Why the Evidence-Resistance Criterion Fails as a Scientific Marker of Delusion

Abstract

Diagnostic manuals in psychiatry characterise delusions partly by reference to evidence-resistance, understood as the persistence of belief despite counter-evidence. This criterion is intended to demarcate pathological belief from ordinary epistemic failure. However, no major manual specifies what counts as evidence or resistance. I argue that the criterion depends on an implicit, institutionally specific conception of evidence, and that once made explicit, it fails as a scientific marker of epistemic pathology.

I first reconstruct the criterion's diagnostic role as identifying a failure of belief revision relative to a benchmark of appropriate evidential reasoning. Clinical practice, I argue, relies on a tacit conception of evidence privileging publicly observable and reproducible materials, while downgrading first-person experience. Then, a worked case shows how belief persistence can arise from divergence in evidential frameworks rather than resistance. Judgements of resistance are framework-relative, and persistence alone cannot ground pathology. I contend that, even if theoretical evidential pluralism is accepted, the criterion remains inoperable by virtue of evidential frameworks being tacit, dynamic, and inaccessible in practice. As such, clinicians cannot determine whether persistence reflects resistance or fidelity to an alternative evidential base. The criterion therefore fails as an epistemically accessible and reliably applicable diagnostic standard.

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