



Adler and Socrates: Similarities and Differences

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Introductory Remarks

Upon discovering the Socratic method in Plato's writings, Benjamin Franklin wrote: "I was charm'd with it, adopted it, dropt my abrupt contradictions and positive argumentation, and put on the humble inquirer and doubter" (Binder, 1970).

This paper will provide a brief overview of the art of Socratic "style" questioning, as used by Alfred Adler, Alexander Mueller, and Sophia de Vries. Its purpose is to reawaken a clinical interest in Adler's original, creative therapeutic approach.

Adler's Therapeutic Technique

Adler's philosophy and theory of personality is well documented in his writings. Adler demonstrated his therapeutic approach; he did not write about it at length. The people who studied with him learned his style of treatment by observing him and absorbing it first hand. He insisted that Adlerian psychotherapy had to be creative, that it could not be made into a system or procedure.

Many therapists, students, and university professors are not aware of the original Adlerian approach. One reason is that most of Adler's writings have been out of print for some time and his two most important clinical works, *The Neurotic Constitution* and *The Theory and Practice of Individual Psychology*, are very poorly translated. The other reason is that the classical Adlerian technique of psychotherapy has not been comprehensively documented or widely demonstrated.

Sophia de Vries. Sophia de Vries is an Adlerian psychotherapist with more than 50 years of clinical experience. She studied with Alfred Adler, Alexander Mueller, and Lydia Sicher. A faithful follower of Adler, she is one of the few living authorities on Adler's original creative therapeutic style.

I started studying with de Vries in 1961. She practiced a very creative and profound form of Adlerian psychotherapy which she learned directly from Adler and Mueller. In her opinion, Adler's work needed no improvement, only accurate demonstration and documentation. She challenged me to study, analyze, and describe what had become an unconscious art for her. It looked effortless, simple, and logical. It was not easy for me to penetrate this spontaneous art and unveil its hidden structure.

Twelve Stages of Psychotherapy. My first task was a comprehensive analysis of the complete process of Adlerian psychotherapy as Sophia practiced it. This led to the definition of 12 stages: empathy-relationship, information, clarification, encouragement, interpretation and recognition, knowing, missing experience, doing different, reinforcement, social interest, goal-redirection, and support and launching. A brief article giving an overview of the stages was published in the June 1988 issue of *Individual Psychology*.

Use of Questioning. One aspect of de Vries' technique was perpetually fascinating. She used questioning, not only to gain information, but also to unravel insight. Gradually, step-by-step, she led her clients to make conclusions about what they were doing and what they should be doing in life. The conclusions were frequently not coming from her, but from the client as a result of her questions. The client was not a recipient of the therapist's interpretation, advice, or wisdom, but an active participant in the search for insight.

This co-thinking really captures the philosophy and spirit of a classical Adlerian dialogue. It reflects Adler's original warm, diplomatic, cooperative approach and bridges the domains of Adlerian theory, philosophy, and practice. Insight is gained gently and respectfully through a series of leading questions. Mistakes and their consequences are uncovered gradually, and the clients are invited to move away from their life-styles, toward common sense and social enlightenment.

In this approach, the therapist does not play the role of the expert or the authority who "knows it all." There is no procedure or systematic way to unfold this process. Each new question is based on the client's previous answer or statement. However, the therapist must have an idea of what direction would yield the most useful information, clarification, or insight. If the therapist frames an insight in the form of a statement,

clients can easily feel provoked to overt or covert resistance. Presenting interpretation as a question provides clients with an easier path of refusal, if they are not ready for the new idea. A sequence of narrowing questions can logically move from general and abstract ideas to specific and concrete applications. Since clients ultimately make the conclusions, there is a better chance they will take action. This therapeutic questioning technique is derived from the Socratic method.

Socrates and Adler

“Know thyself” means “think for yourself” (Meyer, 1980). Socrates made people think more deeply about the implicit premises behind their statements. He explored opinions and clarified meanings. Through a series of questions he frequently led the other person into a contradiction of a previous answer. A judgment of error was not imposed or dictated by a superior partner, but mutually arrived at by admission and agreement (Epstein, 1981).

General Similarities. There are significant similarities in the character, goals, and interpersonal styles of Socrates and Adler. I believe that they were courageous, very social, and committed to searching for truth through reason. They helped others understand their values and beliefs, and consider values that had universal meaning. They had tact, wisdom, humility, eloquence, and patience. They valued freedom, responsibility, courage, and inner integrity. They had the ability to see humor and irony in situations.

Leveling Power. Socrates went after pompous authority figures who, intoxicated with power, assumed they knew the truth. He helped them see their ignorance (Meyer, 1980). Adler followed a parallel line with his patients. He unveiled their striving for power over others and their exaggerated fictional self-importance. He helped them see that their mistakes were rooted in a deficient social interest.

