



Socratic Midwifery and the Epistemology of Questioning: A Framework for Critical Inquiry in Social Science Research

¹Prateep Peuchthonglang and ²Yathaweemintr Peuchthonglang

^{1,2}Department of Social Sciences and Humanities,
Faculty of Business Administration and Liberal Arts,
Rajamangala University of Technology Lanna

¹Corresponding author, e-mail: Yatha.P@rmutl.ac.th

Received November 10, 2025; **Revised** December 25, 2025; **Accepted:** April 30, 2026

Abstract

Imagine research not as a proclamation, but as a living conversation—where every question opens new paths, and certainty is replaced by curiosity. The concept of the philosophical midwife, rooted in Socrates' dialectical art, calls us to this kind of inquiry: privileging questions over answers and humility over dogma. While thinkers have long pored over Socratic discourse, its power as a modern research tool is still emerging. This article invites you to step into the shoes of Socrates, re-examining how we structure research through the very questions we ask. By exploring Socratic maieutics—the art of nurturing knowledge through dialogue—this study builds a six-dimensional framework that brings rigor and self-awareness to qualitative research. Questions about clarification, assumption, evidence, perspective, implication, and meta-cognition challenge us to see familiar topics with new eyes. By weaving together voices from classical texts and contemporary minds, the article suggests that Socratic questioning is more than precision; it's a practice of liberation. What if we treated inquiry as an open journey, not a quest for a single truth? This synthesis of philosophy and methodology seeks to spark a spirit of Socratic inquiry in all who are committed to truth, engagement, and intellectual virtue.

Keywords: Socratic questioning; Philosophical midwifery; Social science research; Epistemology; Research methodology

Introduction

Picture Socrates, not as an author behind closed doors, but as a lively mentor sparking thought in the agora. Today, when information floods our screens and viewpoints clash, the Socratic call to 'know yourself' feels fresh and urgent—



especially in social science. Researchers grapple with tangled realities and ethical puzzles, but how often do we slow down and consider why we ask the questions we do? This paper aims to awaken that curiosity, inviting you to rediscover Socratic questioning as the beating heart of critical social research.

The premise guiding this investigation is simple yet profound: the way a research question is asked determines the nature of the answer obtained. This assertion, while seemingly self-evident, invites rigorous philosophical scrutiny. For Socrates, questioning was not a mere technique but an ethical stance, a form of intellectual midwifery (*maieutic*) through which latent understanding could be brought to birth (Plato, *Theaetetus*, 149a 151d). Socratic questioning does not seek to transmit knowledge but to initiate a reflective search in which interlocutors confront the limits of their beliefs, examine assumptions, and pursue conceptual clarity. As Vlastos (1994) notes, the Socratic method embodies a moral commitment to inquiry rooted in humility, courage, and reasoned dialogue.

Think about your last research question—did you consider not just what was being asked, but why it was being asked that way? In the rush for clarity and concise answers, have we neglected to probe deeper: What assumptions about reality lurk within our questions? Who speaks—and who is silenced—by the way we frame our studies? The Socratic tradition encourages us to embrace uncertainty, to treat questions as beginnings rather than endpoints. What discoveries await when we step into a space of perplexity and open inquiry?

Let's reimagine research as a kind of dialogue—one where liberation begins with the courage to ask difficult questions. Following Paulo Freire's vision in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, authentic education springs from inquiry, not answer-giving. bell hooks call it 'intellectual risk.' How might your own practice transform if each question were an act of emancipation? Socratic questioning is not merely a method; it's a stance that links reflexivity and critical pedagogy, reenergizing how we learn and teach.

Yet, this endeavor is not a call to revive the Socratic method in a nostalgic or uncritical manner. Rather, it recognizes that Socrates' dialogues—situated within Athenian democracy and interwoven with complexities of irony and power—must be reinterpreted within the ethical and political demands of contemporary research. The goal is not to replicate Socratic *elenchus* in its original form, but to translate its philosophical virtues into methodological dispositions: intellectual humility, dialogical openness, and commitment to self-examination.



In doing so, this article addresses several interrelated questions: How does Socratic questioning deepen the formulation of research questions? What role does dialectical inquiry play in the pursuit of knowledge within social science? Can questioning serve as an emancipatory act that challenges dogmatism, both within the researcher and in institutional structures of academia? These questions are not posed rhetorically; rather, they form the backbone of a proposed epistemic framework that positions questioning as a form of philosophical praxis.

What if Socratic questioning were not an ancient echo, but a living discipline shaping our choices today? In a world obsessed with publishing and measuring, the Socratic challenge is more vital than ever: 'The unexamined life is not worth living.' Are we also brave enough to insist: the unexamined question is not worth asking? This work urges you to treat Socratic inquiry not as history, but as a daily, ethical practice toward wisdom.

The structure of this article unfolds as follows. The next section explores the origins and philosophical significance of Socratic midwifery, situating it within Platonic dialogues and modern interpretations. The third section examines the epistemological primacy of questioning, drawing on hermeneutic and constructivist traditions. The fourth section introduces the six-dimensional Socratic framework and articulates its relevance to the stages of research design and analysis. The fifth section discusses the implications for critical pedagogy and research ethics. Finally, the conclusion reflects on the enduring relevance of Socratic inquiry in an age of methodological fragmentation and intellectual haste.

