Critical Thinking in Psychology

Good scientific research depends on critical thinking at least as much as on factual knowledge; psychology is no exception to this rule. And yet, despite the importance of critical thinking, psychology students are rarely taught how to think critically about the theories, methods, and concepts they must use. This book is an introductory text on critical thinking for upper-level undergraduates and graduate students. It shows students how to think critically about key topics such as experimental research, statistical inference, case studies, logical fallacies, and ethical judgments.

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Preface

One day, the president of the American Psychological Association (Bob Sternberg), the president-elect of the APA (Diane Halpern), and the president of the American Psychological Society (now the Association for Psychological Science) (Roddy Roediger) got together to discuss ways in which these two large national associations, both concerned with psychology, might collaborate in a joint venture. Partly we wanted to show the ability of our sometimes rival organizations to collaborate, but partly, the three of us, friends of long standing, wanted to work together on a project. Eventually, we found ourselves talking about a topic that was of great interest to all three of us, and that also was, we thought, important for the field – the nature and development of critical thinking in psychology.

Our concern was that, although psychology curricula were pretty consistently strong in teaching students the main facts, theories, and research done in psychology, these curricula were more variable in the extent to which they fostered critical thinking in the discipline. Part of the reason for this variability, we thought, was that although some texts mentioned or even had exercises in critical thinking, the development of critical thinking in psychology was always secondary to their main purpose. Usually, the purpose of the books was primarily to convey subject matter, and only secondarily, at best, to promote critical thinking about this subject matter.

Of course, there are also books that teach for critical thinking, including books that we have written. But these books are domain general, focusing on critical thinking in general rather than critical thinking in psychology in particular. And if there is anything research in psychology has shown, it is that people often have difficulty applying domain-general principles, especially when they are learned in a decontextualized way, to thinking within a particular domain.

So we decided that what the field needed was a textbook prepared for undergraduates and beginning graduate students that would focus on the
nature and development of critical thinking skills and attitudes in psychology. We realized that we would need to edit rather than write such a book. Psychology is a multifaceted and broad discipline, and it would be hard for any one person to have all the knowledge needed for a written book. We decided to ask the people we considered the leading experts in different areas of psychology, including the psychology of critical thinking, to write about the different aspects of critical thinking in psychology. This book is the result.

We are grateful to our sponsoring organizations, the APA and the APS, for their sponsorship of this book. To affirm the editors’ and authors’ gratitude, all royalties earned by this book will be split between these two organizations and the funds made available for projects undertaken by future presidents. We are also grateful to Cheri Stahl for her help in collating the manuscript and for her invaluable assistance at all stages of the book. We believe the book is unique in its approach to critical thinking in taking different areas of psychology and discussing critical thinking in each of them. But we acknowledge that there have been and continue to be many other fine books on critical thinking in psychology; we believe that, together, they will help the students of tomorrow become not just knowledgeable about the field but able to think critically about and within it.

Finally, we wish to point out that the development of the book did show that our two organizations could work together seamlessly. Never in the course of its development did we have the slightest problem pertaining to collaboration. All three of us are now done with our organizational presidencies. But we continue to value the importance of our organizations – APA and APS – and their role in developing critical thinking in students of psychology – today, tomorrow, and always.