ELEMENTS OF THE SOCRATIC METHOD: I. SYSTEMATIC QUESTIONING

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The Socratic method includes three primary elements: systematic questioning, inductive reasoning, and universal definitions. Although many psychotherapists allude to the Socratic method, most refer only to the questioning style and few describe the process in adequate detail. The present report describes the use of systematic questioning in terms of its format, content, and process. Finally, an attempt is made to provide an intermediate level of structure so as to facilitate a shaping process during the interview.

The Socratic method can be a useful technique in many forms of psychotherapy (Overholser, 1987; 1988). Aaron Beck (Beck & Emery, 1985; Beck, Rush, Shaw, & Emery, 1979) and Albert Ellis (1962) have alluded to the Socratic method as part of their cognitive therapy approaches. However, few authors have delineated the structural or procedural components of the Socratic method in adequate detail. This impedes the ability of others to learn to apply the Socratic method in a reliable manner. The basic components of the Socratic method are systematic questioning, inductive reasoning, and universal definitions (Johnson & Matross, 1975; Overholser, 1988; 1991). Systematic questioning is the most widely used component and will be described in detail in this paper as it is used in psychotherapy sessions. The other two components will be described in future papers.

Originally, the Socratic form of inquiry (called "the elenchus") followed a cross-examination format (Seiple, 1985). Repetitive questioning was used to force people to admit their ignorance (Nelson, 1980) and thus rely on logic instead of pride or faith when deciding which beliefs are valid (Schmid, 1983; Seeskin, 1987). Although the Socratic inquiry can help people become more open minded (Schmid, 1983), it often resulted in public humiliation (Chessick, 1982; Santas, 1979). As used today, the Socratic form of inquiry is viewed as a cooperative exploration (Klein, 1986). Tactfully helping clients recognize areas where they do not know the answers can arouse a desire to learn (Robinson, 1971). The questioning process should motivate clients to discover how to find the answers to their problems (Seeskin, 1987).

Systematic questioning involves the use of a graded series of questions designed to facilitate independent thinking in clients. The questions involve the active and collaborative involvement of both therapist and client. Also, a progressive series of questions can be used to shape the client's thought processes. The Socratic method of questioning will be described according to its format, content, and process of questioning.

Question Format

Questions can follow many different formats. Bloom (1956) and Sanders (1966) have described seven different types of questions: memory, translation, interpretation, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. An appreciation of question formats is important because the form of a question can influence its effect. Clients can be led to engage in different kinds of thinking by asking different types of questions. The question formats described below are arranged in order from simple to complex. However, the question formats are not

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entirely distinct because complex questions include elements from simple questions.

Memory questions require clients to recall or recognize information necessary to answer the question. Examples of memory questions include "When did the problem first begin?"; "When was the last time it happened?"; "What did you do when it happened?". Thus, memory questions typically focus on the client's ability to remember specific facts and details. However, in order to facilitate learning, facts should serve as a means to an end instead of an end in itself. This is because specific facts and details are forgotten more quickly than general principles. Memorized knowledge does not necessarily represent a high level of understanding. Questions should focus on using information instead of simply remembering it (Sanders, 1966). Good questions elicit reasons instead of facts (Blank & White, 1986). Also, questions seeking factual information are often threatening because the client's answer can be wrong (Dillon, 1990). Nonetheless, occasional use of memory questions can facilitate the systematic questioning process by gathering basic information on which to build.

Translation questions require clients to change the information or ideas into a different but parallel form. Examples of translation questions include: "What does it mean to you?"; "How can we make sense out of this?"; "What would your mother say about this?". Translation questions can help identify gaps in the client's understanding and ensure proper understanding. Translation questions can be useful with therapeutic analogies and inductive reasoning, both important aspects of the Socratic method (Overholser, 1991).

Interpretation questions help clients discover relationships among facts, generalizations, definitions, values, and skills. Clients learn more when they discover relationships on their own instead of simply having relationships explained to them (Legrenzi, 1971; McDaniel & Schlager, 1990). Interpretation questions may provide two ideas and ask the client to identify the relationship between them. Examples include: "Do your marital problems seem similar in any way to your problems at work?"; "How are these two situations similar?"; "How do they differ?". Alternatively, the interpretation question may provide one idea and a relationship and ask the client to identify a second idea that follows from the evidence. For example, "I wonder if we can learn anything from your first marriage that would help us here". The emphasis is on relating new problems to information already possessed (Sanders, 1966). Also, interpretation questions can be used to help clients learn to interpret symbolism from inductive analogies, asking the client "What does it mean to you?"; "What can we learn from it?".

