

# SOCRATIC DIALOGUE AND ADLERIAN THERAPY

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So what is Socratic dialogue, and how can I convey its use, as an Adlerian practitioner, to readers of *Self and Society*. After some 'Socratic dialogue' with myself, I have decided initially to outline my understanding of Socrates' method, then to look at how Adler's approach links with this, followed by some examples of Socratic questioning in practice.

My reflections have been greatly inspired by the painstaking work of Henry Stein, (1988, 1990, 1991) who made a detailed study of all Alfred Adler's writings, and also Adler's mode of practice, through his close collaboration with one of Adler's fellow workers, Sophia de Vries. Adler did not write about his therapeutic technique at length. He was a practical man, demonstrating his skills rather than theorizing. This makes Stein's careful study of de Vries' work all the more fascinating to me, as it brings us closer to Adler's own method, revealing Adler's therapeutic technique as a creative and fluid process, that has the flavour of a Socratic dialogue. Stein has termed this 'Classical Adlerian Dialogue'.

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## The Socratic Method

Socrates aimed to make people think more deeply about the implicit premises behind their statements. He explored opinions and clarified meanings. He enabled individuals to think for themselves. Through a series

of questions he often led the other person to a contradiction of a previous answer. After asking the question, Socrates may have anticipated the response but he would take care to find out the genuine opinion of his partner and make sure they both understood and agreed on its meaning. Only then would he dispute it and, if appropriate, show its error.

Socrates demonstrated error by contrasting the present answer with the partner's previously stated one. What had been held as true would now be in contradiction to the present view. So the judgment of error was not imposed by a 'superior' partner, but mutually reached by admission and agreement.

Socrates did not ask isolated questions, but sequences of questions, all logically interconnected, to bring out the logical implications of his partner's answers to earlier questions. So how is Socrates' approach similar to processes in 'Classical Adlerian Dialogue'?

## Classical Adlerian Dialogue

Here leading questions are used, not only to gain information but to unravel and gain insight. Gradually, clients are led to their *own* insight, and make their *own* conclusions as to what they are doing, and what they could be doing more effectively. The conclusions come mostly from the client, *not* the therapist. The client is not a passive recipient of the therapist's wisdom, but an active participant in the search for insight and

change. This co-thinking reflects Adler's original warm, diplomatic and cooperative approach, which has encouragement at its core.

So, in this approach, the therapist does not play the role of expert or authority. Insight is gained gently and respectfully through a series of leading questions. Each new question is based on the client's *previous* answer or statement, with a gradual uncovering of the client's mistaken notions and private logic. The skill of the therapist is in having an idea of what direction would yield the most useful information, clarification, or insight.

If the therapist puts forward an insight in the form of a statement, the client could understandably respond with resistance. If the interpretation is presented as an open question, it offers clients a way out if they are not ready for the idea, or if the therapist is on the wrong track. A sequence of focussing down questions can logically move general and abstract ideas to specific and concrete applications. As it is the clients who make the conclusions, there is a better chance that they will absorb the ideas into their life.

In Adlerian psychotherapy and counselling, we can gradually unfold the client's 'Lifestyle' or 'private logic' (a person's unique, biased perception of themselves, others and the world), with a series of questions that clarify the social and psychological implications of their thinking, feeling and action. We do not have to make judgments on what the clients are doing. Rather, we can lead them to their *own* conclusions. Often clients

want to feel better without having to think or act differently. This form of Socratic questioning, that Stein has called 'psychological midwifery', helps the client to become active in the therapy process, and give birth to new ideas themselves. Adler would often let people go in the wrong direction until they 'hit their head against the wall'. Then he would question them as to how they got there. Stein describes this goal of Adlerian Therapy as a means of 'wakening the person from their dogmatic slumber'.

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy and Solution Focused Therapy also use Socratic questioning as a key part of the therapeutic process. Unique to the Adlerian approach, however, is the goal of helping clients discover that the cooperation and contribution from others benefits them and that they are responsible for reciprocating. With the help of Socratic questioning, the client's social interest can be enabled.

## Types of Questions

Appropriate use and pacing of questioning is a skilful process. At some stages of therapy, of course, questions are not helpful. At the outset, relationship building and a demonstration of warmth, acceptance and empathy are crucial. A barrage of challenging questions in a bid to invite insight would be premature and destructive. When appropriate, there are two main types of questions that could be used: information gathering, and insight enabling, although both are interconnected.

## Information Gathering Questions

Information gathering includes behavioural assessment and questioning that clarifies meaning or vague thinking. The question '*what do you mean when you say X?*', is a crucial one in Adlerian therapy, as it is the client's subjective meaning that we need to discover. When exploring the issue being presented, it is important to gain a detailed behavioural description of how the problem occurs. How this is done is important. Nicoll (1997) describes a form of questioning that takes the client away from the use of the verb 'to be', 'to have' and 'to cause', and towards action oriented verbs ending in 'ing'. This clarifies what the client is actually doing when this problem situation happens. This enables a focus on potential solutions, not causes. It offers an understanding of the client's movement through life, in a social context.

