud of are the most profound points of self-reflection. Other people sometimes assist me in reaching these realisations, whether consciously and at my request or without realising that what they have said or done has reached me deeply. Sometimes I have been offered compliments or reassurance which allowed me to conclude that my conduct had been inappropriate or that my understanding of a situation had been mistaken. At other times, I have been told in very direct and sometimes hostile ways, about my limitations, flaws or misbehaviours. It is the task of every person who wants a better life, and who wishes they could have stronger and deeper relationships with others, to try to figure out how to use these forms of feedback, tender or bruising, as resources in the larger project.

In the past, I mostly saw thinking and action as individual enterprises, rather than collaborative endeavours. In that time of my life, I sometimes felt that the efforts others made to improve on my thinking were personal attacks. I responded defensively to their efforts to support my striving toward ethical conduct and rigorous thinking if they took the form of critique. I was hesitant to offer critical perspectives on other people's ideas or strategies for fear of breaching my relationships with them.

However, conceptualising thinking as an isolated, individual activity is very limiting — and not only because it can lead to defensiveness and silence. I need other people's intelligence and the diversity of perspectives that can only come from collaboration. If I only ever converse with people who agree with me, who share my assumptions and even my prejudices, I will not have access to the resources necessary to improve on my current levels of understanding. People who share my life experiences and values are unlikely to be able to offer me new

perspectives on the assumptions I hold so deeply that they shape (and limit) my understanding of the world and my place in it. These assumptions can be described as 'paradigmatic' (Brookfield, 2012, p. 17). Without the perspectives of those who hold paradigmatic assumptions which are different to my own, I am unlikely to notice that I am making these assumptions at all.

In thinking about how to prepare ourselves for robust conversations with other people that might allow profound insight into our assumptions, we may need to enlarge our sense of what might count as a safe environment for sharing our thoughts. bell hooks suggests that we need to go beyond understanding safety as agreement. Instead, she proposes that we build the skills we need to take risks and understand our capacity to manage those risks as the foundation of our safety.

> Instead of focusing on the commonly held assumption that we are safe when everyone agrees, when everyone has an equal right to speak, if we rather think of safety as knowing how to cope in situations of risk, then we open up the possibility that we can be safe in situations where there is disagreement and even conflict (hooks, 2010, p. 87).

In order to establish this form of safety we might consider establishing and experimenting with the ground rules and structures we believe will support the conversations we want to have with one another (Brookfield, 2012, p. 59).

'Critical thinking' should not be used to dignify the places where we treat others with disrespect, where we act on our arrogance, where we settle for wounding others rather than facing our own limitations. And we can use our relationships with ourselves as spaces of reflection in which we might garner clues that we can use in considering whether—and how—to communicate critical insights to others.

I hope for contexts where others will be able to see beyond the limitations of my current understandings and skills. People who can see beyond my limitations can assist me to transcend them. I hope for others to inspire me to move beyond my current hopes and fears. I expect that people with different experiences and understandings, who stand at intersections of social power which are different from the intersection I stand at, will be in a strong position to help me see beyond the places where I have accepted dominant discourses as the boundaries of what I can be, know or do. And I can accept my responsibility and capacity to offer other people a perspective that is outside what they can, for the time being, be, know or do. This is what Maria do Mar

Pereira has called 'the often emotionally demanding work of critically examining the world and [our] lives, imagining them differently, and attempting to change them' (do Mar Pereira, 2012, p. 129).

(SOME) DIMENSIONS OF CRITICAL THINKING

Having spoken about the broad character of critical thinking, I now intend to offer some specific strategies I find useful in examining my own thinking and that of other people. This is not an exhaustive list of examples but an attempt to generate tools which might be of use in undertaking critical thinking.

LOGICALITY

If the claim being made takes the form of an argument, we can ask whether the argument is logical. Is the argument based on sound premises? Do the premises support the conclusion? If these criteria cannot be met then—in the case of a factual claim— there is no reason for us to be persuaded by the conclusion.