This article situates Socratic questioning at the intersection of ancient philosophy and modern research methodology. It argues that questioning is not simply a procedural step in research design but an epistemic act with ethical and ontological implications. Reclaiming Socratic maieutic for contemporary scholarship, this study proposes a six-dimensional framework of questioning, including: (1) questions seeking clarification of terms and issues, (2) questions examining underlying assumptions, (3) questions evaluating evidence or data, (4) questions exploring alternative perspectives, (5) questions investigating wider implications, and (6) reflexive meta-questions that examine one's own inquiry process. Each dimension serves as a tool for examining the hidden architecture of thought, challenging researchers to cultivate an interior dialogue parallel to their engagement with external interlocutors or data.



Socratic Intellectual Virtue and the Notion of Philosophical Midwifery

The metaphor of *philosophical midwifery* (*maieutikê technê*) represents one of the most profound and enigmatic aspects of Socratic philosophy. Introduced in Plato's *Theaetetus* (149a 151d), this metaphor positions Socrates not as a teacher transmitting knowledge, but as an intellectual midwife assisting others in the labor of thinking. Unlike the literal midwife, who assists in childbirth without conceiving herself, Socrates claims to be barren of wisdom, yet uniquely skilled in helping others bring forth their own insights. This image is not merely poetic; it encapsulates a radical epistemological stance—one that rejects didactic authority in favor of dialogical inquiry grounded in intellectual humility. As Hadot (2002) observes, Socrates' true legacy lies in the transformation of philosophy from a body of doctrines into an "exercise of spiritual self-examination."

Socratic midwifery embodies the virtue of *epistemic humility*, a recognition of the limits of one's knowledge. Socrates' famous declaration, "I know that I do not know," is not an admission of ignorance but a methodological position, a commitment to perpetual questioning as the pathway to understanding (Plato, *Apology*, 21d). Vlastos (1994) argues that this admission constitutes the foundation of Socratic intellectual integrity: it is only through recognizing one's ignorance that genuine inquiry can begin. The *maieutic* method, therefore, does not seek to implant truths but to expose contradictions, test beliefs, and cultivate what Nehamas (1999) terms the "care of the self"—a philosophical practice of self-formation.

At the core of Socratic midwifery is a distinct conception of truth. Unlike sophists who treated argumentation as a means of persuasion, Socrates pursued *aletheia*—truth as disclosure or un-concealment. Knowledge was not accumulated but uncovered through dialectical struggle. The process of questioning, in this sense, resembles a labor—a painful yet transformative ordeal through which the interlocutor confronts the frailty of their assumptions. As Socrates notes in *Theaetetus*, some interlocutors produce mere "wind eggs," opinions devoid of substance, while others, through sustained inquiry, give birth to genuine understanding. This process reflects a deeply ethical vision of inquiry: truth cannot be given; it must be earned.

Socratic midwifery also presupposes a particular relational ethic between interlocutors, grounded in *philia* (intellectual friendship) rather than domination. Socrates does not claim mastery over knowledge but acts as a catalyst, provoking thought through irony (*eironeia*) and elenchus (refutation). Brickhouse and Smith (2005) emphasize that Socratic irony is not deception, but a pedagogical strategy



intended to destabilize false confidence and invite deeper reflection. The midwife metaphor underscores this relational vulnerability; both parties must commit to the uncertainty inherent in authentic dialogue.

This ethical dimension distinguishes Socratic questioning from mere critique. Modern critiques often aim to dismantle arguments; Socratic inquiry aims to *reorient the soul*. In *Alcibiades I*, Socrates implores the ambitious youth to turn inward, insisting that self-knowledge is the prerequisite for any political or ethical action. He employs questioning not to humiliate but to awaken, guiding interlocutors toward what Heidegger (1998) later described as an “openness to being.” Thus, Socratic midwifery aligns philosophical inquiry with moral development; it seeks wisdom rather than victory.

Contemporary scholarship has revisited this Socratic legacy through various interpretive lenses—hermeneutic, existential, and pedagogical. Pierre Hadot (2002) frames Socratic dialogue as a *spiritual exercise*, a discipline of turning and transformation that anticipates later philosophical traditions such as Stoicism and phenomenology. Michel Foucault (1984), in his lectures on the “care of the self,” situates Socratic practice at the origin of *askēsis*—the philosophical cultivation of ethical subjectivity. These interpretations converge on a crucial insight: Socratic midwifery is not a method in the technical sense, but a mode of life oriented toward truth through dialogical engagement.

In educational philosophy, this tradition has found resonance in the pedagogies of Paulo Freire and Matthew Lipman. Freire (1970) explicitly invokes Socrates in his rejection of the “banking model” of education, arguing that genuine learning emerges through *problem-posing dialogue* rather than passive reception. Lipman (1991), founder of the Philosophy for Children (P4C) movement, adapts Socratic questioning into a communal inquiry model, where the classroom becomes a forum for philosophical dialogue. Both thinkers affirm the Socratic conviction that questioning is not destructive, but generative—it reveals possibilities for thinking otherwise.