Application questions ask clients to apply information or skills to a specific problem situation. This requires the identification, selection and implementation of appropriate skills. Examples of application questions include: "What have you tried to correct this problem?"; "What else could you do to correct this problem?"; "How will you go about making these changes?" Application questions include a minimum of directions in order to force clients to identify the specific steps involved. Thus, application questions provide practice in the independent use of knowledge and skills, encouraging clients to focus on areas that have been discussed previously and now need to be applied. Questions are used to bring information already possessed by clients into their conscious awareness (Chisholm, 1979) to help them apply the information to specific situations (Overholser, 1991).

Analysis questions ask clients to solve a problem by breaking it into its parts. Analysis questions focus on developing the conscious awareness of thought processes used for reaching logical conclusions. Thus, analysis questions help clients learn to follow the principles of deductive logic when reasoning from cause to effect. Analysis questions stress the fact that conclusions must be based on adequate evidence (Sanders, 1966), thus promoting objectivity and logical thinking. The use of systematic questioning can help clients notice inadequate evidence or logical inconsistencies in their beliefs (Overholser, 1991). Examples of analysis questions include: "What do you think is causing the problem?"; "What evidence do you have for this?"; "How could you tell if you are right or wrong?"; Are there situations that make the problem better?"; "Are there things that make it worse?".

Synthesis questions encourage clients to solve problems through the use of creative/divergent thinking. The therapist should not have a preplanned answer in mind and expect the client to generate the same answer. Instead, questions should suggest many different possible solutions. For example, "What other ways could you look at this situation?" does not limit the range of pos-

sible answers. Also, clients can be helped to identify all relevant sources of information so they can be synthesized into a unified whole. Thus, synthesis questions often use inductive reasoning to connect diverse elements into a meaningful pattern (Tomm, 1987). Finally, synthesis questions play an important role when using universal definitions, such as asking a medical student who remains ambivalent about his career choice: "What does becoming a doctor mean to you?".

Evaluation questions ask clients to make a value judgment according to specified standards. This decision-making process involves first identifying appropriate standards and then determining how closely the idea or behavior meets these standards. Controversial issues often can be critiqued through questions. Examples of evaluation questions focusing on establishing standards include: "What do you look for in a marriage?"; "What does it mean to you to be a success?". Evaluation questions comparing the actual performance to the client's standards include: "How would you rate your marriage?"; "How do you feel about yourself as a person?". Evaluation questions can help clients clarify and integrate their thoughts and feelings, an important goal of the Socratic method (Haden, 1984).

In summary, the Socratic method uses a mixture of formats throughout the systematic questioning process. A mixture of question formats promotes conceptually integrated understanding (Farrar, 1986). However, the Socratic method is more likely to rely on analysis, synthesis, and evaluation questions because they elicit higher level cognitive processes. Socratic questions typically attempt to go beyond information gathering in order to emphasize the integration and synthesis of different sources of information (Overholser, 1991). Good Socratic questions allow a tremendous amount of latitude in the range of acceptable answers that are possible. In order for clients to avoid feeling interrogated by the investigational process, the therapist should avoid asking questions for which the therapist already knows the answer. Such a tendency makes for game-playing in the session, with the client expected to read the mind of the therapist. When memory questions are used, they usually are part of a broad interviewing style. Also, it should be noted that not all questions need to be phrased as questions. Many questions can be rephrased as reflections, clarifications, or direct statements (Dillon, 1990; Long, Paradise, & Long, 1981) thereby reducing the interrogational aspects of the interview.

Question Content

The content of most Socratic questions is designed to foster independent, rational problem-solving in clients. Overholser (1987) has suggested that the Socratic method can be integrated with the problem-solving approach developed by D'Zurilla & Goldfried (1971). This integration uses systematic questioning to help clients simultaneously learn and apply the stages of problem-solving: problem definition, generation of coping alternatives, decision making, and implementation (see Table 1).

The problem definition stage uses a series of questions to help clients operationally define a specific problem area. Evaluation questions can be used to help identify the emotional and judgmental aspects of the problem. For example, asking "What do you see the problem to be?"; "What makes that a problem?"; "How bad does it get?" can help clients identify what conditions are unacceptable. Also, future oriented evaluation questions (e.g., "What do you hope to accomplish?") can help cultivate and solidify the client's goals (Tomm, 1987). Goals should be described in specific, concrete, and realistic terms (D'Zurilla, 1986). Then, memory questions can help ensure an accurate and thorough assessment of the problem area. Emotional and interpersonal problems often appear overwhelming to clients, making it difficult to think and act in a rational manner. By forcing clients to answer questions regarding the frequency, intensity, and duration of the problem, an overwhelming problem can seem more manageable. Useful questions include: "How often does the problem occur?"; "When it happens, how long does it last?"; "Are there ever times when the problem goes away completely?". Also, analysis questions can be used to identify the antecedents and consequences temporally surrounding the problem so clients can begin to identify possible causes and potential solutions. Analysis questions can help clients become more objective in their description of problems as they learn to distinguish facts from beliefs (Bloom, 1956).

