A shift from internalism to externalism in clinical explanations of mental disorders

This presentation examines a shift in clinical explanations of mental states from internalism to externalism and explores its implications for agency and responsibility. I define internalist explanations as those locating the sources of mental disturbance within the agent's influence, and externalist explanations as those emphasizing factors beyond the agent's control, such as trauma, neurobiology or social environment. I trace this shift across psychoanalysis, psychiatry and moral psychology. In psychoanalysis, I argue that the movement from guilt-centered interpretations toward shame and trauma reframes pathology as externally caused, as illustrated by the downplay of survivor guilt and identification with the agresor. In psychiatry, I discuss the transition from borderline personality disorder to complex PTSD – as an example of externalized causal attribution. I discuss the "concept creep" of trauma: corpus analyses show a marked increase in the use of harm-related concepts in psychological literature, alongside an expansion of what counts as trauma. I further argue that contemporary debates about free will and moral responsibility reinforce this broader externalist orientation by questioning the extent of individual control over mental states and actions. While these developments reduce blame, they may also weaken the sense of agency that is crucial for recovery and therapeutic change.