However, to merely praise the Socratic method would be to ignore its challenges. The midwife metaphor presupposes asymmetry—a guide who knows how to question and a respondent who does not. Critics have argued that this asymmetry risks paternalism, as the midwife implicitly directs the birth of ideas. Nussbaum (1997) defends Socratic pedagogy against this charge by emphasizing its ethical core: Socrates does not prescribe conclusions but compels interlocutors to



assume responsibility for their own thinking. The discomfort of *elenchus* is not coercion but liberation from intellectual complacency.

For research methodology, the implications of Socratic midwifery are profound. It calls for a transformation of the researcher from an expert who extracts answers to an interlocutor engaged in the dialogical co-construction of meaning. It discourages premature closure and demands that every question be examined for its hidden presuppositions. The Socratic researcher must be willing to stand in *aporia*—a state of perplexity—not as failure, but as an opening to deeper understanding. As Gadamer (1975) asserts, “the path of questioning is the path of knowledge.”

Thus, Socratic midwifery stands as both an epistemic virtue and a methodological disposition. It compels the researcher to cultivate patience with uncertainty, courage to confront contradiction, and humility to remain teachable. In an age where academic inquiry is often pressured to produce quick answers, Socratic philosophy reminds us that wisdom resides not in having answers but in knowing how to ask questions.

The Epistemic Power of Questioning in Socratic Dialectic

At the heart of Socratic philosophy lies a provocative claim: that wisdom begins not in the possession of answers, but in the disciplined practice of questioning. The Socratic method, or *elenchus*, is often mischaracterized as merely refutational; yet within the Platonic dialogues, its deeper purpose is epistemic rather than rhetorical. Questioning serves as a means of uncovering the hidden structure of belief—its assumptions, contradictions, and implications. In this respect, Socratic questioning is not an auxiliary skill but a pathway to *epistēmē*, knowledge understood as justified understanding grounded in reason. As Gadamer (1975) observes, “To ask a question is to open up the possibility of experience,” for it creates a space where meaning is not imposed but discovered.

Socratic questioning operates within a unique epistemic atmosphere marked by *aporia*, a condition of perplexity. Far from representing failure, *aporia* signifies the first step toward genuine insight. In the *Meno*, Socrates leads the slave boy through a series of geometrical questions until the boy arrives at a state of confusion—a realization of not-knowing. This state, Socrates insists, is more valuable than false certainty, for it restores a sense of intellectual wonder. As Hadot (2002) notes, Socrates transforms ignorance from a deficit into a dynamic force capable of propelling inquiry. The power of questioning lies precisely in its ability to destabilize complacency and provoke the labor of thinking.



From an epistemological standpoint, Socratic questioning anticipates what contemporary scholars' term *critical reflexivity*. Modern research methodologies, particularly within qualitative and interpretive traditions, have emphasized the importance of reflexivity in acknowledging the researcher's role in knowledge production (Charmaz, 2014; Schwandt, 2014). Yet few explicitly connect this reflexive stance to its Socratic origins. Socratic questioning insists that before interrogating the world, the inquirer must interrogate themselves: *What do I already believe? Why do I believe it? On what grounds can it be defended?* This methodical self-examination forms the foundation for epistemic integrity.

Crucially, Socratic questioning is dialogical. It presumes that knowledge emerges through relational exchange rather than solitary reflection. In the *Republic*, Socrates likens dialectic to an ascent of the mind, a cooperative inquiry through which interlocutors collectively approach truth (Plato, *Republic*, 511d). Unlike sophistic debate, which seeks victory, dialectic seeks understanding. The question is not "How can I persuade?" but "What is the nature of the thing itself?" This ontological orientation situates questioning as a search for being (*ousia*) rather than opinion (*doxa*).

Hermeneutic philosophers such as Gadamer and Ricoeur have emphasized this dialogical nature of inquiry. For Gadamer (1975), a genuine question is one that remains open, resisting the closure of predetermined answers. Questioning is an encounter with alterity—the otherness of meaning—that demands humility and attentiveness. This aligns with Socrates' insistence that the midwife must not impose but accompany thought. The question thus becomes a site of encounter, where new meanings may be born.

This epistemic humility contrasts sharply with modern academic culture, where questions are often framed for instrumental purposes—to justify hypotheses or operationalize variables. In such contexts, questioning becomes subordinated to confirmation. Socratic questioning, by contrast, is fundamentally *exploratory*. It seeks not to validate but to discover. It treats every claim as provisional, subject to further inquiry. Flyvbjerg (2001), in *Making Social Science Matter*, argues that contemporary research must reclaim the virtues of phronesis—practical wisdom—and engage with the complexity of lived experience through questioning rather than measurement alone. Here, Socratic epistemology gains contemporary urgency.