The generation of alternatives stage involves using a series of questions to help clients think of new and creative ways of coping with the identified problem. Synthesis questions are used to

TABLE 1. Question Formats as Used with Different Problem-solving Content

	Question Format				
Question Content	Memory	Application	Analysis	Synthesis	Evaluation
Problem definition	+		+ + +		+ +
Generate alternatives	+	+ +		+ + +	
Decision-making		+	+ +		+ + +
Verification					
Planning		+ + +	+	+ +	
Appraisal	+		+ + +		+ +

Note. + indicates question format plays a minor role with that content
+ + indicates question format plays a moderate role with that content
+ + + indicates question format plays a major role with that content

encourage divergent thinking and to help clients formulate a plan of action (Bloom, 1956). Critical thinking is postponed until a later stage in order to help clients overcome critical tendencies that may limit perceivable options. Application questions can be used to help clients learn about the management of a specific problem area. Useful questions include: "Have you ever noticed a problem like this before?"; "How did you deal with it then?"; "Would the same solution work again?"; "Any other ideas of what might help?". the goal at this stage is to increase the quantity and variety of options (D'Zurilla, 1986), assuming quality will follow. The use of open-ended questions helps clients generate many useful coping options not limited by the therapist's frame of reference. Unexpected answers may be very appropriate and extremely useful (Blank & White, 1986).

In the decision-making stage, questions are used to help clients identify the advantages and disadvantages of each coping option. Analysis questions are used to promote critical thinking so clients can evaluate the probable short-term and long-term consequences of each alternative in a systematic manner. Evaluation questions are used to examine each option in terms of the subjective value of its most likely outcome. Finally, application questions are used to estimate the amount of time, energy, and emotions required to implement the option. By examining the potential risks and benefits of each option, clients should be able to identify the best coping alternative or combination of alternatives. This process can help clients learn how to maximize the benefits and minimize the costs in their decision making. Thus, although clients may lack certain knowledge, they can make good decisions if questioned properly (Seeskin, 1987). Useful questions at this stage include: "What do you think needs to be done?"; "How well do you think it will work?"; "What could you gain by behaving that way?"; "What could you lose?"; "What would be the worst thing that could happen?"; "How likely is it that would happen?".

Finally, the implementation stage involves asking clients to implement the chosen alternative and appraise its effects. The first aspect of the implementation stage involves using application questions to help clients plan the specific course of action that was selected in the decision-making stage. Application questions are designed to put a plan of action into effect (Bloom, 1956). Socratic questions may include implied directions (Garner, 1978), designed to promote a change of behavior. Questions facilitating the implementation of the chosen strategy include: "So, what do you plan to do?"; "Have you thought about when and where you will do it?"; "How well do you think it will go?"; "Is there anything we can do to improve your chances of doing well?".

After clients have implemented the response, evaluation and analysis questions can be used to appraise the outcome and help clients learn from their successes and failures. Clients can identify approaches that are either likely or unlikely to be successful should the problem recur. Questions designed to appraise the strategy after it has been implemented include: "Are you satisfied with how things turned out?"; "Why do you think things went like they did?"; "What can we learn from this experience?"; "What do you wish you had done differently?"; "Next time the problem occurs, how will you deal with it?".

In summary, a series of questions can be used to guide the problem-solving process. The Socratic method emphasizes a self-control approach (Chessick, 1982). Thus, the therapist serves as a guide, facilitating a self-discovery process. The client is seen as the expert, knowing the problem-situation first-hand. In this way, two goals are accomplished simultaneously: the specific problem is solved and the client begins to learn the problem-solving process (Sklare, Portes, & Splete, 1985). It is important for the therapist to place the responsibility on clients to solve their own problems (Long, Paradise, & Long, 1981). Both the decision and responsibility for action rest with clients because only they will experience the consequences of their behavior.

Questioning Process

The effective use of systematic questioning requires an awareness of the process involved (Haden, 1984). Because the Socratic method uses a series of questions, a temporal sequence develops. The therapist alternates among several different interviewing styles as the session progresses. Five elements of the questioning process have been identified: the leading question, the explication, the defense, a sequential progression, and the use of short sequences (*see* the Appendix for a detailed example).

