

From experimental philosophy to philosophical practice, via feminist epistemology: the use of subjects' intuitions in empirical research and philosophical counseling

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Abstract: The article examines, at preliminary (yet pioneering) level(s), the relationship between experimental philosophy, feminist epistemology and (at a subsidiary, incipient, level) philosophical practice. We opted for a broad approach of the basic premise of experimental philosophy – that even the intuitions of those who are not philosophers can be particularly useful in addressing philosophical issues – and that feminist epistemology is a tool compatible with the former in exploring ways to integrate these methodologies optimally into theorizing. As illustrations and instantiations of this new philosophical perspective based on empirical research we used the results of an innovative sociological study of perceptions and intuitions of subjects regarding a specific socio-cultural reality and its compatibility with various approaches from the field of philosophical practice.

Key-words: experimental philosophy; feminist epistemology; sociological data; philosophical practice; intuitions;

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Introduction.**The hypothesis of compatibility between experimental philosophy, feminist epistemology and philosophical practice**

The recent move towards experimental philosophy, mainly in the fields of ethics, philosophy of science and epistemology, could be efficiently backed by feminist epistemology, to the extent to which as experimental philosophy entitles a departure from the tradition of mainly Caucasian, middle-class, Western men (or imitators - including women - of this profile) trying to extract universal statements within the confines of their own experience and research. However, the relationship between the two is not so straightforward, and an analysis of the connection between the two is related to broader questions of philosophical methodology and epistemic standards in general (Appiah, 2008, p. 10). For our limited and preliminary purpose, we opt for a broad approach to the basic premise of experimental philosophy - that insights from non-philosophers can also be particularly useful in addressing philosophical problems - and that feminist epistemology (and non-mainstream/minority groups perspectives inspired by it) is a compatible tool with the former in exploring how best to integrate these methodologies into theorizing.

We also accept that a very clear distinction between data collection and theorizing is unquestionable. But this does not at all mean that resorting to empirical data falls beyond the boundaries of philosophy, and that individuation, selection and interpretation of empirical data itself represent genuine philosophical work. Moreover, "the use of experimental data in philosophy does not constitute a controversial issue." Scholars dealing with philosophy of mind, for example, "frequently resort to experimental data from the cognitive sciences and psychology. The controversy arises with the question of whether philosophy can provide a particular method for discovering a particular type of empirical data" (Huminski, 2018). Along these lines, we will refer very briefly (as illustration) to our own sociological study of ordinary subjects' intuitions regarding a particular topic (perceptions of Islam and modernization by Muslim women in the Romanian city of Timisoara and in some Arab communities of Israel).

To this hypothesis, we advance the corollary of philosophical practice as illustration and data provider for the study of intuitions

experimental philosophy is placing under focus. Being at a very preliminary stage, this association is only meant to open the path for future research which can assemble the fields of experimental philosophy, sociological research and philosophical practice, with their mutual reinforcement as one of the desired outcomes.

Experimental philosophy in a nutshell

Jesse Prinz contends that philosophy, in its essence, is observational. He delineates two branches within this realm: 'empirical philosophy,' which leverages empirical evidence from varied disciplines, and 'experimental philosophy,' where philosophers themselves design and execute experiments to explore philosophical inquiries. Prinz extends this observational nature even to traditional armchair philosophy, considering it observational due to its reliance on introspective examination of one's own thoughts, memories, and mental processes. This introspection, he argues, is a form of observation, where one scrutinizes personal intuitions and mental states to gain philosophical insights.

In addition, there are "philosophical methodologies that are empirical in a narrower sense", i.e. "research that relies on controlled experiments and statistics" (Prinz 2008, p. 192). This includes appealing to experimental results obtained by psychologists, sociologists, biologists, anthropologists, etc. And finally, there are those philosophers who choose to collect data, usually by asking "ordinary people to do what philosophers have traditionally done when reflecting on concepts", i.e. asking ordinary people to reflect on their own intuitions, memories, associations and mental states, often by appealing to thought experiments (Prinz 2008, p. 198). It is this latter methodology that Prinz calls experimental philosophy.