Yet, Socratic questioning is demanding. It exposes the fragility of belief and the instability of meaning. It refuses the comfort of definitive answers. As Socrates remarks in the *Apology*, it is better to suffer uncertainty in pursuit of truth than to



possess certainty rooted in illusion. For researchers, this implies an ethical commitment to ambiguity, an acceptance that inquiry may unsettle rather than affirm. Such a posture stands in contrast to research paradigms that privilege control, predictability, and closure.

The epistemic power of questioning resides in its generativity. A well-formed question has the capacity to reorganize the field of thought, to reveal relations previously unnoticed. In this way, questions are not passive invitations but active interventions. They frame reality, delineate possibilities, and determine the contours of knowledge. The philosopher Hans Jonas (1966) warned that modern science's fixation on answers risks obscuring the moral responsibility embedded in the very act of questioning. To ask is to position oneself in relation to truth and to acknowledge one's role in shaping it.

In educational contexts, Socratic questioning has long been associated with critical pedagogy. Freire (1970) develops the notion of *problem-posing education*, where questions serve as catalysts for consciousness rather than conduits for information. Students, like Socratic interlocutors, must confront contradictions and seek coherence. bell hooks (1994) similarly insists that transformative pedagogy requires "the courage to interrogate"—to push beyond what is known toward what must be understood. These pedagogical insights resonate with Socratic dialectic, which conceives questioning as a moral practice oriented toward the care of the soul (*epimeleia heautou*).

Within research methodology, however, the philosophical depth of questioning is often obscured. Method sections instruct scholars to "pose research questions" but provide little guidance on how to cultivate the intellectual virtues necessary for genuine inquiry. Socratic questioning remedies this deficiency by returning to fundamental epistemic principles: clarity, coherence, justification, and reflection. It demands that researchers treat their questions not as procedural tools but as philosophical commitments.

In summary, the epistemic power of Socratic questioning lies in its ability to transform inquiry from an act of extraction into an act of revelation. It compels the inquirer to dwell within uncertainty, to interrogate assumptions, and to pursue understanding through dialogue. It resists dogmatism and fosters intellectual humility. Above all, it positions questioning as the birthplace of wisdom—a notion with profound implications for both philosophy and social science.



A Six-Dimensional Framework of Socratic Questioning in Social Science Research

The Socratic method, while often referenced in educational discourse, has seldom been systematically translated into a research methodology capable of guiding scholarly inquiry. To address this gap, this section introduces a six-dimensional framework of Socratic questioning specifically tailored for social science research. Each dimension corresponds to a fundamental epistemic function of inquiry, forming a process through which a researcher may interrogate meaning, test validity, and cultivate reflexive understanding. This framework is not linear but dialogical; the researcher may move fluidly between dimensions, revisiting earlier questions as new insights emerge. The six dimensions are:

1. Questions of Clarification
2. Questions Examining Assumptions
3. Questions Seeking Reasons and Evidence
4. Questions Exploring Alternative Perspectives
5. Questions Testing Implications and Consequences
6. Questions of Meta-Reflection and Critical Dialogue

Collectively, these dimensions translate Socratic midwifery into a methodological practice grounded in intellectual humility, critical insight, and epistemic responsibility. They offer a philosophical scaffold for qualitative inquiry, enabling researchers to treat research questions not as fixed points, but as evolving sites of ethical and ontological engagement.

1. Questions of Clarification: Illuminating Meaning: Socratic inquiry begins with the pursuit of clarity. In many dialogues, Socrates' first intervention is deceptively simple: *"What do you mean by that?"* This question, directed toward interlocutors who believe they understand a concept, forces them to articulate—and thus confront—their implicit definitions. In *Euthyphro*, Socrates challenges Euthyphro's confident claim to know the nature of piety by simply asking for clarification, revealing conceptual confusion beneath apparent certainty. As Vlastos (1994) notes, this strategy exposes the fragility of unexamined language.

In social science research, questions of clarification serve a parallel function. Researchers often rely on abstract concepts—justice, identity, agency, resilience—without interrogating their underlying meaning. Clarificatory questioning demands precision: *What is meant by social justice in this context? For whom? According to which tradition?* Such questions are foundational in phenomenological and constructivist research, where meaning precedes measurement. Charmaz (2014)

argues that qualitative researchers must continually return to clarification to avoid conceptual vagueness that compromises interpretive validity.

Examples of Clarification Questions in Research:

- What exactly is being claimed?
- How are key terms being defined by participants or researchers?
- In what context is this concept being used, and does its meaning change across contexts?

Clarification is not semantic pedantry; it is epistemic necessity. Without clarity, evidence cannot be evaluated, and arguments cannot be coherently developed. In Socratic dialogue, clarity creates the conditions for truth; in research, it creates the conditions for reliability and conceptual rigor.

2. Questions Examining Assumptions: Uncovering the Hidden Foundations: After clarification, Socrates turns to the assumptions that underlie definitions and beliefs. He asks not whether a statement is true, but *on what basis it is held*. This process, central to the *elenchus*, reveals the unspoken premises that structure thought. For instance, in *Meno*, Socrates interrogates Meno's assumption that virtue can be taught, unraveling the unstated proposition that virtue is knowledge. These reveals questioning as an archaeological act—unearthing the foundations of belief.

