Inquiry, Criticism and Reasonableness: Socratic Dialogue as a Research Method?

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Introduction

While Socratic Dialogue has been, and still is, used in education and training, it has rarely been applied as a method for empirical research. The central question of this article is whether Socratic Dialogue can be used as a research method. First the relevance of Socratic Dialogue and the hourglass model will be explained. We will make a distinction between the Platonic idea of a truth seeking dialogue and the notion of an inter-subjective truth, and we will discuss Martin Buber’s idea of a genuine I-You encounter as the basis of Socratic Dialogue. Then, by examining a concrete case, the utility of Socratic Dialogue as a research method will be evaluated.

The examined dialogue in this article is part of the authors’ current research on civil-military relations from an ethical perspective. The aim of this research is to facilitate a higher quality dialogue between the (inter)national military, (inter)national humanitarian organizations, and the local populations by identifying, clarifying and discussing the moral values underlying tensions in civil-military relations, in this case in Afghanistan. While the researcher introduced the central theme - civil-military relations in the Baghlan Province in Afghanistan - the fundamental question did not reflect the values, ideas and assumptions of the researcher but those of the participants, and it was exactly these values, ideas and assumptions that were investigated.

The case shows how Socratic Dialogue can reveal the (moral) values of the participants through inquiry, criticism and reasonableness. What is considered to be reasonable may be regarded as objective, but it has to be borne in mind that decisions of this kind carry value judgments at every turn and few situations would be immune from their influence.

Socratic Dialogue as a research method

Socrates’ philosophy was rooted in concrete problems; he tried to find answers to the seemingly simple questions that puzzled him, for example: ‘What is justice?’ or ‘What is a good life?’ Dialogue about questions such as these helped both Socrates and his dialogue partners to achieve ‘practical wisdom’. Such wisdom, and not the construction of a philosophical system, was, and is, the aim of Socratic Dialogue.

As Socrates stated time and again, practical wisdom starts by admitting one’s ignorance and willingness to learn. It implies being aware of and preserving (not denying or ignoring) what is true, and choosing and acting on this. The person with practical wisdom knows which choices contribute to ‘a flourishing life’ (eudaimonia)
not just for his or herself but for all the people involved (Aristotle, 1997). Practical wisdom, then, includes both an aspect of understanding and an aspect of action. A person, who claims to know what to do in a given situation but then does not act on this, does not have practical wisdom.

Socratic Dialogue as a method for empirical research can be used to focus on relevant questions for the ‘Other’ in order to create a theoretically vibrant and rigorous research agenda. The term ‘Other’ refers to a person other than oneself. The concept of ‘Otherness’ is integral to the understanding of identities, as people construct roles for themselves in relation to an ‘Other’ as part of a fluid process of action-reaction that could be, but is not necessarily, related to subjugation or stigmatisation.

A legitimate question would be whether, with regard to non-Western cultures (Others), standards of objective reasonableness (coherence, plausibility, simplicity), which are undoubtedly values, can be applied. The American pragmatist Hilary Putnam answers that ‘without the cognitive values of coherence, simplicity, and the like, we have no world and no facts, not even facts about what is relative to what. These cognitive values are simply a part of our holistic conception of human flourishing. We are left with the necessity of seeing our search for better conceptions of rationality as an intentional activity’ (Putnam, 2002, p.15). Apart from focusing on relevant questions of the ‘Other’, Socratic Dialogues combines empirical observation with normative assessment. Therefore, they can also contribute to our understanding of important (public) values. Socratic Dialogue is a cooperative (inter-subjective) inquiry into the assumptions and values that underlie our everyday actions and decisions and a collective attempt to find an answer to a general question that is relevant to all participants. This question will not be discussed in the light of a theory; it will be exemplified in a concrete experience of one or more of the participants. It is the systematic reflection upon this concrete experience that forms the basis of the group’s search for shared judgment about the general question.

To explain what we mean by this, we will make a distinction between the Platonic idea of truth-seeking dialogue and the notion of an inter-subjective truth. We will subsequently discuss Martin Buber’s ‘I-You’ idea of a genuine I-You encounter as the basis of Socratic Dialogue.

