

The Interplay of Existentialism and Socratic Wisdom in Philosophical Counselling

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Abstract: The paper explore the integration of Socratic questioning in addressing existential challenges within counselling. Through various statistical studies, it evaluates the technique's applicability, highlighting its significance. The study traces the evolution of existential thought and Socratic inquiry, emphasizing their relevance and practical use in counselling. Methodologically, qualitative research with interviews of seven philosophical counsellors and five psychotherapists was conducted. Despite the limited awareness of Socratic questioning among therapists in Romania, there exists considerable potential for its development and integration into therapeutic practices. Findings reveal that Socratic questioning enhances critical thinking and autonomy, particularly in adolescents, but requires careful application with solution-oriented clients and in trauma contexts. A deeper understanding of Socratic questioning is necessary to increase its effectiveness. Future research should validate existing frameworks and explore ethical AI integration to enhance the efficacy of philosophical counselling in contemporary mental health practices.

Key words: Socratic questioning, existentialism, philosophical counselling, psychotherapy, existential therapy, crisis, critical thinking.

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Introduction

A few years ago, I faced a severe burnout that led me to the emergency room, revealing an existential crisis masked by work. This experience introduced me to Socratic questioning through a psychotherapist, sparking a transformative journey into philosophy. This personal shift, including leaving my long-term job and pursuing a passion for existential inquiry, mirrors the broader struggle many face with existential crises, leading to significant life changes. This journey affirmed my belief in the power of Socratic questioning to effect profound change, inspiring my research into its role in addressing existential challenges.

The study explores how counsellors in Romania apply Socratic questioning to existential dilemmas, its effectiveness as a therapeutic tool, and the potential for a standardized framework. By examining the intersection of existentialism and Socratic wisdom, my research investigates how these philosophies address human existence, freedom, and meaning. Integrating these approaches could enhance both existential therapy and self-counselling. Dr. Beatrice Popescu's study highlights that DSM-5 symptoms often reflect deeper existential issues, underscoring the importance of incorporating Socratic questioning into early interventions.

The primary objective of the research is to analyze how philosophical counsellors and psychotherapists in Romania use Socratic questioning in counselling individuals with existential issues and to assess its perceived effectiveness in navigating these dilemmas and fostering personal growth. Additionally, the study aims to propose an optimal framework for applying Socratic questioning to existential issues and suggest enhancements in training and application within a modern context. However, the study's exclusion of existential therapists and its reliance on qualitative methods may limit insights, suggesting the need for a mixed-method approach and further testing of the proposed framework.

Bridging Theory and Practice

Existentialism and Therapy. Existentialist philosophy, which developed in the 19th and 20th centuries, focuses on fundamental human concerns such as meaning, death, freedom, and responsibility. It challenges pure rationalism and explores existential crises, including fears and

anxieties about life's adversities. Key figures in this movement include Søren Kierkegaard, who introduced concepts of personal choice and self-discovery through works like "Fear and Trembling," and Friedrich Nietzsche, who emphasized the will to power and the idea of "God is dead," advocating for self-overcoming and continuous transcendence. Existentialism also intersects with phenomenology. Edmund Husserl's focus on subjective experience laid the groundwork for Martin Heidegger's exploration of being, time, and identity, deepening the understanding of human existence in the modern world. Existential philosophy and existential therapy are deeply intertwined, both focusing on fundamental aspects of the human experience. Existentialism examines concepts like freedom, responsibility, and the search for meaning, often addressing existential anxiety and the complexity of human existence. In therapy, these philosophical ideas are applied to help individuals explore personal beliefs, develop self-awareness, and confront fears such as death and meaninglessness. Existential therapy emphasizes the subjective experience of individuals, encouraging them to take responsibility for their choices and actions. This approach, as articulated by Viktor Frankl, Rollo May, and Irvin D. Yalom, integrates existential concepts into practical counselling methods. Frankl, influenced by his own experiences in concentration camps, developed logotherapy, focusing on finding meaning as a primary motivational force. May's existential-humanistic approach highlighted human potential and self-realization, while Yalom identified four ultimate concerns: death, freedom, existential loneliness, and meaninglessness, addressing the anxieties associated with these concerns.