In research, assumptions are often embedded within methodological choices, theoretical frameworks, and disciplinary conventions. Critical theorists, particularly Freire (1970) and Habermas (1984), have stressed the emancipatory potential of examining these assumptions. Questions that probe assumptions prevent researchers from reproducing dominant ideologies or uncritically adopting inherited frameworks.

Examples of Assumption-Based Research Questions:

- What assumptions am I making about the nature of this phenomenon?
- Are these assumptions supported, or are they inherited from disciplinary norms?
- Do my participants share these assumptions, or am I imposing them?

Assumption-based questioning fosters what Schwandt (2014) calls “epistemic vigilance”—a researcher's ability to detect and challenge interpretive bias. In the Socratic spirit, such vigilance is not adversarial but liberatory; it frees inquiry from invisible constraints.



3. Questions Seeking Reasons and Evidence: Justification and Epistemic Accountability: Socratic questioning is inseparable from the demand for justification. In numerous dialogues, Socrates challenges interlocutors with a simple yet disarming question: “*What is your reason for believing this?*” Unlike sophistic rhetoric, which seeks persuasion, Socratic inquiry seeks grounding. In *Gorgias*, Socrates interrogates Polus not on the force of his conviction but on the rational support for his claims (Plato, *Gorgias*, 471e-475e). This marks the shift from opinion (*doxa*) to justified belief (*epistēmē*).

Within social science research, questions seeking reasons and evidence serve as safeguards against unfounded claims and speculative assertions. Researchers must not merely report what is believed, but inquire into *why* it is believed, and whether such beliefs can be substantiated through empirical, experiential, or theoretical grounds (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). This dimension is integral to grounded theory, discourse analysis, and phenomenological validation.

Examples of Reasoning Questions in Research:

- What reasons do participants offer for this claim, and how coherent are they?
- What forms of evidence support or challenge this interpretation?
- Is the justification epistemically sufficient, or rooted in unexamined cultural norms?

Questions of justification foster *epistemic accountability*—a commitment to align claims with rational support. In this respect, Socratic inquiry complements the hermeneutic injunction that *understanding requires justification*, not mere description (Gadamer, 1975).

4. Questions Exploring Alternative Perspectives: Multiplicity and Dialogical Imagination: Socrates consistently disrupts singular viewpoints by introducing alternative perspectives. In the *Republic*, he famously asks Glaucon to consider justice not only from the standpoint of the individual but from that of the polis. This perspectival shift reveals the contingent nature of moral judgments and opens space for plural visions of the good. Socratic inquiry thus nurtures what Nussbaum (1997) calls the “narrative imagination”—the ability to inhabit perspectives not one’s own. In research, exploring alternative perspectives is essential for avoiding epistemic monism. Interpretive inquiry, especially within phenomenology and ethnography, demands that researchers remain open to divergent narratives and resist premature closure. Flyvbjerg (2001) insists that *phronetic research* requires attentiveness to “who gains and who loses” from particular interpretations.



Examples of Perspective-Based Questions in Research:

- How might a different participant interpret this phenomenon?
- What cultural, historical, or theoretical frameworks offer alternative explanations?
- What has been silenced or excluded from the dominant narrative?

These questions align Socratic inquiry with methodological pluralism. They foster interpretive depth by challenging researchers to move beyond their own horizon of understanding, echoing Gadamer's (1975) "fusion of horizons."

5. Questions Testing Implications and Consequences: Ethical and Logical Probing: Socrates often tests arguments by tracing their logical consequences. If a belief leads to absurdity or moral contradiction, he compels the interlocutor to reconsider it. In *Euthyphro*, this technique exposes the problem of divine command theory: if the gods love what is holy, does holiness depend on divine love, or do the gods love it because it is holy? (Plato, *Euthyphro*, 10a). Such questioning reveals that belief carries consequences that must be evaluated.

In social science research, implication-based questioning serves both logical and ethical purposes. Researchers must anticipate the consequences of their interpretations, particularly when findings may reinforce power structures or perpetuate injustice (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Critical theorists argue that inquiry must not only interpret reality but also evaluate its ethical implications (Habermas, 1984).

Examples of Implication-Focused Questions in Research:

- If this interpretation is accepted, what ethical consequences follow?
- What policies or practices might this research inform—or misinform?
- Does this conclusion empower or marginalize communities?

These questions link Socratic inquiry to research ethics, ensuring that knowledge is not only coherent but morally responsible.

6. Questions of Meta-Reflection: Self-Interrogation and Methodological Integrity: The final dimension returns inquiry to its origin: the questioner. Socrates insists that no investigation is complete without self-examination: "*The unexamined life is not worth living*" (Plato, *Apology*, 38a). Meta-reflective questioning demands that the researcher scrutinize not only the phenomenon but their own interpretive lens. This aligns with modern calls for reflexivity in qualitative research, where scholars acknowledge that knowledge is co-constructed rather than discovered (Finlay, 2002).

Examples of Meta-Reflective Questions in Research:

- How are my positionality and presuppositions shaping this interpretation?