**Truth in Socratic Dialogue**

There is a difference between the notion of truth in Socratic Dialogue as we propose it (in the tradition of pragmatic theory) and Socratic Dialogue as we know it through Plato’s middle dialogues. Plato’s concept of truth, as presented in Plato’s texts, is part of Plato’s doctrine of ideas. Plato propagated the influential dichotomy between reality and appearance. He implied a distinction between two worlds: the world of ideas and the empirical world. The phenomena of the empirical world, the world we live in, are characterised by Plato as reflections or shadows of their original ‘idea’. According to Plato, what we see and experience as ‘beautiful’ or ‘just’ is only an imperfect and defective image of what the idea of
‘beauty’ or ‘justice’ really consists. These original ideas, which are only present in
the ‘world of ideas’ that is beyond our perceptive facility, are therefore not present
in our unstable and ephemeral world. For that reason the ideas are unique, stable
and eternal, and as indicated, we are only able to see the imperfect reflection of
the original idea in our world.

The notion of ‘truth’ in Socratic Dialogue we propose is not Platonic, but based
on American pragmatist theory. Pragmatists give up the correspondence theory of
truth associated with metaphysical realism. According to Hilary Putnam, reality
does not have an existence wholly independent of human practices and beliefs.
In fact, these practices and beliefs are a very large part of the reality we talk
about, and reality would be quite different if we were different (Putnam, 2002).
Knowledge, as we understand it, is an abstraction from direct experience and
ultimately informs experience in turn. If we understand the nature of knowledge
this way, the long-standing dichotomy between fact and value becomes problematic.
‘Without inquiry we oscillate between a theory intended to save the objectivity (in
the sense of metaphysical realism) of value judgments isolated from experience,
and a theory that reduces values to mere statements about our feelings’ (Dewey,
1929, p.263). Putnam argues that through inquiry and criticism of our values,
reasonable, and therefore ‘objective’, values are possible. They presuppose what
Putnam refers to as standards of objective reasonableness (coherence, plausibility,
simplicity and the like). Reasonableness means reasonableness for human beings;
standards and rationality that transcend the limits of our own cultural or historic
context(s) (Putnam, 1995).

Inquiry is a cooperative (inter-subjective) activity based on standards of
reasonableness. Subjectivity, in the sense of taking one’s own perception as the
only perspective, can be avoided only by engaging with others — with all relevant
others. In Socratic Dialogue, the participants engage in a cooperative inquiry into
their assumptions and values concerning a concrete situation which applies to their
question. Hence, the question will be openly submitted for testing and inquiry by the
participants in order to clarify, justify or refute proposed values. These judgments,
by the participants, are what we refer to as ‘inter-subjective truth’.

The values and judgments in the dialogues are based on the active intervention by
interested inquirers (the participants of the dialogue), which is not at all the same as
mere communal acceptance. It is not simply the case, that whatever works is right
(which is an often mistaken view of pragmatism). The task of practical reasoning is,
therefore, not just to find successful outcomes or answers to the principal question,
but rather to sketch out what ought to be reasonable outcomes.

We argue that these Socratic Dialogues can be part of what David Thacher has
identified as normative case studies (which could be connected to both causal and
interpretive case studies) (Thacher, 2006). Normative case studies combine empirical
observation with normative assessment, therefore, they can contribute both to
normative theory as well as to explanatory theory. Socratic Dialogues can be used
as a method in such a normative case study and thereby contribute to ideas, for
instance, regarding what good civil-military relations ought to be about.
A genuine *I-You* encounter

The form of Socratic Dialogue we propose (a cooperative inquiry, in common partnership, into the participants’ assumptions and values) is based on the idea of a genuine *I-You* encounter.

According to Buber, in such a genuine dialogue the *I* is constituted in a conversation between the *I* and the *You*: ‘The basic word *I-You* can be spoken only with one’s whole being. The concentration and fusion into a whole being can never be accomplished by me, can never be accomplished without me. *I* require a *You* to become; to become *I*, I say *You*. All actual life is encounter’ (Buber, 1970, p.62).

According to Buber, the other basic word is the word pair *I-It*. *I-It* involves distancing; differences are accentuated and the uniqueness of the *I* is emphasised. Here the *I* is separated from the self it encounters. An *I-it* relation is fundamentally instrumental in nature. *I-it* relations are oriented toward domination because they are relations in which the subject (the ‘*I*’) takes its partner (the ‘*it*’) as an object. Buber states that modern society (Buber speaks of the ‘sick’ ages) is characterised by these *I-it* relations in which a genuine dialogue cannot occur; in fact the *I-It* relation could even be considered a monologue. Charles Taylor calls this the ‘modern malaise’, which manifests itself primarily in a centring on the self, which both flattens and narrows our lives and makes us less concerned with others (Taylor, 1992). In order to escape this malaise, both authors believe genuine dialogues are required; in which people meet one another in their ‘authentic’ existence.