The leading question contains an implied assumption, often serving as a spotlight to focus the client's attention onto a specific area. However, the phrasing of the question should not push clients toward one response over another (Bernstein & Bernstein, 1985; Kahn & Cannell, 1957). For example, it may be useful to ask "Do you think talking about this with your spouse would help the two of you learn to deal with this problem, or would it just stir up more of an argument?". This kind of question provides adequate structure without unnecessarily biasing the client's response. Instead of requesting factual information, the leading question may ask clients to think about certain issues and express their views. Evaluation questions can help clients express their views and defend or abandon these views when probed (Seeskin, 1987). Socratic questions frequently offer two alternatives so as to minimize using excessively biased questions (Santas, 1979). For example, it can be useful to ask "Is that a good sign or a bad sign?" to direct clients onto issues of critical evaluation.

It is important to use an intermediate level of structure when formulating the leading question. Either too much or too little structure will prove ineffective. The therapist should provide structure only to the extent necessary because if questions are overly directive, clients may begin to passively wait for the therapist to lead the session (Long, Paradise, & Long, 1981). Skillful questions force the client to think instead of simply answer. Patience is required of both parties in order to persist with a line of questioning when the answer does not seem readily apparent (Overholser, 1992).

The explication occurs when the client has not understood the leading question. It can be important to make all assumptions explicit in order to test them (Haden, 1984). For example, clients are likely to respond "I don't know" if asked "What else could you have done?". The questioning process must not stop at this point, but the therapist must be prepared to re-evaluate the implications of the original leading question. For example, asking "Could you have done anything else?" forces the client to evaluate the basic assumption underlying the leading question. The explication openly asks the assumption that had been implied in the leading question. However, it is important that the explication not occur very often because it implies the therapist has misjudged the client's level of understanding and disrupts the therapeutic relationship (Kahn & Cannell, 1957). Clients may feel threatened if repeatedly unable to follow the line of questioning (Kahn & Cannell, 1957). Thus, the therapist should use the client's responses to adjust the questioning process to the client's abilities (Farrar, 1986).

The defense follows an explication, asking clients to defend their view. A simplification sequence can be used to reformulate the original question at a more basic level (Blank & White, 1986). Repeating or rephrasing the original question, in light of the previous explication, can encourage clients to go beyond the "I don't know" response. The defense forces clients to critique their logic and helps promote insight into the reasoning they used to answer the question. Sometimes asking "Why do you think so?" can help clarify their assumptions (Ennis, 1982). Although "Why" questions may increase the client's defensiveness when seeking justification or explanation of one's behavior (Long, Paradise, & Long, 1981), "Why" questions can be effective if

they help the client to reason through a problem to its solution (Sanders, 1966). The Socratic method attempts to help clients evaluate their reasoning (Chessick, 1982). Although the tenacious questioning can be useful in forcing clients to pursue a persistent line of thought, clients may feel threatened or interrogated. The therapist must help the client think through the issues without appearing to doubt or distrust the client. Socratic questions can ask "What reason do you have for believing this?" without expressing doubts in the client's honesty or intelligence (Chisholm, 1979).

A sequential progression occurs when a second leading question is used to carry the discussion closer to the intended goal. Insight comes through a slow and methodological progression (Nelson, 1980). A shaping process is used to persistently refine the client's understanding, appreciation, and integration of complex issues while avoiding questions that are too difficult for the client to comprehend (Long, Paradise, & Long, 1981). In some ways, the process is similar to helping a child assemble a puzzle. If you hand the child a piece but the child cannot find the proper place, you do not keep handing the child the same piece. Instead, you can give the child a few other pieces. As the picture starts to develop, the child can easily place the original difficult piece. Thus, early questions should be used to lay the foundation for more complex questions. For example: "How do you think your parents will react?"; "Why do you think that would happen?"; "If you are right, what will you do next?"; "So, what does this tell you about handling this type of problem?".

Finally, systematic questioning should be used in short sequences, alternating between Socratic and non-Socratic dialogue. Despite the advantages of the systematic questioning process, it should not be overused. Questions can limit spontaneity by restricting the client's communication to responses to specific questions (Engel & Morgan, 1973). The overuse of questions will limit the client's self-exploration (Long, Paradise, & Long, 1981). The Socratic style often needs to be suspended or discontinued in order to explain and discuss the issues from a non-Socratic style. This can help reduce the interrogational nature of an interview that relies solely on persistent questioning. Frequent use of comments and discussion can protect the therapeutic relationship (Blank & White, 1986). Finally, only one question should be asked at a time, letting clients tell their own story (Johnson, 1981).