- What epistemic interests or values guide my inquiry?
- Am I willing to revise my question in light of new understanding?

Such questioning embodies *intellectual virtue*. It requires humility to reconsider one's position, courage to confront bias, and commitment to truth rather than self-confirmation. In Socratic terms, meta-reflection is the highest exercise of philosophical midwifery—it births not only ideas, but the thinker herself.

Synthesis: From Method to Disposition

While each dimension can be operationalized as a methodological tool, its deeper value lies in cultivating a Socratic disposition—a way of being in inquiry characterized by vigilance, openness, and rigor. This framework calls researchers not to *use* questions instrumentally, but to *live* them as pathways to wisdom. As Rorty (1980) notes, philosophy at its best does not end with answers but with better questions.

The six-dimensional framework thus offers a philosophical scaffold for research methodology, reconnecting epistemology to ethics and securing a space for dialogue in an era of academic instrumentalism. In the following section, these dimensions will be mapped onto research practice, demonstrating how Socratic questioning can inform research design, data analysis, and critical pedagogy.

Implications for Research Methodology and Critical Pedagogy

The integration of Socratic questioning into social science research has profound implications that extend beyond technique into epistemology, ethics, and pedagogy. If research is fundamentally an act of questioning, then the quality of inquiry depends upon the quality of those questions. Socratic questioning—rooted in clarity, reflexivity, and dialogical responsibility—offers a philosophical compass for navigating the complex terrain of knowledge construction. In this section, the six-dimensional framework previously outlined is applied to contemporary issues in research methodology and educational practice, demonstrating its transformative potential.

1. Socratic Inquiry as Epistemic Praxis in Qualitative Research

In qualitative research, meaning is not discovered but constructed, negotiated, and interpreted. Traditional approaches often treat research questions as procedural necessities—forms to be completed before data collection. Socratic inquiry challenges this view by insisting that questioning itself is the central epistemic



act. As Denzin and Lincoln (2018) argue, researchers must “interrogate the world” rather than merely document it.

Socratic questioning strengthens methodological rigor in several ways:

- **Clarification** prevents conceptual ambiguity that compromises interpretive validity.
- **Assumption analysis** guards against epistemic bias, especially in culturally embedded research.
- **Justification** enforces standards of credibility and coherence in grounded interpretations.
- **Alternative perspectives** ensure multiplicity and protect against analytical reductionism.
- **Implication testing** aligns inquiry with ethical responsibility.
- **Meta-reflection** integrates reflexivity, transforming the researcher into a dialogical subject.

These functions echo the criteria of trustworthiness established in naturalistic inquiry—credibility, confirmability, and authenticity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985)—but deepen them through philosophical reflexivity rather than protocol alone.

2. From Researcher as Expert to Researcher as Midwife

Modern research culture often positions the scholar as an expert responsible for producing authoritative interpretations. The Socratic model proposes a radical alternative: the researcher as *midwife*, whose role is to facilitate the birth of insight rather than impose theoretical constructs. This reconceptualization resists extractive models of inquiry, especially within marginalized communities.

Key characteristics of the Socratic researcher include:

- **Epistemic humility** — acknowledging the limits of one’s knowledge.
- **Dialogical engagement** — treating participants as co-inquirers rather than data sources.
- **Ethical accountability** — recognizing the power dynamics within interpretation.
- **Intellectual courage** — dwelling within *aporia* rather than seeking premature closure.

This aligns with Freire’s (1970) concept of *dialogical action*, where the educator does not deposit knowledge but provokes critical consciousness through questioning. Socratic inquiry thus forges an ethical bridge between research and pedagogy.



3. Socratic Questioning and Critical Pedagogy

Education, like research, is often constrained by the demand for answers. Classrooms reward correctness rather than inquiry, and curricula prioritize content delivery over conceptual exploration. Socratic pedagogy subverts this paradigm by privileging questioning as the act of intellectual emancipation.

Paulo Freire, who explicitly draws on Socratic principles, rejects the “banking model” of education in favor of problem-posing pedagogy. Teaching, in this view, is not transmission, but co-investigation of reality. Similarly, bell hooks (1994) describe the classroom as a space of “transgressive practice” where authority is decentralized through collective questioning.

Applying the Six Dimensions to Pedagogy:

Clarification	Deepens linguistic and conceptual understanding
Assumption Analysis	Reveals ideological underpinnings of knowledge
Evidence Inquiry	Promotes logical accountability
Alternative Perspectives	Cultivates intellectual empathy
Implication Questions	Connects inquiry to ethical responsibility
Meta-Reflection	Develops self-critical learners

In this way, Socratic questioning functions as a form of *philosophical literacy*, teaching students not what to think, but how to think.

4. Ethical Implications: Questioning as Moral Responsibility

Socratic inquiry is not morally neutral. To question is to challenge, and to challenge is to assume responsibility for the consequences of knowledge. Socrates himself was condemned not for error, but for unsettling the foundational beliefs of Athenian society. In modern research, questioning has similar ethical stakes.