For Buber, encounter (*Begegnung*) has significance beyond co-presence and individual growth. He looks at ways in which people can engage with each other fully — to meet with themselves. When a human being turns to another as another — as a particular and specific person to be addressed — and tries to communicate with him through language or silence, something takes place between them which is not found elsewhere in nature.

Encounter is a situation in which relation (*Beziehung*) occurs. We can only grow and develop, once we have learned to live in relation to others, to recognise the possibilities of the space between us. The fundamental means for encounter is the dialogue. Encounter is what happens when two *Is* come into relation at the same time.

Buber identifies this encounter as a genuine dialogue, no matter whether spoken or silent: each of the participants really has in mind the ‘*Other*’ or ‘*Others*’ in their present and particular being, and turns to them with the intention of establishing a living mutual relation between himself and them. This meeting involved in genuine dialogue is rare, and is, in a sense a meeting of souls. The life of dialogue involves ‘the turning towards the *Other*’ (Buber, 1970, p.62).

The Socratic form of inquiry, as found in most of Plato’s dialogues, may not always appear as such an *I-You* meeting. As indicated before, some of the dialogues prove to be quite revealing and even embarrassing for those engaged in the dialogue.
Socrates questions were in the most part leading questions eliciting no more than ‘undoubtedly Socrates!’ ‘Truly it is so!’ ‘How could it be otherwise?’ (Nelson, 1949, p.13). In this form of inquiry, questioning is used to force people to admit their ignorance. Therefore, the Platonic dialogues are not always representative of what we believe a Socratic Dialogue should be about. A relevant question, in this context, is whether the I-You encounter, the turning towards the ‘Other’, should be an encounter in which there are no power relations. We argue here that power relations, which are always present, are not necessarily a problem for the genuine I-You encounter.

In our view, the situation of encounter obeys the principles of what Habermas calls ‘discourse ethics’ which includes presuppositions such as that no force except that of the better argument is exerted (Habermas, 1992; McCarthy, 1998). Putnam refers to it as ‘the democratization of inquiry’ (Putnam, 2002). It does not block inquiry by preventing the raising of questions and objections by others. At its best, it avoids relations of domination and dependence.¹

**The hourglass model**

The hourglass model is one of the variants of Socratic Dialogue described by Kessels in his book *Socrates op de Markt, Filosofie in Bedrijf* (Kessels, 1997). We have chosen the hourglass model because it is in line with our suggestion of a dialogue as a cooperative investigation aimed at an inter-subjective truth, and it is also in accordance with the idea of a genuine I-You encounter. In addition, the model is practical and convenient to use; by its structure it focuses, in particular, on the values and principles at stake for the participants.

According to the hourglass model, the Socratic Dialogue begins with a general question of principle which is important to all the participants. Note that this question is not introduced by the facilitator (the facilitator can introduce a more wide-ranging theme). It may be extremely difficult, or even impossible, for a specific group of participants to think of such a general question which is important to all the participants. This in itself could be an interesting observation which, the facilitator can address in the group and which can possibly generate different themes and questions.

The general question of principle will be discussed on the basis of the example - a real-life situation of one of the participants. A core statement(s) concerning the example will be formulated, and, in the last part of the dialogue, the rules and values underlying these statements will be identified (Verweij and Becker, 2006).

¹ Paolo Freire, one of the creators of Participatory Action Research, refers to dialogue as praxis; as an encounter of other ‘is’ opposed to mere ‘its’ (Freire, 1972:63). Freire (inspired by Martin Buber) argues that love, humility and faith (which produce a climate of mutual trust) are the foundation of a dialogue and not oppression.
The Hourglass Model

Socratic Dialogue provides insight into the participants’ ways of thinking, the values that they hold and the preconceived opinions they might have. At the same time, it also has a normative aspect; it contributes to what we have called value rationality. Above that, for the participants, it can be a learning process: one often believes things that, if one really learns to think about them, are incorrect. The ancient Greeks called this process *elenchus*, which means rebuttal or embarrassment (Verweij and Becker, 2006). In asking people to state and defend the moral intuitions which underlie their actions and their way of life, Socratic Dialogue inevitably also reveals something about their character. In a Socratic context it is impossible to defend a position at odds with one’s behaviour since this position is always related to a concrete experience (to ‘what is’ rather than ‘what one is ought to say’ (Seeskin, 1984).

Becoming aware of the values underlying the core statement and rules, points to another important process, which follows the process of *elenchus*, and which is referred to as *maieutics* (midwifery). The facilitator’s role is, like a midwife, to give birth to the participants’ thoughts by asking questions (Nelson, 1949; McDowell, 1924).

