

Basic Guidelines for Critical Thinking about Psychology

(adapted from Wade, 1997)

- 1. Ask questions: be willing to wonder.** To think critically about psychology, one must be willing to think creatively—to be curious about why people act the way they do and to question common explanations and examine new ones.
- 2. Define the problem.** Once a question has been raised, the next step is to identify the issues involved in clear and concrete terms, rather than in vague terms such as “happiness”, “potential”, or “meaningfulness.”
- 3. Examine the evidence.** Consider the nature of the evidence supporting various approaches to the problem being examined. Is it reliable? Valid? Is the “evidence” merely someone’s personal assertion or speculation? If the evidence is scientific, is it based on one or two studies or on many studies?
- 4. Avoid emotional reasoning.** (“If I feel this way, it must be true.”) Emotion can motivate someone to investigate important, thorny issues. However, when evaluating claims, remember that people with opposing views can be equally sincere about their convictions. Thus, feelings cannot substitute for careful appraisal of arguments and evidence.
- 5. Do not oversimplify.** Be wary of argument by anecdote or either-or thinking. Such approaches tend to oversimplify the issue being considered.
- 6. Consider other interpretations.** Before leaping to a conclusion, ask if there are other explanations for the behavior or events being considered. The ultimate goal is to find an explanation that accounts for the most evidence with the fewest assumptions. Be especially careful about drawing premature conclusions about cause and effect.
- 7. Tolerate uncertainty.** Sometimes there is not enough evidence available to draw a conclusion, or sometimes the evidence allows only a tentative conclusion until additional information can be collected.