Conclusions

Systematic questioning involves a complex interplay of question format, content, and process issues. The format of Socratic questions emphasizes higher level cognitive processes. Instead of asking clients to remember facts and details, Socratic questions are more likely to encourage the analysis, synthesis, and evaluation of different sources of information. The content of Socratic questions focuses on developing independent problem-solving skills in the client. The process of systematic questioning emphasizes a collaborative interaction between therapist and client (Overholser, 1992).

The Socratic method is not without its limitations. Systematic questioning should not be used when the client is unlikely to benefit from a cognitive exploratory process. Young children are too concrete to appreciate the complexities of the Socratic method. Likewise, patients suffering from psychosis, dementia or other organic brain syndromes may lack the abstract abilities to benefit. Finally, because of the emphasis on verbal interactions, the Socratic method may be ineffective with hearing impaired individuals and clients whose primary language is different from that of the therapist. Many complications can arise when interviewing clients from a different cultural background (Fletcher, 1980). Thus, systematic questioning should be used with caution.

Socratic questioning can be used to facilitate self-initiated discovery, helping clients realize the answers they already possess (Navia, 1985). Self-discovery is important because explicit instructions are often counterproductive (Claiborn & Dixon, 1982). The Socratic method can promote autonomy (Overholser, 1987) and reduce resistance (Overholser, 1991). The questioning process can be used to help clients identify and develop skills they lack (Blank & White, 1986). Clients can learn to identify and self-correct illogical reasoning (Seeskin, 1987) and learn to find answers independently.

Appendix: Socratic Questioning Process Example

Patient: "I feel like such a failure when I make even small mistakes."

Therapist: "What does failure mean to you?"

P: If I make mistakes, it means I can't do as well as everyone expects of me; I'm incompetent and worthless.

T: Making mistakes means you're incompetent and worthless?

P: Yes. If I make mistakes, I'm not doing a good job. I need to feel I can handle my job without needing other people to always help me out.

T: What happens when you react like that?

P: It tells me that I need to push myself if I ever hope to get any better.

T: What would happen if instead of criticizing your shortcomings, you praised the progress you have made?

P: I'd stop trying to improve myself. I'd settle for where I'm at and would get fat and lazy. I have so many things I need to work on, I need to keep pushing myself.

T: Let's look at this from a different angle. Say you were taking one of your craft classes. Would praise or criticism make you do better?

P: I'd like hearing the praise but I wouldn't necessarily believe it.

T: What determines whether or not you believe the praise?

P: If I hear it too often I won't believe it.

T: What if the instructor didn't praise everything you did, but every so often you did something that really worked out well and he said you did a great job, it looked wonderful. How would you react?

P: I'd like hearing the praise. It would make me feel good about myself and what I could do.

T: Would you stop trying to improve yourself?

P: No, I think it would help me enjoy learning more.

T: What if you took a different class with a different instructor, one who could always find something to criticize?

P: I'd hate it. I might learn some things, but I wouldn't like the class.

T: What if the instructor said you made many mistakes and need to work harder to even get up to average level. Would you be likely to agree?

P: No, I know I can at least do average.

T: What would you think of the instructor?

P: I'd hate him. I'd wonder if I could ever make him happy.

T: What if you were the instructor, how would you deal with students?

P: I think I'd probably criticize their work.

T: Which style would you *want* to have?

P: The one that praises their work.

T: Why that one?

P: It has a positive effect on the students; it's more constructive, helping them to learn and enjoy learning.

T: What if you had a few "craft-clods" in class, people who have no artistic abilities whatsoever. How would you deal with them?

P: I would tell them how good they've done but point out ways they can improve their work.

T: So, even with people who don't do very well, you could still find some good things to say about their work?

P: Well, I'd try. I'd try to find some things I liked so I could give them some positive feedback along with the suggestions on how to do a better job.

T: Why do you sugar-coat it?

P: I don't know.

T: What happens if you don't sugar-coat it?

P: I guess if I get too critical, they won't like me.

T: How would it affect their mood?

P: They'd be angry at me and depressed with themselves.

T: How would it affect their motivation in class.

P: I think they would enjoy it less and probably not try as hard.

T: But if you praise someone for doing a good job even though it's not perfect, won't they settle for a poor performance?

P: No, I think it helps people enjoy what they're doing and work harder at it.

T: Do these same things happen when you are critical or supportive of yourself?

P: Yes, I guess so.

T: So, what does this tell us about criticizing yourself?

P: I guess if I focus on the positive things in myself, it might be more constructive without causing me to settle for where I'm at?

T: So, how can we get you to be the good instructor toward yourself?

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