Existential crises are turbulent phases marked by profound uncertainty and anxiety as individuals confront core questions about their identity, such as "Who am I?" These crises manifest differently at various life stages. The "sophomore crisis," typically occurring during adolescence or early adulthood, centers on identity issues related to future goals (Andrews, 2016). In contrast, adult existential crises, which often start in the mid-twenties, delve into more complex issues like mortality, legacy, and personal achievements. Unlike the anxieties associated with difficult decisions or clinical depression, existential crises disrupt the fundamental structures that provide meaning and coherence to one's life (Neupane, 2022). They can be exacerbated by societal factors, potentially leading to broader societal impacts if left unaddressed. To navigate these crises,

strategies such as aligning career goals, building meaningful relationships, and improving social perspective-taking skills are suggested. Addressing an existential crisis is crucial to prevent negative outcomes like intense anxiety, existential depression, and relationship strain. The term "crisis" captures both the potential for adverse effects and the motivation to seek resolution. Effective management involves self-discovery, recognizing personal strengths and weaknesses, and aligning core interests with life choices. While seeking support is important, clarity about personal desires is essential. Successfully resolving an existential crisis not only enhances individual well-being but also contributes to societal stability by fostering engagement in meaningful pursuits, which can lead to lower divorce rates and greater overall societal contentment (Andrews, 2016).

The field also draws from the Socratic Method, which emphasizes self-reflection and the pursuit of understanding through dialogue. Philosophers like Socrates and Plato established a tradition of critical inquiry and ethical reflection that informs contemporary existential therapy practices. Overall, existential therapy builds on these philosophical foundations to offer a therapeutic framework that supports personal growth and addresses existential challenges.

Socratic Dialogue in Therapy

Socrates, a pivotal ancient philosopher, left no written records but is renowned for his method of questioning and his focus on morality. Born in Athens around 469 BC, Socrates' approach led to his execution at 70. Despite being declared the wisest man by an oracle, he famously claimed to know nothing, reflecting his pursuit of deeper truths beyond superficial appearances. His Socratic method, which involves probing questions to uncover contradictions and stimulate critical thinking, seeks to align theory with practice. Socrates believed that true knowledge emerges from within and emphasized the importance of a pure soul in understanding. Plato, Socrates' student, elaborated on this method in works like "Meno" and "Theaetetus" describing it as a process of drawing out latent knowledge through dialogue (Plato, 2015/2019). Xenophon, a contemporary, also highlighted Socrates' approach but with less emphasis on irony compared to Plato. Socrates' use of irony and his method of questioning often appeared arrogant to others, creating a barrier that distanced him from his interlocutors. The Socratic Method, likened to midwifery, helps individuals develop understanding by testing accepted

beliefs for consistency. It remains influential in modern pedagogy, promoting deep inquiry and critical reflection.