To stimulate these two processes, and in order for Socratic Dialogue to be successful as a research method, much is required from the facilitator. The following
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qualification criteria should apply. He or she must be:

- Gentle: give people time to think;
- Sensitive: listen to what is said and how it is said;
- Critical: is prepared to challenge what is said, for instance dealing with inconsistencies;
- Ethically sensitive, ensuring the participants understand and apply the guidelines of the Socratic attitude and guarantee that the participants answers will be treated confidentially.
- Engaged: is familiar with the culture and associated sensitive issues.

The Socratic attitude

The results of Socratic Dialogue are optimised when not only the facilitator but also the participants have a ‘Socratic attitude’. This requires an open mind and the willingness and ability to postpone one’s judgment. This is consistent with the normative aim that there should be a minimum of domination (fixed power relations) in the dialogue.

This attitude implies abiding by the following guidelines:

- Take your time. A dialogue is a form of slow thinking aimed at depth.
- Listen carefully. Ask questions. Put yourself into the other’s place. See the world through his or her eyes.
- It is the responsibility of all participants to express their thoughts as clearly and concisely as possible, so that everyone is able to build on the ideas contributed by others earlier in the dialogue.
- Abstract statements should be grounded in concrete experience in order to illuminate statements made.
- Each participant’s contribution is based upon what he or she has experienced, and to a lesser extent upon what he or she has read or heard.
- Do not think in opposition of the other (‘Yes, but … ’), instead, think along with the other (‘Yes, and … ’)
- Don’t concentrate on solutions. Examine underlying reasons, values and views.
- Participants should not concentrate exclusively on their own thoughts, they should make every effort to understand those of the other participants and if necessary seek clarification.
Anyone who has lost sight of the question or the thread of the discussion should seek the help of others to clarify where the group stands.

The thinking and questioning must be honest. This means that only genuine doubts about what has been said should be expressed.

Emotions may play an important role. They also should be carefully discussed and clarified. (Kessels, 1997)

A Socratic Dialogue example

In order to discuss the question whether Socratic Dialogue can be a research method, we will look at a concrete example of a Socratic Dialogue. One might argue that one example is insufficient for discussing this question. However, the aim of discussing the example is to not to prove that Socratic Dialogue ‘works’ in all situations; rather it is to identify the advantages and disadvantages of Socratic Dialogue by examining a concrete example in which Socratic Dialogue was tested for research purposes.

While we invited four people to participate in the dialogue, two of them cancelled at the last moment for practical reasons (both of them did participate in other dialogues). For that reason, there were only two participants. Nevertheless, we have chosen this case because it clearly shows the values as well as the moral dilemmas and the related issues for military personnel in Afghanistan. The entire dialogue lasted three hours.

The theme of the dialogue was ‘civil military relations in the Baghlan province in Afghanistan’. The participants were two Dutch Civil-Military Cooperation (CIMIC) officers who had been deployed in Pol-e Khomri, in the Baghlan province in Afghanistan as part of the Dutch Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT). This PRT team combines humanitarian efforts with military work. The theme was introduced by the facilitator, the general question was introduced by the participants themselves. Note that the example does not contain a full transcription of the dialogue, it reflects the main points.

The participants agreed on the following general question:

‘What is the effectiveness of CIMIC?’

To explain why this general question was important to them, the participants explained the situation they faced in Pol-e Khomri:

One of the main problems for the local people in the Pol-e Khomri region was enormous flooding (snow was melting in the mountains). Most people live near the river in houses made of mud and clay. Since the river was bursting its banks, most of these houses were flooded or have even disappeared. The land was devastated and unusable to the farmers. On a daily basis these local people visited the PRT compound to ask for aid. Our role as CIMIC officers was to advise our commander about what to do with these requests.
The mayor of Pol-e Khomri was not interested in the situation; according to him most people were staying there illegally. In addition, there was no aid from either aid organisations or the local government. These people had no one else to turn to.

Both participants were able to give a concrete example from their own experience related to the question: ‘What is the effectiveness of CIMIC?’

**The first participant:** ‘What we have been taught is to ask local people to think of a solution themselves. So we asked them which solution they thought would be best considering the situation (in which the river had burst its banks). The solution they offered was to dig out the river. We knew this wouldn’t make the situation any better but in order to show them that we were listening, I decided to spend the money to dig out the river.’