Philosophers in many sub-disciplines appeal to intuitions as part of theory building, sometimes by appealing to intuitions as *evidence* that suggests (or refutes) certain philosophical ideas. Among these views, intuitions are primarily defined by being non-inferential, non-deductive, spontaneous and non-reflective. However, even if appeals to intuition are explicitly non-rational, it seems to follow that they play an important role (Huminski, 2018, p. 2).

Consequently, even when a theorist appeals to or own intuitions, "it is the phenomenal experience of having the intuition that plays the role of evidence." And the gathering, "systematization, and statistical analysis of

all these data points of intuition is what makes experimental philosophy *empirical*." Surely, the question if intuitions provide or do not provide "good or reliable evidence, and for what kind of hypotheses," is very often in the center of "many metaphilosophical discussions of experimental philosophy" (Alexander, 2012; Deery, 2013).

Appiah posits that intuitions play a crucial role as a specific kind of evidence in the realm of philosophical theory. This perspective leads to challenging questions about the dependability and precision of these intuitions, and how they intersect with theoretical frameworks. The complexity of these issues intensifies when considering the typical methods employed for gathering such evidence. Appiah points out that within philosophical tradition, intuitions derived from thought experiments are often uncritically accepted as natural or inherently objective. (Appiah, 2008, p. 15).

Amanda Huminski (Huminski, 2018, p. 7) pertinently argues that both the motivation of theory building and that of diversity seem compatible with goals of some variants of feminist epistemology, namely the goals of reducing both bias and epistemological power imbalances manifested in the search for more accurate theories. In addition, Huminski argues that feminist epistemology could provide some theoretical support for the methodology practiced by experimental philosophy (Huminski, 2018, p. 8). The topic of bias in theorizing, has been widely discussed among feminist epistemologists. One of the statements made by Catherine Womack and Norah Mulvaney-Day is a good summary of these positions:

The inclusion of a multitude of voices and viewpoints fits well within a vision of feminist epistemic practice that recognizes the ways in which value judgments and the social contexts in which they occur exert powerful influences on the resulting theory (Womack & Mulvaney-Day, 2012, p 115).

Experimental philosophy and feminist epistemology

In the contemporary literature in the field, there are serious theoretical concerns of feminist theorists about the mutually supportive relationship between feminist epistemology and experimental philosophy. In general, they draw distinctions between abstract philosophy, empirical philosophy and experimental philosophy. They also point out that between

'pure' abstraction and empirical research the distinction is blurred when we consider the problem of underdetermining theory by data. The concept of under determination, notably introduced by W. V. O. Quine, highlights a fundamental dilemma: that any given dataset may prove inadequate for conclusively supporting a particular explanatory theory (Quine, 1951). This challenge is well recognized in feminist epistemology. For instance, Louise Antony, employing a Quinean perspective, acknowledges the existence of countless, equally plausible yet contradictory hypotheses for the same set of data. She concedes that, from a logical standpoint, one can always reinterpret 'data' to uphold their theoretical propositions.

The dilemma for feminist epistemologists arises when empirical data, which can be 'reinterpreted' to support preferred theories, insufficiently determine those theories. Their focus then shifts to discerning the social and cognitive mechanisms influencing the transition from data to theory. Feminist critiques of scientific research, particularly in studies concerning gender and race, frequently uncover biases influencing the development of theoretical frameworks. (Antony 2001, p. 138). Antony closes one of her studies with a categorical conclusion about the risks of bias contamination to which experimental philosophy itself is subject in the absence of input from feminist epistemology:

„There are dangers associated with asserting the existence of gender differences. Such claims are readily accepted - the evidence in their favour conforms to essentialist thinking about gender and specific stereotypes about gender, so they may be accepted because of confirmation bias rather than impartial examination of the evidence.“ (Antony, 2012, p. 251).