What characterizes a 'Socratic' consultation? Fundamentally, it involves activities akin to those performed by our Athenian philosopher. But what exactly did Socrates engage in during his dialogues? Throughout the extensive history of philosophical and classical scholarship, numerous experts have attempted to elucidate this. Yet, even now, the precise nature of Socrates' methods remains a mystery (Van Rossem K., 2006). Socratic philosophy, founded on methods of dialogue and critical questioning, emphasizes examining concepts and ideas to reach a deeper understanding. In this context, the Socratic seminar (also known as the Socratic circle) appears, a pedagogical method based on dialogue to understand information from a text through questions and answers. The goal is for participants to collaborate to construct meaning and find answers, not to win a debate. Students read a text in advance and discuss it in concentric circles, with those in the inner circle analyzing the text through questions and those in the outer circle observing and providing feedback. The teacher's role is to guide the discussion, allowing students to lead it. Experts may have different views on the purpose of the Socratic Method, but they agree on its essential components (Grondin, 2018). Initially, the teacher asks an open-ended question, or the student might pose a question to the teacher. Alternatively, either can present a claim or argument to be explored. This step serves two key purposes: (1) to introduce a central topic for investigation and (2) to inspire a sense of curiosity in the student. When faced with broad, open-ended questions about virtues such as justice, goodness, evil, and truth, people typically attempt to answer based on their own understanding and knowledge (Grondin, 2018). In the subsequent phase, the student is tasked with formulating a hypothesis in response to the posed question. This stage not only permits but actively encourages errors or lapses in reasoning. In Plato's accounts of Socrates' dialogues, Socrates refrains from chastising students for their imperfect responses. Instead, he regards these instances as opportunities to refine their cognitive processes towards greater accuracy. Contemporary criticisms of the Socratic Method frequently depict it as involving egotistical and condescending professors who demean anxious and embarrassed students. This portrayal suggests a departure from Socrates' original approach, which was characterized by

patience and an acceptance of flawed answers as part of the learning process (Grondin, 2018). Third, the professor employs a technique known as *elenchus*, which involves a series of probing questions. This method, central to the Socratic approach, involves repeated cycles of examination, presenting counterexamples, and refutation. Socrates developed this technique upon noticing that his dialogue partners often contradicted themselves when challenged. By highlighting scenarios where the student's hypothesis might fail, the professor helps the students identify their reasoning errors. Each counterexample from the professor prompts the student to refine their hypothesis to address its weaknesses. To make these adjustments, the student must grasp what the professor already understands. Unlike traditional lectures or assignments, the Socratic Method requires students to teach themselves. By recognizing their logical mistakes, students achieve a deeper understanding of the subject and build confidence in their reasoning and ability to contribute ideas in discussions.

Thereby, imagine navigating a time of uncertainty and self-doubt, guided by the wisdom of Socrates. Instead of feeling lost, your questions become guiding lights, helping you understand yourself better and find peace. The Socratic Method, rooted in ancient philosophy, remains highly relevant today. This approach uses probing questions to uncover deeper truths and clarify contradictions in beliefs. It's not just about asking questions but about how these questions lead to understanding and resolution. Socrates, through his dialogues recorded by Plato, used a specific pattern of questioning to reveal core issues. This technique helps in philosophical counselling by breaking down complex existential issues into manageable stages:

1. Clarify the Issue: Define and understand the problem thoroughly.
 2. Explore Alternatives: Generate various solutions and strategies.
 3. Evaluate Options: Assess potential risks and benefits.
 4. Implement and Review: Put the chosen solution into action and reflect on its effectiveness.
- Socratic questioning is used in therapy, education, and leadership to foster critical thinking and problem-solving. It helps individuals grapple with existential dilemmas, guiding them through structured inquiry to find clarity and resolution. In essence, the Socratic Method serves as a powerful tool for personal and philosophical exploration, aiding individuals in navigating life's complexities with insight and purpose.