**The second participant:** (who had arrived in Pol-e Khomri when the money to dig out the river had already been spent) ‘After the river was dug out, the situation worsened. We went to the location and saw for ourselves that this was a serious natural and humanitarian disaster. Building a dam was not an option as it overreached the budget by far. I decided not to help the people and to put back the responsibility to the governor. We told the people that we understood the urgency of the matter and that we would discuss it with the governor of Pol-e Khomri. If the governor had the same opinion with regard to the situation, he would be able to convene the ‘emergency committee’.’

Because both participants had been in Pol-e Khomri as CIMIC officers, they were both familiar with the situation and consensus was reached to investigate the example of the second participant (the presenter).

The facilitator asked the presenter to describe the example once more in full detail.

**Presenter:** ‘The first plan of the PRT was to dig out the river; by the time I arrived this project had been completed. Unfortunately, this had made things even worse. We visited the area and we came to the conclusion that even more houses had disappeared. People were living in a dreadful situation; it was a true humanitarian disaster. The only solution would have been to build a dam. However, this was not an option as this plan did not fit our budget. My decision was to wash my hands of the situation. We would not help the local population and decided to put the responsibility back to the governor.’

**Facilitator:** ‘Why did you make this decision?’

**Presenter:** ‘I felt this would be a win-win situation. The local government would have the opportunity to do something about the situation and we would be able to support the local government with diesel and blankets. This would not take much of our budget and we could perhaps even increase the permissive environment - which is the main objective of the PRT. In a permissive environment our mobility and ability to interact with the population is much better than in a hostile environment.’
Facilitator: ‘Did the governor care about the situation?’

Presenter: ‘The people living near the river are not related to the governor or to his tribe; therefore I knew that their well-being would not be a priority to him. [pause] Nevertheless, we did advise the governor to convene the ‘emergency committee’. The PRT also takes part in this committee and there is also some (local) Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) present. We were able to support the governor with some blankets, fuel and sandbags.’

Participant: ‘How did you feel when you made this decision?’

Presenter: ‘I knew that there was nothing we could do about the situation. I felt it was best to stop being involved.’

Facilitator: ‘Why did you feel that?’

Presenter: ‘I never had any problems making this decision. I went to Afghanistan to complete my task. [pause] It might have been a moral dilemma if my priority had been the well-being of the local people. From the perspective of an NGO I might seem hard-hearted. I was in Afghanistan to complete my task; which was to increase the permissive environment.’

Facilitator: ‘What happened afterwards?’

Presenter: ‘People continued visiting our compound informing us about the situation; those were dreadful stories, and they were asking us for aid.’

Facilitator: ‘What would be the perspective of an NGO concerning your decision?’

Presenter: ‘They might have looked for alternatives: such as a tent camp or providing for the local people.’

Facilitator: ‘Would this have been possible for you?’

Presenter: ‘Yes, that would have been a possibility. [pause] But even for NGOs this was not an attractive project. Eventually even NGOs need to consider the amount of budget and time invested versus the ‘success-factor’ of a project. They also need money from donors.’

Facilitator: ‘Can you focus on a crucial moment: an act, experience or judgment of this situation? This will be the core statement.’

Presenter: ‘My core statement would be: I have solved the problem well’

Facilitator: ‘Is it possible for you (participant) to put yourself in the presenter’s place and tell us if you agree with this core statement?’

Participant: ‘I agree.’

Facilitator: ‘What would be the rules that underlie this core statement?’
Presenter: ‘As a CIMIC officer you are in Afghanistan with a military task, which is to preserve the permissive environment or increase the permissive environment. This situation was likely to harm the permissive environment. It was important to turn the situation in such a way that we could not be held accountable for not being able to solve the problem.’

The first rule: to maintain or increase the permissive environment. (Both participants agree that this is the first rule.)

Facilitator: ‘Are there any other reasons why you think you have solved the problem well?’

Participant: ‘I feel the problem is solved well because the problem has become the problem of the local community and not the problem of the PRT. For example, if we built a well in Afghanistan, it would be our well; if it is damaged we are expected to repair it. If the well is built by the local community, they will consider it to be their well and they will also maintain and repair it. I believe it is important to stimulate people to solve their own problems.’

The second rule: stimulate the local population to solve their own problems. (Both participants agree on this second rule.)

Facilitator: ‘Which values underlie these rules? Let us first look at the first rule: to maintain or increase the permissive environment.’

Presenter: ‘It could be that the military mission is prioritised. [pause] Is this a rule or an underlying value?’

Presenter: ‘To be loyal to your employer. [pause] The value could be loyalty. [pause] My aim was to increase the permissive environment. I wanted to do my task well.’