Feminist researcher Lisa Schwartzman argues that in the absence of feminist epistemology and research from "fringe" perspectives experimental philosophy does not provide a sufficiently robust explanation of how insights are formed, and suggests that given the widespread nature of racism and sexism, and the evidence of their effects on all involved and targeted, insights (by philosophers and others) are likely to reflect these biases and perspectives. In this context, she points to the diversity motivation for experimental philosophy, which suggests that otherwise, the insights of philosophers (or scientists who embody this

hypostasis) "who are predominantly white, Western, middle-class men are likely to reflect some biases that might be contradicted if we examined the insights of a diverse range of people. Schwartzman agrees that the intuitions of a dominant, homogenous group may be biased," but she also suggests that the intuitions of majorities in heterogeneous groups may be similarly biased and that certain political and social ideologies will simply be replicated in the data collected by experimental philosophy projects (Schwartzman, 2012, p. 310).

For our part, we are encouraged that recent experimental work on implicit bias seems to suggest that research along the lines of Schwartzman's is on the right track, given that even members of marginalized groups often have implicit biases against the majority groups to which they belong (Nosek & Bar-Anan, 2012). One of the most relevant warning signs about this project is published in a recent article written by Catherine Womack and Norah Mulvaney-Day on feminist bioethics, that specifically challenges the selective/biased employment of surveys in experimental philosophy on two grounds:

„First, given the abstract nature and brevity of the scenarios used, the survey response models underdetermine the psychological processes that led to the responses. Second, the use of methods that do not allow respondents to reformulate the scenarios to reflect the characteristics they consider important in developing their responses may cause philosophers to miss potentially fruitful explanations for responses.” (Womack & Mulvaney-Day, 2012, p. 120).

Our modest research attempts to contribute, by way of illustration, to the case for diversity through the contribution of the comparative empirical research undertaken. One of the important elements counteracting the epistemological relativism attributed to approaches in experimental philosophy in general is the explicit assumption by our subjects (selected with strict adherence to the criteria of representativeness of sociological samples) of a relatively unitary interpretation of the precepts of religious teachings in the context of modernization concerning Muslim women, both among women and men belonging to the respective communities.

Moreover, to combat the simple facade of diversity, very often present in the official statements of institutions, schools of thought, political authors, etc., which is also often adopted in experimental philosophy, we point out that the first volume of the anthology of experimental philosophy edited by Joshua Knobe and Shaun Nichols (Knobe & Nichols, 2008) explicitly devoted to experimental philosophy at the time of its publication, contains exclusively chapters by male authors. This has been corrected in the subsequent volume, where contributions by female authors also appear (Knobe & Nichols, 2013). This development vindicates our belief that if experimental philosophers defend a claim about the importance of intuitions in constructing philosophical theories, and manage to diversify the pool of intuitions that inform these theories, there may not be much cause for concern about diversifying the pool of theorists and skewing their approach to research bias. Thus, the chances increase that research questions aim, through the way they are worded, for the right answers to bring us in line with the experimenters' self-reported diversity motivation.

The danger of essentialism

A final threat we want to mention is that of essentialism, which appears in experimental philosophy. In a 2013 paper Buckwalter and Stich express their - justified - concern about the implications of the thesis that women have systematically different philosophical intuitions than men, including the research into the genesis of these differences (if we are to accept them in the first place) - are they innate, learned, socio-psychologically or contextually contingent, etc.? (Buckwalter & Stich, 2013, p. 27). For example, in Machery et al.'s paper on cross-cultural differences in semantic intuitions, the authors argue that their hypothesis about variations in semantic intuitions is a consequence of classifying Westerners as generally more motivated by "analytic thinking" and East Asians as generally more motivated by "holistic thinking" (Machery et al., 2004, p. 50).

For our part, we believe that examining potential gender and cultural differences does not imply essentialism. We believe that works of experimental philosophy such as this one, placed within the perimeters of cultural studies and the sociology of culture illustrate how theoretical

philosophers who have no training in the social sciences or social theory, or who do not follow the standards commonly applied in these fields, err (misalign theory with practice). The first question is whether these experiments meet the standards necessary to make the kinds of generalizations they claim to make. For example, does not *the* survey *design* applied in large research centers validate the claim that women's philosophical insights differ systematically from men's? It is possible that the lack of a more nuanced approach to such generalising statements contributes to an essentialist or colonialist approach.

