

## 1. How do you understand the relationship between critical thinking and critical theory?

Brookfield on page two defines it well when he writes that critical theory attempts to “illustrate the ways in which people accept as normal a world characterized by massive inequities and the systemic exploitation of the many by the few.” He continues on page 38, noting that “critical theory is normatively grounded in a vision of a society in which people live collectively in ways that encourage the free exercise of their creativity without forestalling that of others.” It is a theory influenced by Marx, theorists from the Frankfurt School, Gramsci, Freire and others. It is a theory that includes feminism, gender issues and adult education. Plainly it is a set of revolutionary ways to identify and fight back against the machines of industry and government that overtly prevent entire groups of people from fully engaging in society or through generations of control seeps into the subconscious of the citizenry, lulling them into self-oppression, or the act of individuals willingly limiting their freedom without recognizing as much. Taken as a whole (if that is even possible) critical theory is daunting. Exposed to some of critical theory’s main tenets, many will throw their hands in the air, exhausted at the sheer amount of questioning to be done and overwhelmed at the concept that the freedoms they believe they enjoy are merely illusions granted by selfish and malevolent overseers. This is where critical thinking comes into play. It makes the theory accessible. From the first page of the critical thinking document:

Instead of simply collecting the “facts,” a critical thinker probes them, looking for underlying assumptions and ideas. Instead of focusing on dates and events in history or symptoms in psychology, she probes for motives, causes -an explanation of how these things came to be. A critical thinker cultivates the ability to imagine and value points of view different from her own - then strengthens, refines, enlarges, or reshapes her ideas in light of those other perspectives. She is at once open and skeptical: receptive to new ideas yet careful to test them against previous experience and knowledge. In short, a critical thinker is an active learner, someone with the ability to shape, not merely absorb, knowledge.

In essence, critical thinking opens the mind to possibility. It creates pathways to resist those that oppress us. It allows us to begin to see self-oppression at work in our own lives. Without critical thinking, we cannot begin to examine our biases, implicit or otherwise. I reflect back on a thought I had in Module 3’s readings and analysis wherein I questioned how I can immediately judge someone who has views that are not as (in my perception, anyway) altruistic as mine. IN judging, I immediately close myself to critical thinking. And in closing myself to this process, I am demonstrating bias which in turn reduces, if not eliminates, my ability to see why that person believes what they do. For hatred and demagoguery are not naturally born characteristics. Something or someone taught them their beliefs. Parents, education, media, all surely played a part in their ideology much as those same things played a role in mine. Finding the root is how people change. It is how societies change. Understanding the baseline of a belief is how we begin to break free from it and the related self-oppression. And as an adult educator, I, we, are in a unique position to impact an individual’s critical thinking skills. As Usher (182) posited, we can create a psychological climate of inclusiveness in order to explore difference and put our experiences into a situated context. We can then help learners see a variety of interpretations, not just the dogmatic one. As educators, we can create “experimental flexibility” that seeks to expose and “circumvent dominant practices and expectations,” per Brookfield (p. 179). All of this is to say that practicing critical theory hinges upon the ability to think critically for without the ability to question

everything (and make no mistake, questioning the nature of society is a task which never ends), we will never be free of self-oppression.

7. In what ways do you understand the influence of ideology in your own everyday thoughts and actions? In our institutions and organizations?

Like most everyone, my ideology, or as Brookfield stated on page 66 the “manifestation of a set of largely unquestioned dominant beliefs and values that reside” in my subconscious drives everything I do. My reactions to situations and my perception of events are dictated by a personal ideology. For example, I don’t react to gender or race or wealth or religion. I see these things, of course. I mean, I know that a woman is a woman and I am a man and that we are biologically different. It’s that I don’t react to these differences as meaning the other person is inferior to me in any way. They are who they are and are worthy of equal treatment and equal access to opportunity. And I don’t have to think about it: This is simply who I am. That said, there was a time when I repressed my ideology in an effort to “fit in”, surrounding myself with individuals who brought little to my life in the way of genuine discourse or appropriate values. I behaved poorly for the better part of my twenties and early thirties. Even though my behaviors changed, however, my core ideology didn’t. I never forgot that people are worthy of being treated like people and that I am no better than another person. Again, that is who I am, inherently. Now postmodern interpretations of self will tell you that there is no core, origin self, that our selves are fragmented, comprised of various versions and that those versions are constantly changing due to the changing nature of our social context. And if I think about how my behaviors changed for the worse, this makes sense. I’m not sure it is entirely correct, however. A combination exists wherein varied selves constantly adapting are in play but there is a part of our core that remains unchanged though it may go silent for some time. As Tennant noted on page 154, “it is possible to argue that some level of continuity and coherence to the self, however contingent, is a necessary condition for resistance to domination and oppression.” We find hope in this.

Ideology as it relates to institutions and organizations begins with this quote from Brookfield on page 68: “Ideology is the central concept in critical theory. It describes the system of beliefs, values and practices that reflects and reproduces existing social striations, systems and relations.” In America, this means capitalism, nationalism and individualism—money, country and me. In other words, ideology in the United States is designed to propagate self-oppression all while having us believe (or attempting to, anyway) the idea that things are the way they should be. Even organizations that seemingly benefit the working class are merely extensions of capitalism. Brookfield discusses Horkheimer on page 72, for example, who argued that labor unions have forsaken the laborer by commodifying them and adopting a business model where success is measured in increased wages. Seems counterintuitive as, according to Horkheimer, labor unions should be advocating for the dismantling of a system unjustly set up to benefit the corporation, not becoming a part of it. Yet bringing the system to its knees is not what the ranks of labor want negotiators to do. They want more money and more benefits, not a new system designed to promote collectivism and equality for everyone. Flatly, capitalistic ideology has America embracing self-oppression. The masses embrace the administered life, or “a life in which the urgent need to reproduce the existing order is felt at the deepest, most visceral, instinctual level. Keeping things as they are becomes a vital personal imperative.” And as the result of these deep-seated feelings,

we “reproduce our own repression and eschew a rupture with the given reality.” These ideas are discussed by Brookfield on 188 and 189.

To be sure, it will take considerable effort to break free from the effects of capitalistic ideology as they are not only political, but structural. As adult educators, however, we need not be concerned with optics. On page five, Cervevo and Wilson write, “The problem for adult educators constrained by the ideals of decency, detachment and civic responsibility is that we do live in a world where we have harsh and unpalatable conflicts of interests, and where we have real and tangible enemies. We have irresponsible and lawless multinationals that put profit before anything else, and whose executives ignore or deny the humanity of the people they employ. We have racists. We have corporate oligarchies, groups of the “elite,” people with access to power and privilege who try to restrict the extent to which ordinary people exercise democracy.” Sadly, the restricting of participation Cervevo and Wilson speak about is not always overt, like reducing the number of polling places in predominantly black communities. It takes place every day when self-oppressed, ordinary citizens stay silent because they believe what they have is good enough. This is the ultimate influence of institutional and organizational ideology.