Critical theorists such as Habermas (1984) emphasize that communication must be “undistorted”—free from coercion and domination. Socratic questioning inherently pursues such conditions by exposing contradictions and advocating transparency. It aligns inquiry with the ethical imperative to confront injustice, particularly within institutional systems.

Thus, research informed by Socratic inquiry should refuse complicity with oppressive frameworks. It should question not only participants, but also systems,



policies, and epistemic regimes. To fail to question is, in Socratic terms, to live unexamined—and therefore unfree.

5. Limitations and Challenges: The Risk of Misuse

While Socratic questioning offers powerful epistemic tools, it is not without risk. Misapplied, it can degenerate into intellectual aggression or ironic elitism. The Socratic interlocutor may feel destabilized, even humiliated, if questioning is wielded without care. As Nussbaum (1997) warns, philosophical inquiry must remain rooted in compassion to avoid becoming a discourse of domination.

Therefore, the ethical use of Socratic inquiry requires:

- Respect for interlocutors as co-thinkers
- Sensitivity to cultural and epistemic diversity
- Awareness of power dynamics in questioning

In pedagogical and research settings, the goal is not to defeat but to awaken—to build dialogical communities where questioning is experienced as liberation rather than critique.

6. Toward a Culture of Inquiry: Socratic Virtue in Scholarship

Ultimately, the integration of Socratic questioning into research is not a methodological reform but a cultural transformation. It calls universities, journals, and scholars to revalue inquiry over certainty, dialogue over monologue, and wisdom over productivity. It demands that scholars embody *intellectual virtue*—honesty, humility, courage—in both thought and practice.

In an age marked by polarization and epistemic fatigue, Socratic questioning offers a way forward. It invites the academy to rediscover its philosophical vocation: not merely to produce knowledge, but to cultivate the conditions for truth.

Discussion and Future Directions

The integration of Socratic questioning into social science research represents more than a methodological refinement; it signals an epistemological and ethical reorientation toward inquiry as a philosophical practice. In this discussion, the implications of the Socratic framework are reconsidered through three thematic lenses: epistemology, pedagogy, and praxis. Each highlight both the transformative potential and the inherent tensions of adopting Socratic questioning in contemporary academic discourse.

1. Reclaiming Epistemic Humility in an Era of Certainty

Modern academia often privileges the production of definitive knowledge—hypotheses tested, theories confirmed, findings published. Within such a climate,



Socratic epistemology offers a countercultural stance by foregrounding *aporia*, the productive state of not-knowing. Socrates' declaration, "*I know that I do not know*" (Plato, *Apology*, 21d), is not a concession of defeat but a philosophical affirmation of epistemic humility.

Reintroducing this stance into research disrupts the illusion of certainty that too often masks interpretative fragility. It calls for scholars to resist the premature closure of inquiry and to preserve the openness essential to intellectual discovery. As Hadot (2002) observes, philosophy is not the possession of truth but "the exercise of truth." Socratic questioning invites scholars to dwell in uncertainty, not as a void but as a horizon of possibility.

Yet humility alone is insufficient. Without critical vigilance, it risks degenerating into relativism or disengagement. The Socratic framework thus emphasizes *disciplined humility*—a posture that pairs openness with rational rigor, inviting challenges while demanding coherence.

2. From Dialogues to Dialogical Science: Reimagining Research Communities

The Socratic method is fundamentally relational. Dialogues are not pedagogical spectacles but ethical encounters premised on mutual vulnerability and co-construction. In this respect, Socratic inquiry aligns closely with contemporary calls for participatory, decolonial, and feminist methodologies that challenge hierarchical knowledge structures (Smith, 2012; Harding, 1991).

Potential Transformations in Research Culture:

- Researchers as co-inquirers rather than experts.
- Participants are epistemic agents rather than data sources.
- Research questions are negotiated rather than imposed.

Such a transformation envisions what Habermas (1984) calls a "communicative community," where validity is established not through authority but through the force of the better argument. Socratic questioning provides a philosophical scaffolding for this ethos, though institutional pressures toward academic performance may resist such dialogical openness.

3. The Ethical Imperative of Questioning: Philosophy as Praxis

One of the most significant contributions of the Socratic framework is the ethical reframing of questioning as a form of responsibility. Socrates was condemned not for ignorance, but for his relentless interrogation of Athenian values. To question is to unsettle—and to unsettle is to risk conflict.

Within social science, this ethical dimension manifests in the interrogation of injustice, power, and ideology. Freire (1970) insists that education must unveil oppression; Socratic questioning offers the epistemic tools to do so. However, such questioning must be conducted with care. Without ethical grounding, it may devolve into skepticism or nihilism.

Thus, the challenge is twofold:

- **To question courageously** — resisting conformity.
- **To question compassionately** — avoiding harm to interlocutors.

These dual imperative positions Socratic inquiry not only as a research method but as a philosophical praxis rooted in justice.

4. Potential Misapplications and Critiques

Despite its virtues, Socratic questioning is not immune to critique or distortion. Scholars have raised concerns about the potential elitism embedded in Socratic dialogue, where one party assumes the role of midwife with presumed authority. Feminist philosophers have challenged the asymmetrical nature of this model, arguing that inquiry must be truly co-constructed rather than subtly guided (Lugones, 1987).