Integrating Existentialism and Socratic Wisdom in Philosophical Counseling

Combining existentialist thought with the Socratic Method offers a profound approach to philosophical counselling. Existentialists like Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Sartre, and Heidegger explore themes such as freedom, responsibility, and the absurdity of life, emphasizing personal choice and self-awareness. These insights align with the Socratic Method, which uses probing questions to uncover deeper truths and foster introspection. Modern philosophers like Emmy van Deurzen and Irvin D. Yalom build on this integration, using Socratic questioning to address existential dilemmas and promote self-discovery. Lydia Amir (Amir, 2018) highlights humors' role in facilitating self-awareness and managing conflicts, while Oscar Brenifier (Brenifier, 2020) and Rossi Annalisa (Rossi, 2021) underscore how Socratic techniques help redefine identity and address existential issues. Philosophical counselling, distinct yet complementary to psychotherapy, leverages these techniques to tackle life's ethical and existential challenges. Research by Dr. Beatrice Popescu shows that philosophical counselling can effectively address underlying existential concerns in clients experiencing symptoms like depression and anxiety. By integrating dialogue with existential reflection, this approach provides a rigorous and non-medical means of navigating life's complexities (Popescu, 2015). Existential Therapy offers profound personal insights and a sense of awakening but demands significant emotional resilience and may struggle with practical application inconsistencies (Grondin, Amanda J., 2018). Socratic questioning enhances critical thinking and can improve logical reasoning and depressive symptoms with repeated use (Jensen, R. D. Jr. 2015). It shows promise in education and therapy but faces challenges like linguistic barriers and student anxiety. Further research is needed to confirm its benefits and address methodological issues. Both approaches provide valuable insights but require ongoing evaluation.

The Problem

After reviewing the literature, several issues emerged. Counsellors face a theory-practice gap, struggling to apply Socratic questioning effectively in existential counselling. There is also uncertainty regarding the efficacy of Socratic questioning in addressing existential crises.

Additionally, the lack of a standardized framework leads to variability in how counsellors implement Socratic questioning.

Research Questions

1. To what extent do counsellors apply Socratic questioning when addressing existential dilemmas?
2. How effective is Socratic questioning in resolving existential crises, and what are the reported benefits and challenges?
3. How does adopting a standardized framework for Socratic questioning enhance therapeutic effectiveness?

Hypothesis

1. Counsellors use Socratic questioning to address existential dilemmas, integrating ethical and philosophical perspectives.
2. SQ is effective in therapy for existential crises, supported by research.
3. A standardized framework for Socratic questioning enhances therapeutic effectiveness by promoting critical thinking and self-awareness.

The Study

This study explores the application of Existential Therapy and Socratic questioning in addressing existential crises. Initially focused on existential therapists in Romania, the scope expanded to include philosophical counsellors and psychotherapists due to a limited number of specialists. Data will be gathered through semi-structured interviews, observations, and field notes. The research will compare how philosophical counsellors and psychotherapists use Socratic questioning and assess its impact on understanding existence, knowledge construction, and core values like autonomy and authenticity. The goal is to evaluate the effectiveness of these methods in therapeutic settings. Twelve interviews with seven philosophical counsellors and five psychotherapists assessed their use of Socratic questioning. Participants had diverse backgrounds in psychology and philosophy. Interviews were conducted in Romanian and translated into English. Data were manually analyzed for key themes (Creswell, 2009). Ethical standards were upheld with consent, confidentiality, and data protection. Participants could withdraw anytime, and their identities were is anonym zed.

Methodology

The research design initially aimed to explore how Existential therapy and Socratic questioning could effectively support counselling and self-counselling during existential crises. Due to a lack of active existential therapists in Romania, the scope expanded to include philosophical counsellors and psychotherapists. Following John W. Creswell's methodology, semi-structured interviews were conducted to investigate professionals' use of Socratic questioning in depth. Twelve Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) were utilized, analyzed thematically to uncover insights into therapeutic application and effectiveness, maintaining ethical standards throughout data collection and analysis.

Findings

The interview findings analyze both philosophical counsellors' and psychotherapists' perspectives on Socratic questioning separately and collectively, to provide a comprehensive understanding of its use and significance in various counselling contexts, with themes reviewed for relevance and coherence.

Motivation: Participants in psychotherapy are motivated by self-discovery and a desire to help others with existential concerns, while those in philosophical counselling are driven by a long-standing interest in philosophy and a wish to apply it practically, suggesting that integrating both approaches could create a more effective and holistic counselling model.