Hiding Insight. Socrates and Adler hid their insight behind questions to make their subjects think for themselves and search for a deeper truth. Neither took the role of a mentally superior authority who aggressively pointed out the mistakes of others, nor did they provide others with ready-made answers. They modeled cooperation in the role of a warm, gentle, humble co-thinker who stimulated others through skillful and sometimes playful questioning to do their own thinking and reach their own conclusions.

Latent Knowledge. Socrates' questioning gradually revealed unrealized knowledge that the others did not know they possessed (Angeles, 1981). Adler unveiled the private, fictional ideal of a client and compared it to the social ideal of common sense. Adler helped clients discover that the social interest, cooperation, and contribution from others benefited them, and that they were responsible for reciprocating. The clients had some awareness of the need for cooperation in life, but did not feel obligated if it conflicted with their personal goals.

Low Profile. Socrates played the role of the humble inquirer, rather than the prosecuting attorney. He even pretended to be ignorant to seduce others into playing his game (Bedell, 1980). Adler felt and expressed a genuine equality with his clients. He had no need to win a contest or prove his superiority. He also had a keen sensitivity to his impact on an insecure, discouraged person. His manner has been described as being like a kindly, old grandmother.

Roots and Consequences. Socrates and his partner discussed the meaning and implications of ideas, and the grounds for beliefs (Bedell, 1980). He examined people's assumptions to get at the core of their beliefs. The root presupposition of the Socratic method is that ideas have consequences (Fishman, 1985). Adler would explore the personal and social consequences of a client's actions. He would trace a style of life back to the childhood prototype. He also would project a tendency into the future and consider the long-term results of actions.

General Differences. Mutual Regard. Socrates held it essential that the participants share a regard for each other which might be called love or friendliness. Inquiry had to be mutual. He called his art "intellectual midwifery," helping a person bring an idea to birth (Epstein, 1981). Adler did not enjoy this friendly encounter with a client at the beginning of treatment. He gradually had to teach the client to cooperate and usually had to deal with the client's tendency to depreciate a therapist. Any progress in therapy was a result of the increased cooperation between him and the client. Adler provided the encouragement and challenge; the client did most of the work.

Argument. Socrates would argue until he secured a logical admission of ignorance (Bedell, 1980). Adler would frequently let people go in a wrong direction until they "hit their head against the wall." Then Adler would question them about how they got there.

Dialectical Method. The classical technique involved several factors: elaborating a point with questions to a logical conclusion or generalization, finding real definitions of things, and making others admit a series of points so that their acceptance led to an inconsistency with what they believed (Angeles, 1981).

The method of playing off one argument against the other is the heart of the dialectical method. Argument and counterargument produces a dialogue between competing arguments. Dialectic is purely rational and intellectual. It tests the adequacy of a position by making sure that its weak point is exposed. It implies a critical attack on the original position (Bedell, 1980).

Adler's approach was not to argue with a client. He helped them see that the conflict was between their private logic and common sense. He used friendliness, warmth, caring, and empathy to win them over emotionally. A purely logical argument or the unveiling of mistakes would not have elicited core psychological change. Adler used encouragement rather than argument. He first built clients up and helped them make steps in a new direction before discussing their faults.

Goals. Socrates' style was based on humility, irony, and fun. However, he could be a disturbing force, especially to individuals who were so absolutely sure of their knowledge. His goal was to wake people from their dogmatic slumber so that they would face their ignorance and search for truth (Bedell, 1980).

Adler approached his clients with humility, irony, and occasional playfulness. He could also be disturbing to people who were cocky, dogmatic, and arrogant. His goal was primarily to change the clients' way of functioning, not just their thinking. Awareness of mistakes or admitting ignorance was not enough. At times, he would consider it sufficient if people changed their attitude and behavior, even if their insight was not substantial.

Conclusion

The Socratic method is one aspect of classical Adlerian psychotherapy that needs to be clarified, documented, and demonstrated. After 17 years of taping, transcribing, and analyzing discussions, demonstrations, and case interpretations with Sophia de Vries, I have finally evolved a structure for describing this art. The audiotape study program, *Classical Adlerian Psychotherapy: A Socratic Approach*, includes a comprehensive analysis of Socratic questioning, strategies, techniques, and transcribed case demonstrations (Stein, 1990).

Adler reminded us that the successes of psychotherapy should be attributed to clients. Socratic questioning provides an appropriate and effective method in Adlerian psychotherapy for leading clients away from their life-styles. The path toward common sense is paved with their own conclusions.

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