Facilitator: ‘Was it loyalty or do you think it could be more than loyalty?’

Presenter: [long pause] ‘It is very difficult to describe it as a value. [pause] I think it is important that I want to do my task well. [long pause] The value underlying that could be to be achievement-oriented. Yes, I think that is an important value for me.’

Facilitator: ‘Let us look at the second rule: stimulate the local population to solve their own problems. What could be the underlying value?’

Participant: ‘The value could be that people can build their own future. [pause] Is that a value?’

Facilitator: ‘Why is it important to you that people can build their own future?’

Presenter: ‘I don’t think this is important to me.’

Participant: ‘For me it is important that the local population is satisfied. This will
increase the permissive environment. If they are satisfied, I believe they are more likely to be happy with their lives. [pause] Happiness is also a value. This is related to the ability to do things independently.’

Facilitator: ‘Would you be able to answer the initial question?’

Participant: ‘It is funny to see that these values: the local population to be satisfied, to be happy and to be able to do things independently, are all crucial in achieving and increasing a long term permissive environment.’

Presenter: ‘That is what CIMIC should be about.’

Socratic Dialogue as a method for value research?

Whereas the researcher introduced the central theme, civil-military relations in the Baghlan Province in Afghanistan, the fundamental question did not reflect the values, ideas and assumptions of the researcher but those of the participants. Because exactly these values, ideas and assumptions were investigated, the level of bias was minimised.

In the dialogue example, the general question was ‘What is the effectiveness of CIMIC?’ Since, at the beginning of the dialogue, there is no explicit definition of both central concepts in this question - effectiveness and CIMIC - during the dialogue, different points of view can be discussed. In Socratic Dialogue the objective is to identify the values, ideas and assumptions of the participants concerning these concepts.

Initially it might seem that the general question is just a practical, instrumental, question concerning the practicality of CIMIC. The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) defines CIMIC as: ‘The coordination and cooperation in support of the mission between the NATO commander and civil population including national and local authorities as well as international, national and non-governmental organisations and agencies.’ (NATO, 2003)

During the dialogue, it appears that for the participants the general question is more than just a practical question; apparently it is also an ethical question. CIMIC, in their view, also concerns an aspect of human security: satisfaction and happiness of the local population.

However, it should be noted that they (particularly the presenter) refer to human security in rather instrumental terms: in order to increase the permissive environment. The presenter decided to dig out the river while he knew in advance that this was not a solution. In fact, it only worsened the circumstances for the local population. Both participants referred to the situation as a humanitarian disaster but, at the same time, they did not feel responsible to find a solution for the flooding, and they did not feel bad about passing the responsibility to the governor of Pol-e Khomri.
It seems that the happiness and satisfaction of the population are only important because of the permissive environment. Their encounter with the local population is certainly not a genuine encounter as Buber defines it. It seems the relation is mainly instrumental in nature (an I-it relation), it focuses on the self and, for that reason, is less concerned with ‘Others’.

The facilitator could have made these points more explicit by asking at the end of the dialogue (when the participants formulate an answer to the general question), if they still understand the question in the same way as in the beginning of the dialogue.

Apparently, the quality of the dialogue depends to a large extent on the quality of the questions posed by the facilitator: to stimulate the participants to critically examine underlying reasons, values and views, and to ask questions themselves. Since it is impossible to make a list of questions in advance, the facilitator needs to have enough experience with Socratic Dialogues to be able to use it as a research method.

One might argue that the facilitator could have tried to ask the participants for a definition of ‘effectiveness’ at the beginning of the dialogue. The essential objective of Socratic Dialogue, however, is to discuss the question, and the concepts within it, in relation to a concrete experience. All insights, including the values and principles, rendered by Socratic Dialogue should stay in contact with reality and with the personal experiences of the participants. This is the main reason why this dialogue can also be part of a normative case study which not only describes values but also contributes to our understanding of important values relating civil-military relations.

The example shows that it takes time, and slow thinking, to reach underlying values. For the participants, it was not easy to formulate the underlying values. There were some profound silences during the last part of the dialogue. It is interesting to see that the ‘real’ thinking occurred during these silences. Eventually, the participants were able to formulate the values they considered most important.

It would be interesting to see what would emerge as the values and principles regarding this concrete example in a larger group, or in a more heterogeneous group of participants, for instance, with some people from NGOs or local people from Pol-e Khomri. On the other hand, it is likely that if the group is more heterogeneous, more time would be needed for the participants to create and experience an open and safe environment.