So, instead of 'How is it for you to be depressed?', the questions '*What do you do ( how do you act when you're ... (depressed, anxious, out of control) ) ?*' and '*What do others do when you are ... (anxious, out of control etc.)*' offer both the therapist AND the client an insight into the dynamics of the client's behaviour and its purpose. This form of questioning has been termed circular questioning as it is based on circular rather than linear causality. These questions elicit the patterns that connect individuals, and so form the basis for reframing life events later in the therapy.

Similarly, questions that focus clients on how they want life to be, or on

times when they have experienced life more positively can help them to create a new perspective on the issue. e.g.

*'Tell me about a time when this problem has not occurred'*

*'What will be happening differently in your life when this problem is no longer troubling you?'*

## 'The Question'

This last question above is a variation on 'The Question', a specific technique that Adler developed, primarily designed to determine whether a problem has an organic or a functional basis. If the client complained of a physical symptom such as a headache, he would ask *'What would be different if you were well?'* If the basis of the condition was functional, and had a purpose, the client might say *'I could meet a man'*, or *'I could complete my studies'*, which would indicate what s/he was avoiding through having the physical symptom.

Adler's 'Question' has been used and adapted, most clearly perhaps in the process of Solution Focused Therapy, where it is termed 'The Miracle Question' (de Shazer 1988):

*'Imagine when you go to sleep one night a miracle happens and the problems we've been talking about disappear. As you were asleep, you did not know that a miracle had happened. When you woke up, what would be the first signs for you that a miracle had happened?'*

This question aims to identify existing solutions and resources, to clarify the client's goals in realistic terms whilst creating a climate of change. The first response may be vague and general, and this is when further focused questions need to be used, that follow the client's language closely. If the client says vaguely 'I'll be generally happier' this needs to move to a gaining of more specific information. Similarly, in gaining Lifestyle data, questions track the subjective flow of the client, with the therapist using his or her skill in following through in clarifying areas where further information is needed.

## Enabling Insight Questions

Enabling the client to gain insight involves taking clients step by step through the structure of their private logic using carefully focused Socratic questioning. The therapist will be most effective if he or she is able to hold back from interpreting to clients, and let them do it for themselves. For example, Fiona talks about having:

*'felt awful and nervous when my boyfriend complimented me on my driving.'*

**Therapist:** *What was awful about this situation?*

**Fiona:** *Just that he focused on my driving.*

**Therapist:** *What's awful about him focusing on your driving?*

**Fiona:** *One day he'll notice I'm driving badly.*

**Therapist:** *What might happen then?*

**Fiona:** *He's likely to shout at me and think I'm stupid.*

**Therapist:** *What's the worst that could happen then?*

**Fiona:** *He'd ditch me.*

**Therapist:** *How could you summarise the thoughts that led you to feel so awful and nervous after Terry complimented you?*

**Fiona:** *Well, it's silly now I look at it, but I suppose I had the idea that because Terry complimented me, he was noticing my driving, and that he would notice my mistakes just as easily. And I feel really scared at the idea of people seeing me do something wrong, as I think they'll reject me.*

Gaining insight also involves enabling clients to discover their impact on other people and the extent that they are able to cooperate with others. Questions such as: *'What did you notice about how your friend felt when you did this?' or 'How much do you want to upset your brother?'* can be asked in a matter of fact, non judgmental way. *'What do you feel others do to help you?'* followed by *'What do you do to help others out?'* can enable awareness and challenge regarding the client's cooperation with others.

## Questions for enabling change

Insight is nothing without action, and Socratic questioning is an important part of the reorientation phase. The client needs to have his own struggle in finding solutions. The therapist need only hint at solutions through the form of questioning. There are as many questions as there are clients; here are just a few examples that would come about naturally in the flow of the work, when the therapist senses the client is ready:

*What needs to happen for the changes to keep happening?*

*What might get in the way of you achieving this?*

*How could you overcome these obstacles?*

*How did you decide to do that?*

*What have you learned about what you've done so far?*

*What do you appreciate about the way you handled that?*

## Conclusion

Socratic Dialogue is an important process within Adlerian therapy, enabling clients to come face to face with their own insights, gain internal courage and make creative changes. Having taken a great deal from Stein in this overview of Socratic Questioning, I would like to let him have the final word:

*'Socratic questioning provides an appropriate and effective method in Adlerian psychotherapy for leading clients away from their Life-styles. The path towards common sense is paved with their own conclusions.'* (Stein 1991)

### Further Reading

De Shazer, R. (1988) *Clues: Investigating Solutions in Brief Therapy*. New York: W.W.Norton

Nicoll, W. (1997) *Behavioural Assessment Questions*. Notes from Brief therapy conference. Athens 1997 (Bill Nicoll, Florida Atlantic University.)

Stein, H. (1988) *Twelve stages of creative Adlerian psychotherapy*. Individual Psychology 44, 138-143

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