The task of examining differences in gender, race or ethnicity is one that feminist epistemology has struggled with for decades. Our comparative study, on minority communities in both Romania and Israel, is intended as an attempt to prevent such risks, even if the insights expressed do not belong to women concerned with philosophy, but whose substance holds important philosophical contents related to the *Weltanschauung* of these people, which includes the religious, ethical, social and political coordinates underlying their representations. Following the field investigation and data processing in the light of the sociological, anthropological, epistemological, psychosociological theories to which we will refer, we will make, even partially, and on a preliminary basis (the extent and novelty of the research and perspectives being new) recommendations inspired by the perspectives of feminist epistemology, including feminist empiricism, leading to a revision of experimental philosophy towards approaches that prioritise qualitative methods and integrate research from a variety of other fields, including anthropology, social psychology, various branches of sociology, public health and comparative literature.

Catherine Womack and Norah Mulvaney-Day also advocate incorporating a qualitative approach:

„What we argue is that philosophers could (and in many cases should) go further into the realm of empirical inquiry, incorporating information not only through quantitative fixed-response surveys of standard thought experiments designed by philosophers, but also by collecting qualitative information about real-life experiences that use the philosophical concepts under discussion. In this way, by enabling people to have the power to

formulate scenarios themselves and identify what features are important to their particular judgments, philosophy truly incorporates individuals' experiences into a coherent, complex, and multifaceted description of important philosophical concepts." (Womack and Mulvaney-Day, 2012, p. 114).

Feminist empiricism

What differentiates feminist empiricism from other feminist epistemologies is the fact that "empirical success is considered a necessary condition for accepting scientific theories, models or auxiliary hypotheses as justified." What differentiates feminist empiricism from other varieties of empiricism is not only the feminist commitment of its practitioners, "but also specific methodological commitments shaped by feminist considerations", such as a closer examination of "the roles that power, gender, and social structures play in empirical investigation, " partially justified "with the goal of improving our theories." One could outline these engagements "not as an investigation of how empiricism can be used in the service of feminism, but rather of how feminist considerations can further the improvement of scientific theories" (Intemann, 2010, p. 780).

Feminist empiricism has long struggled with exactly these issues in terms of empirical methodologies and various feminist empiricist approaches and methodologies have emerged.

Our perspective, which we acknowledge is one among many regarding experimental philosophy, suggests that this field is essentially focused on addressing the theoretical and societal biases that stem from over-relying on a narrow spectrum of perspectives — predominantly those of white, Western, middle-class, male researchers. This viewpoint is mirrored in our extensive review and citation of related literature. Both experimental philosophy and feminist empiricism, in our view, share a common objective: devising methodologies that lessen these biases, thereby facilitating more robust and inclusive progress in knowledge acquisition. Feminist empiricists offer a variety of different views on the nature of bias and different perspectives on objectivity, providing yet another robust body of literature that seems to us directly relevant to experimental philosophy.

Helen Longino, who calls science a subjective interaction, insists that appealing to scientific methodology does not eliminate bias, and offers guidance for cultivating objectivity in scientific communities. Longino does not explicitly mention that she engages with experimental philosophy, and offers an example of a way in which feminist empiricism can help and back experimental philosophers in their endeavours to diminish bias and expand the outlooks which contribute to theorizing in philosophy.

Longino's research primarily advocates for the necessity of critical engagement among scientists with diverse perspectives to counterbalance the impact of individual preferences or foundational assumptions on theory selection (Longino, 1996). She promotes an understanding of objectivity as a feature achievable by scientific communities, rather than solely by individual researchers. Furthermore, Longino critiques approaches to the scientific method that emphasize individual actions over collective, social processes.