2 Buber also acknowledges that silence plays a crucial part in dialogue: dialogue, especially when people who are open to an I-You relation, is likely to involve both silence (stillness) and speech. In stillness there is communion. When people are able to release themselves to silence: ‘unreserved communication streams from him, and the silence bears it to his neighbour’ (Buber,1947:4)
Constraints

The above Socratic Dialogue example, as well as other experiences with Socratic Dialogues, provides background for some comments on the main constraints of Socratic Dialogues as a research method.\(^3\)

The first main problem is ‘Who Participates?’. One might want to include all relevant others, but who turns up for the dialogue? Apart from physical presence or absence, whose knowledge is accessible? People are not equally good expressing themselves, using arguments and participating in a dialogue. In the military context it is obvious that hierarchy, and thus lack of balance of power, are not easy to overcome. In the dialogue example here, the participants did not wear their uniforms so their rank was not immediately obvious, but it remains an important factor and, if necessary, it should be made explicit by the facilitator. More generally (although it definitely also plays a role in the military), gender relations should be considered. As there is a minimum of woman perspectives in Participatory Rural Appraisals and in ethnographies this could equally be a problem for Socratic Dialogues (e.g. Mosse, 1994). In order to deal with existing power relations, the facilitator should ensure that the participants understand and apply the guidelines of the Socratic attitude.

Second, there is a problem concerning the security of the participants of the dialogue. The Socratic Dialogue example here shows that the process of *elenchus* and *maieutics* allows hidden knowledge of the participants to enter their consciousness. People might say things which not only embarrass them but which might also put them at risk. As we stated before, for the presenter of the example it is impossible to defend a position at odds with his behaviour; and this position might not be the ‘official view’ of his organisation or community. Our advice is that all studies should include a statement (safety protocol) on how the Socratic interview will be carried out. Most importantly all the interviews will be entirely voluntary and confidential. Without permission, by the participants, no specific reference will be made to them.

Trustworthiness and authenticity

As the objective of Socratic Dialogue as a qualitative research method is fundamentally different from more traditional, quantitative research, the criteria to determine the possibilities of Socratic Dialogue as a research method should also be different. In order to further determine the successfullness of Socratic Dialogue as a research method we shall discuss the trustworthiness and authenticity of this research method (Lincoln and Guba,1985; Bryman, 2004).

Trustworthiness consists of four elements: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. These elements parallel validity, generalisability, reliability, and objectivity in the conventional research paradigm (Bryman, 2004). Authenticity

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\(^3\) These comments arise from analysis of Socratic Dialogue as a research method in our projects. Clearly, there is a continuing need for further exploration and critical analysis of this method.
criteria, which focus on knowing, action, and fairness, have no counterparts in the conventional research paradigm, but are primarily demonstrated through stakeholder testimony and are supported by an audit trail of evidence of fairness and authenticity. The major reason for Guba and Lincoln’s use of the terms trustworthiness and authenticity was their unease with the application of reliability and validity standards to qualitative research. These criteria presuppose that a single absolute account of social reality is feasible. In contrast with conventional causal epistemology, they argue that there can never be such an ultimate account of social reality. As pragmatists argue, it is recommended that we remain open to a plurality of theories and a plurality of descriptions about the world since no belief or theory is, in our view, immune to revision.

Trustworthiness is made up of four criteria:

- Credibility: The establishment of the credibility of findings entails both ensuring that research is carried out according to the canons of good practice and submitting research findings to the members of the social world who were studied for confirmation that the investigator has correctly understood that social world.
- Transferability: researchers are encouraged to produce ‘thick description’, rich amounts of details of a culture, which will provide others with a database for making judgments about the possible transferability.
- Dependability: researchers should adopt an ‘auditing’ approach. This entails that complete records are kept of all phases of the research process.
- Confirmability: it should be apparent that the researcher has not overtly allowed personal values or theoretical inclinations to sway the conduct of the research and the findings deriving from it.

Authenticity is made up of five criteria:

- Fairness: Does the research fairly represent different viewpoints among members of the social setting?
- Ontological authenticity: Does the research help members to arrive at a better understanding of their social milieu?
- Educative authenticity: Does the research help members to appreciate better the perspectives of other members of the social setting?
- Catalytic authenticity: has the research acted as an impetus to members to engage in action to change their circumstances?
- Tactical authenticity: Has the research empowered members to take the steps necessary for engaging in action?

(Lincoln and Guba, 1985:301; Bryman,2004:276)
If we look at the trustworthiness of Socratic Dialogue as a research method, what is distinctive is that the degree of credibility and confirmability are relatively high.

