A Novel Approach to Experimental Philosophy of Psychiatry: Insights from a Study of Existential Conflict in Psychotherapy with Older Adults

I present a methodological approach combining philosophical reflection with empirical analysis. It aligns with principles of experimental philosophy (X-Phi) and contributes to debates about the field's development, particularly regarding the integration of medically and psychiatrically relevant questions. Some philosophy of psychiatry studies draw on empirical data and can retrospectively be understood as exhibiting an X-Phi structure, even though they do not follow classical X-Phi designs or explicitly use the label. Connecting these lines of inquiry could advance the application of philosophical concepts to work on clinically relevant questions.

I illustrate the approach using a study of existential conflicts in psychotherapy with older adults, which employs concepts from existential philosophy alongside qualitative content analysis. Rather than testing predefined hypotheses, the approach is exploratory, generating hypotheses from empirical material that may subsequently be examined quantitatively. The findings show how philosophical concepts can generate insight into practical phenomena while simultaneously being refined and enriched through engagement with these phenomena. Moreover, it can provide a reference point for normative reflection.

I argue that this constitutes one viable approach to an experimental philosophy of psychiatry, and hope to contribute to broader debates about the role of philosophical concepts in psychiatry and mental health research.