To avoid such pitfalls, Socratic inquiry must be reconceived not as a method of extraction but as a mutual philosophical exercise, where both researcher and participant remain open to transformation. This requires vulnerability from the researcher—acknowledging that they, too, must be questioned.

5. Directions for Future Research

The reintroduction of Socratic questioning into research opens several promising avenues for future investigation:

(1) Philosophical Education and Research Training

How might doctoral programs incorporate Socratic frameworks to cultivate deeper reflexivity and intellectual virtue among emerging scholars?

(2) Socratic Inquiry in Participatory and Decolonial Research

What adaptations are necessary to integrate Socratic questioning into community-based and indigenous research without reproducing epistemic dominance?

(3) Empirical Evaluation of Socratic Methodologies

Can the practical effects of Socratic questioning on analytic depth or ethical sensitivity in research be studied empirically, perhaps through interpretive case studies or hermeneutic phenomenology?

(4) Comparative Philosophical Methodologies



How might Socratic questioning intersect with Eastern traditions such as Buddhist *vipassanā* inquiry or Confucian *rectification of names* (*zhèngmíng*)?

Conclusion

The pursuit of knowledge is often imagined as a journey toward answers; yet Socratic philosophy reminds us that wisdom begins with the capacity to ask better questions. This article has argued that Socratic questioning, far from being a relic of ancient pedagogy, constitutes a vital epistemic framework for contemporary social science research. By reframing questioning as both a methodological tool and a philosophical disposition, this study advocates for a revival of *maieutic inquiry*—a form of intellectual midwifery that births understanding through disciplined dialogue, critical reflection, and ethical responsibility.

At the heart of Socratic midwifery lies an enduring paradox: Socrates professed ignorance not as an admission of failure, but as a declaration of commitment to inquiry. His claim, “*I know that I do not know*,” challenges the modern researcher to embrace epistemic humility while pursuing epistemic rigor. This article has sought to translate that paradox into a six-dimensional framework designed to deepen research practice: clarification, assumption analysis, justification, perspective, implication, and meta-reflection. Each dimension illuminates a distinct aspect of inquiry, together forming a holistic method of philosophical investigation within empirical research contexts.

The adoption of Socratic questioning offers substantial benefits to research methodology. It resists dogmatism by keeping inquiry open; it strengthens conceptual clarity by interrogating language; it promotes reflexivity by examining the positionality of the researcher; and it ensures ethical accountability by tracing the consequences of knowledge claims. In this way, Socratic inquiry stands not in opposition to methodology but as its philosophical foundation—an epistemic conscience that guards against intellectual complacency.

However, revitalizing Socratic questioning demands more than procedural adoption; it requires a transformation of scholarly ethos. Research must be reimagined as a dialogical process—a shared journey between researcher, participant, and phenomenon. Knowledge is not extracted but co-created through encounter. This vision aligns with emancipatory pedagogies articulated by Freire and hooks, who similarly insist that education’s purpose is not to deposit information, but to awaken consciousness. Socratic inquiry thus bridges philosophy and pedagogy, research and reflection, knowledge and justice.



This reorientation carries profound ethical implications. To question is to take responsibility—to challenge assumptions, expose contradictions, and confront the moral dimensions of belief. Socrates paid the ultimate price for such commitment, condemned for “corrupting the youth” precisely because he taught them to think. In an age where research is often instrumentalized, there remains a pressing need for such intellectual courage. As the stakes of knowledge grow higher—ecological, social, political—the obligation to question becomes not only philosophical, but ethical. Yet, as this article has acknowledged, Socratic inquiry is not without peril. When wielded carelessly, questioning may humiliate rather than liberate, dominate rather than enlighten. Therefore, the Socratic researcher must embody more than critical acuity; they must cultivate compassion, patience, and integrity. Socratic humility does not deny the possibility of knowledge; it denies the right to certainty without examination. This offers a corrective to contemporary academic cultures defined by specialization and certainty.

The future of Socratic inquiry lies not in historical imitation but in creative adaptation. Questions remain for future research: How might Socratic dialogue be practiced in community-engaged scholarship? How can its principles be reconciled with indigenous or decolonial epistemologies? Can its impact on reflexivity or analytic depth be empirically measured? These unanswered questions mark the horizon of the Socratic method—not a terminus, but an invitation to further inquiry. Ultimately, the legacy of Socrates endures not in doctrines, but in a disposition—a way of inhabiting the world through questioning. To adopt Socratic inquiry is to affirm that knowledge is not possession, but pursuit; not certainty, but care. In a time marked by epistemic fatigue and social fragmentation, Socratic questioning offers a pathway to intellectual renewal, reminding us that philosophy is not a discipline to be studied, but a life to be lived.

The final legacy of this study may be summarized in a single inversion of the Socratic maxim: *If the unexamined life is not worth living, then the unexamined question is not worth asking.* To question wisely is to live wisely—and therein lies the enduring promise of Socratic midwifery for the future of research, education, and democratic life.

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