The output of the dialogue will be credibility: during the dialogue it is ensured that the researcher’s (facilitator’s) findings and impressions are congruent with those ‘on’ whom the research is conducted. Every time a part of the dialogue is recapitulated, the facilitator has to confirm with the participants the correctness of that particular summary. Concerning the confirmability, it is apparent that during the Socratic Dialogue the facilitator contributes no content and therefore his or her personal values or theoretical inclinations do not influence the research findings. The transferability of the research requires that researchers produce ‘thick description’. This includes a thorough context analysis including a rich amount of the culture of the participants. It should be remembered however, that while outcome of the dialogue is relative to context, including culture, the outcome is not necessarily similar to what a culture takes to be reasonable.

In order to support dependability of the research all dialogues should be taped.

As seen in the chart above, the authenticity of Socratic Dialogue as a research method can be analysed by looking at the following criteria: fairness, ontological authenticity, educative authenticity, catalytic authenticity and tactical authenticity (Bryman, 2004).

Whether the research fairly represents different viewpoints among members of the social setting depends on the group of participants and the number of dialogues held within a specific social setting. If we look, for instance, at the theme ‘civil-military relations’, it is important to notice that possible focus groups such as ‘the’ military, ‘the’ NGO-community and ‘the’ local population, do not exist as monolithic entities. Different humanitarian and military organisations may stress, and often do, different values and principles. Obviously, the same is also true with regard to local communities: what a traditional leader values may be very different from what a mother, of the same community, would value.

The ontological authenticity (the research helps members to arrive at a better understanding of their social milieu) is one of the main objectives of Socratic Dialogue. It is a learning process and a cooperative investigation into the participants’ assumptions, ideas and values. The fact that this is done in common partnership means that the research will also help the participants to appreciate better the perspectives of other members of the social setting (educative authenticity). In the case of Afghanistan, this could possibly improve relations and particularly the dialogue between the military, the humanitarian organisations and the local population.

Catalytic authenticity requires that the research has acted as an impetus to members to engage in action to change their circumstances. Tactical authenticity asks whether the research has also empowered members to take the steps necessary for engaging in action. Following the dialogue example above, it has proved that, since the participants argue they have an answer to the question which they considered...
relevant during their mission in Afghanistan, catalytic authenticity is achieved. Moreover, they have identified their core values and principles. Being aware of their values will help them to deal more consciously with difficult situations or dilemmas in which these values are at stake.

**Conclusion**

The results of the analysis presented in this article support the idea that Socratic Dialogue explicitly searches for values and principles that, through inquiry, criticism and reasonableness, are at stake for the people engaged in the dialogue. As such, Socratic Dialogues could be part of normative case studies which contribute to normative theories about the ideals we should pursue and the obligations we should accept.

The examined case shows that Socratic Dialogue truly is a systematic inquiry into the participants’ assumptions, preconceived opinions, principles and values, and is a critical investigation which always stays in touch with reality and personal experiences (the process of *elenchus*). One of the strengths of Socratic Dialogue is that the participants become aware of, and can communicate about, ‘underlying’ values (the process of *maieutics*).

It is interesting to see that while Socratic Dialogue as a research method meets both criteria of trustworthiness and authenticity, in particular it stimulates the participants’ learning process. This helps them arrive at a better understanding of their own values, the values of ‘Others’ and could empower them to engage in action to change their circumstances.

There are possible disadvantages to this method. First, the facilitator needs to be competent to use the dialogue as a research method, and this requires considerable practice. Second, the participants’ commitment to engage in the dialogue is a necessary precondition for the successfulness of the method. This point is related to the constraints we have identified: who participates in Socratic Dialogues and the security of the participants.

Clearly, some of these possible disadvantages are time-related. Buber has reminded us that modern times are characterised by a progressive increase of *I-it* relations; in most research, we do, in fact, take interviewees primarily as objects for our study. The question is whether researchers should also take time to engage in a genuine *I-You* encounter in which interviewees are persons who speak to us and require a response. If we don’t, Buber argues: ‘that is where the *It-world*, and its knowledge, is no longer fertilised by the living currents of the *You-world*, it becomes stagnant, like a swamp phantom which overpowers us’ (Buber, 1970, p.102). Taking an *I-You* approach to research, which implies a genuine dialogue, will be a time-consuming process, but the effort can lead to a vibrant research agenda with questions which are actual and alive between people.
References


Inquiry, Criticism and Reasonableness: Socratic Dialogue as a Research Method?


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