Definition: Philosophical counsellors use Socratic questioning for deep philosophical exploration and clarity, while psychotherapists see it as a versatile tool for psychological insight and growth, with both benefiting from integrating and strategically applying this technique to enhance client understanding and self-awareness.

Frequency: The analysis shows that Socratic questioning is used extensively by therapists, especially at the start of sessions, with most employing it frequently or very often to clarify issues, encourage reflection, and support cognitive restructuring, highlighting its vital role in enhancing therapeutic dialogue and client introspection.

Role: The analysis reveals that Socratic questioning serves three main roles: exploring existential themes like fear and meaning, guiding

individuals towards self-awareness, and seeking truth by challenging assumptions and evaluating beliefs from multiple perspectives.

Structure of a typical session: The philosophical counsellors (PC) use various structured approaches to Socratic questioning, focusing on reflective dialogue and self-exploration, such as Ada's delayed problematization, Raul's PEACE framework, Andy's rationality probing, Loren's systematic belief evaluation, Alissa's clarification of word meanings, John's problem formulation, and Anette's contracting stages. Psychotherapists (PT) also employ structured methods, emphasizing empathy and resource enhancement, including Ana's five-step process, Lory's sequential exploration, Kate's evaluation of past and present, Alya's context-based adaptation, and Teo's eight-stage approach.

Adaptation: Both philosophical counsellors (PC) and psychotherapists (PT) adapt their methods to client needs: PC use tailored questioning and metaphors for deep engagement, while PT employ flexible strategies within structured frameworks. Both aim to enhance self-awareness and personal growth, demonstrating the effectiveness of their adaptive approaches.

Efficiency: Socratic questioning enhances critical thinking, balances rational and emotional perspectives, and supports autonomy, but may be challenging for solution-oriented clients, potentially overwhelming in trauma contexts, and requires intellectual engagement.

Self-Application: Socratic questioning is effective for personal exploration of existential issues, enhancing self-awareness and critical thinking, but it is most beneficial when complemented by external perspectives and professional guidance.

Existential Crisis: Socratic questioning deepens exploration and clarification of emotional ideas, supporting long-term personal growth in existential counselling, but should be balanced with other therapeutic techniques to avoid limiting outcomes and ensure tailored client care.

Future Directions: The future of the Socratic Method in counselling includes broader adoption, public engagement, and educational initiatives. Key developments involve integrating it with various therapeutic approaches, enhancing flexibility, and introducing Socratic dialogue in early education to address contemporary challenges effectively.

AI in Counselling: AI can enhance counselling by suggesting questions and analysing data but lacks the ability to understand human

emotions and experiences. It should complement, not replace, human counsellors, as overreliance may reduce engagement and lead to social isolation. A balanced approach is essential.

Results

Key findings phase 1 - Answer to the questions

The findings of this study partially support *Hypothesis 1*, revealing that both PC and PT use Socratic questioning for existential issues; however, PTs often deviate due to limited understanding. *Hypothesis 2* is supported by the study findings, demonstrating that SQ's perceived effectiveness in existential crises varies: highly for introspective youths, moderately for OCD, and less for trauma affected clients. *Hypothesis 3* is supported by diverse methodologies among PCs and PTs, emphasizing tailored strategies. SQ standardized framework could ensure balance and flexibility, improving therapy by promoting tailored, consistent and measurable outcomes.

Key findings phase 2 - The main themes emerged

The percentages for relevant terms in exploring existential issues through Socratic questioning are as follows:

"Clarity" represents 22.7% of the analysis, emphasizing the crucial role of achieving cognitive clarity.

"Thinking" accounts for 25% of the total, highlighting the emphasis on developing critical thinking skills.

"Emotion" comprises 20.5% of the analysis, acknowledging the profound influence of emotions in existential inquiries.

"Understanding" and "awareness" each occupy 15.9% of the analysis, underscoring the importance of gaining deep insights and increasing awareness.