EVIDENCE

If the claim being made is presented as factual, we might ask for evidence that the claim really is a fact (a true statement), and then examine the quality of the evidence for it being a fact. We might go further and ask about the context in which this 'fact' has emerged. How might that context have affected what counts as 'factual', which evidence is seen as relevant, and which questions went unasked?

EMPLOYING COUNTER THEORIES

If we can identify a philosophy, theory or approach on which the claim being made is based, we might ask what other theories would say about this claim. What other approaches exist? How would they respond to this claim? This approach could certainly be used to inquire into the differences between a narrative therapy approach and one from a different school of thought within therapy. Discussion between different theoretical approaches can provide alternative viewpoints which may critique one another. This process in itself may provide a more nuanced approach which can enrich both fields.

ALTERNATIVE PERSPECTIVES

If we can identify that the claim comes from a specific perspective (or we want to check the influence of perspective on the claim), we could ask what alternative perspectives might say about this claim. What qualifications would they make to this claim? Would they reject or accept this claim? Why? It is immensely helpful to ask these questions about the claims or proposals we ourselves are making, since our own perspectives seem natural and normal to most of us.

WHO BENEFITS? WHO PAYS?

What are the benefits of the proposal? What are its costs? Who will benefit from this proposal? Who will pay, or bear the costs? It is helpful to remember to think locally as well as globally.

EXAMINING SILENCES

We can also ask who is speaking about this claim or proposal, and what are they saying. If more than one voice is present, what do you notice about the differences in what each voice contributes? Who is silent? Why are they silent? Who is silenced—not allowed to speak, not reported as speaking, not listened to if they do speak? It is helpful to consider our own silences: are they chosen by ourselves or encouraged by others? Does speaking involve penalties? Are there places where we speak? In what ways do our decisions to speak prevent others from speaking? How could we enable their speech? Is it possible that the way we speak creates silences?

FLOWS OF POWER

In some way, many of the questions I have suggested so far could allow an investigation of flows of power. However, it is possible to use power itself as a framework for thinking critically about a situation or proposal. We can begin by asking who has the power in the situation, conceptualising power as broadly as possible. There will usually be multiple forms of power at work in a situation. We can ask: whose perspective, experience or voice is privileged? Who has power exercised over them in this situation? By whom? Why? It is important to also ask whether the treatment of people in this situation is consistent with dominant flows of power, or pushes against dominant flows of power.

EXAMINING ASSUMPTIONS

I believe that all critical thinking requires us to go deeper than the surface presentation of information, behaviour or arguments. We can then ask what is assumed in the situation we are examining, whether these assumptions are valid and whether the assumptions being made would be valid for everyone, in all relevant contexts. We can consider what questions would assist us to move beyond a superficial view of the situation. Sometimes examination will confirm the correctness of our assumptions.

However, if we discover that our assumptions are incorrect, we should be prepared to abandon them, no matter how passionately we hold them (Brookfield, 2012, p. 38). We are unlikely to uncover our own assumptions without the help of others—self-critique is useful, but it is not usually sufficient. 'It's enormously difficult to discover how some of your most deeply held values and beliefs have led you into wrong choices' (Brookfield, 2012, p. 57).

The longing to go below the surface for constructive ends is one of the reasons people seek the opinion of their friends and families or go to therapy when facing a complex decision. They are hoping for support in examining their assumptions about themselves, what they should be like and what they can or should do.

THE MEDIUM AND THE MESSAGE

It is likely that in any communication, there will be both overt and implicit messages, even if the person making the communication is not consciously intending to communicate the implicit messages, which may seem so natural and normal to him or her that they pass unnoticed. It is useful therefore to ask what the overt message/s and implicit message/s are. We can then ask how the medium chosen invites us to accept the overt message/s and the implicit message/s. Is the medium inviting an emotional response that renders us more likely to accept these messages? Sometimes I find myself watching a film or TV show where the music and images are inviting me to sympathise with someone or some actions that I would usually find objectionable. Having realised this, I can make choices about whether this is a valuable opportunity to reconsider my previous position, or whether I might resist the pull of emotion raised by the music and images since it conflicts with an ethical position I am strongly attached to for good reasons. I might decide that my previous position, while basically correct, lacked compassion.