Key Findings phase 3 - Research-Based Structure

The application of Socratic questioning in therapy varies significantly among practitioners. After synthesizing perspectives from twelve distinct approaches utilized by philosophical counsellors and psychotherapists, the proposed framework emerges. It offers a comprehensive approach to effective therapeutic practice by amalgamating these common elements into a unified, cohesive model.

However, this framework remains theoretical at present and necessitates rigorous empirical research to assess its validity.

1. Initial Engagement and Contracting Stage: Establish rapport and clarify mutual goals and expectations.

2. Exploration and Understanding Stage: Engage in deep exploration through open-ended questions to understand the client's perspective and issues.

3. Problematization and Conceptualization: Identify core issues and challenge underlying assumptions to promote critical reflection.

4. Evaluation and Clarification: Evaluate past experiences and current perspectives to clarify ambiguities and align goals.

5. Application and Solution Exploration: Explore potential solutions and alternative perspectives creatively.

6. Resource Building and Enhancement: Identify and activate personal strengths to enhance self-awareness and resilience.

7. Decision Making and Implementation: Collaboratively decide on actions and implement strategies to achieve tangible outcomes.

8. Monitoring and Adjusting: Continuously monitor progress and adjust strategies to meet evolving client needs.

This structured approach integrates diverse methodologies, emphasizing a systematic and client-centered approach to addressing existential dilemmas and enhancing therapeutic effectiveness. It aims to guide counsellors in facilitating meaningful self-exploration and promoting positive psychological growth in their clients.

Limitations

This study has limitations affecting its generalizability. The sample size and participant diversity may restrict the breadth of perspectives, and the qualitative approach introduces subjectivity and potential bias. Additionally, the inclusion of varied PC and PT backgrounds, due to the initial lack of specialized existential therapists, may not fully represent those specifically trained in existential therapy.

Recommendations for future research

This study emphasizes several key recommendations for advancing research in philosophical counselling. To enhance the practice, it is crucial to integrate philosophical counselling into existing therapeutic

frameworks by developing training curricula that combine theoretical foundations with practical skills, particularly in Socratic questioning (SQ). Evaluating these integrative approaches could provide valuable insights into improving therapeutic efficacy and client outcomes. Additionally, exploring the public role of philosophical practitioners is important. Successful public engagements, such as televised conferences, highlight the potential of outreach to broaden awareness and acceptance of philosophical counselling. Research should examine the effectiveness of various outreach strategies in reaching diverse audiences and addressing societal stigmas related to mental health.

The potential of artificial intelligence (AI) in philosophical counselling also warrants further investigation. AI could augment rather than replace human expertise, offering new ways to enhance counselling practices through technology. Ongoing research should focus on refining AI tools for effective use in therapeutic contexts. Educational research should investigate incorporating Socratic questioning into school curricula to develop critical thinking and assertive communication skills from an early age. Designing and evaluating such educational interventions could foster intellectual curiosity and emotional resilience among students. Finally, creating a comprehensive written manual for therapists would be invaluable. This resource should provide structured guidance on mastering Socratic techniques to address existential inquiries, combining robust theoretical foundations with practical skills development in psychotherapy training.

Conclusion

This study has revealed the transformative potential of Socratic questioning (SQ) within philosophical counselling and psychotherapy, particularly in addressing existential issues such as identity and personal fulfilment. It demonstrates how SQ, aligning with Socrates' goals of self-examination and knowledge pursuit, helps clients clarify beliefs and foster self-reflection. Both philosophical counsellors (PCs) and psychotherapists (PTs) extensively use SQ to explore existential themes and promote self-awareness. PCs focus on philosophical inquiry and personal growth, while PTs emphasize empathy and therapeutic techniques. The study advocates for the wider adoption of SQ, greater public engagement, and the

integration of SQ into educational settings. The profound impact of SQ on guiding individuals through existential crises underscores its value. Even if SQ benefits just one person, the effort remains meaningful and impactful.

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