CHECKING FOR COLLUSION

There are other situations in which we may feel pulled to think or act in ways which conflict with our ethical standards. It helps to check whether we are colluding in unethical conduct or thinking because doing so feels familiar or comfortable or because it is in our interest in some way by examining our thoughts and feelings. We can ask questions such as: How am I feeling about this claim? What am I thinking about this claim? Am I more likely to accept this claim without critical examination because I'm inclined to agree with it? How does accepting this claim reinforce my privilege? How does this claim reinforce the ways I may have internalised

oppressive messages about people like me or 'them'? Am I pulled to collude with the claim in order to remain comfortable, or to resist self-examination? Would doing so be ethical for me?

PUTTING CRITICAL THINKING TO USE

Having put forward these potential strategies for critical thinking, I am going to bring this paper to a close by making visible some of the critical reflection that is part of the writing process for me…

Writing from the first person

The personal history of critical thinking which now forms the beginning of this paper was not there in the early drafts. It was proposed by one of the people who read the paper in draft form and gave me feedback. I chose to accept his feedback, and as a result, this paper now has my own history as a central part. I feel a little uncertain about this. Part of my uncertainty comes from feeling exposed, and part of it comes from my asking what is so important about me that my life should take up space in this context. Some more of it comes from this way of writing being so different from what would be expected in most of the other contexts in which I write. I am often expected not to talk about myself and my experiences in my writing. They are not seen as relevant, and I am expected to adopt a distanced writing style which comes with (what I believe is) the serious problem of making it appear that my perspective is not central to the writing, when my perspective is always there whether I acknowledge its centrality or not. On the other hand, writers whose work I very much admire (for example, Audre Lorde and bell hooks) are authors whose writing begins from their own, clearly articulated, experiences.

Has my inclusion of personal history made the paper more readable and vivid and more importantly, made my own perspective, speaking position and cultural location more visible? This remains an open question for me.

Values, conduct and care for relationships

I have tried to articulate critical thinking as inviting a deep investigation of each person's own values and the relationship between their values and their conduct. But have I have done enough thinking about the importance of connecting critical thinking to ethics and to care for relationships? The stereotypical idea of Western critical thinking is individualistic and dispassionate to the point of being callous, rather than honouring or valuing

relationships. I hope this paper questions this stereotype rather than confirming it.

Cultural specificity

Have I sufficiently acknowledged that my perspective on critical thinking is culturally specific? I believe it is possible to reflect upon one's own cultural location, but it is not possible to speak from outside it. I chose to write about the resources for critical thinking offered in my culture, and the limits placed upon it, hoping that people whose cultural locations are very different from mine might find clues they could use in their own processes of critical thinking. I hope that my writing in the first person will allow people from different traditions and locations to think about their own stories. Surely this is preferable to me pretending to speak for everyone from every culture, as if that were possible. I hope also that the definitions and dimensions of critical thinking I have offered are broad enough that there might be some part of it that will resonate across differences sufficiently to trigger thoughts about readers' own cultures and societies.

I know that you, dear reader, will carry out your own critical evaluation of what I have written. I hope you will take away with you anything that you found valuable or useful and leave the rest to be forgotten.

NOTES

1. Slang for 'Australian', and often applied by Australians to themselves.

2. In the lead-up to the 1996 Australian election, John Howard, who was to become Liberal (conservative) Prime Minister of Australia (1996-2007), promised government which would make Australians 'relaxed and comfortable'. I took this to mean (among other things) that non Indigenous Australians would be invited to give up thinking about what it might mean to address the legacy of colonisation, if we had ever begun to do so. I also took it to mean that wealthy Australians would be invited not to think about their privilege nor about ending poverty.

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