Longino implicitly criticizes an idea relevant to experimental philosophy: that individual theorists, in a vacuum, are incapable of developing objective theories. This indicates, in our view, that being bounded by intuitions, philosophical theorizing cannot facilitate the development of universalizable claims.

In order to prove and also apply these principles and concepts, we conducted an ample research (Samih, 2023) which was not a metatheoretical endeavour aimed at refining the understanding of experimental philosophy, but an attempt to illustrate its usefulness in conjunction with feminist epistemology and other compatible *non-mainstream* approaches in sociology (including sociology of religion, economic sociology, family sociology, etc.). Having this limited aim in view, we did not deal with the many criticisms to which experimental philosophy has been subjected to date. From the many disputes we have encountered, we retain only the general (principled) assumptions that seem confirmed by our own research: 1) intuitions are particularly useful for philosophical theorizing, and 2) the more intuitions we probe, the better. In our case, these intuitions were captured through field research conducted in Muslim women's communities in Timisoara and Israel, where we tried to identify the views (often intuitive) of these subjects on the status of Muslim women within these communities and in the latter's relations with Muslim men and society in general, and on modernization

and religion in this complex context. Our findings contain interesting novel elements that challenge both prejudices about Muslims in general and those about women's status in Muslim environments (communities, family) and the supposed anti-modernism of these groups.

The second hypothesis of our sociological study which we used firstly as a *working hypothesis*, and secondly, once confirmed, as the factual basis of the initial theoretical hypothesis of the compatibility between feminist epistemology and experimental philosophy, is the following: "The more Muslim women have experienced Western-type civilization, the more rational their attachment to tradition is, without rejecting Qur'anic precepts" (Samih, 2023).

Recent metaphilosophical studies, notably the widely cited reviews authored by the philosophical practice analyst Vasile Hațegan, illustrate characteristics of philosophical thinking involving ordinary people (that is, non-philosophers as professionals per se), based on empirical evidence or detailed technical descriptions of procedures, both in comparison with and as present within spiritual practices such as religions (Hațegan, 2021a, 603; Hațegan, 2018b, ch. 2); with practical amiable settling of disputes such as mediation (Hațegan, 2018b, ch. 7) applied to daily "situation[s] by solving a conflict or ... a dilemma or life problems" (Hațegan, 2018a, 31); and even with meditation (Hațegan, 2021b, 152). Regarding this last practice, Hațegan examines in detail "the mental processes that can be used in philosophical practice at different times and can be included in meditation to clarify or understand life situations" (Hațegan, 2018c, 140). These thorough analyses (which include detailed monographs) illustrate virtually all major contemporary approaches in philosophical practice, especially in philosophical counseling which operates at length with individual clients' and groups' intuitions and other subjective perceptions of themselves, the others and the world, and the relations between them.

Conclusion:

The experimental philosophy is backed by field research.

Whereas our research has sought to explore, in a comparative registry, the horizons of the expectations of Muslim women –which comprise their intuitions – regarding the pressures of modernizing Muslim

feminism under the impact of globalisation, we considered as operational, both theoretically and practically, the following concepts: muslim feminism, globalization, Islam, modernization, tradition, equality of chances, education. As a working hypothesis, we used as a starting point the following statement: "The more Muslim women have experienced the Western-type civilization, all the more rational is their attachment to tradition, without rejecting the Quranic precepts".

The main method employed was a sociological survey based on questionnaires that we administered in Romania (Timisoara) to Muslim women and in Israel Muslim women in the Arab sector of the country. For measuring attitudes towards feminism we used the Lickert scale (sumative scale); we chose this scale construction model because it facilitates the direct processing of responses received from subjects, given that each subject expresses the degree of agreement or disagreement with a particular problem on the basis of a graphical scale of ranking of responses. After data collection, individual scores can be calculated by summation.

We also used a guided interview guide to explore the motivations underlying their attitudes towards the content of the research topic, that is, to evaluate the effects of Islamophobia generated by excessive media coverage of what Americans call international "terrorism" abusively associated with Arab/Muslim reactions. We have resorted to the "snowball" method, through which we have passed from one topic to another, discovering a remarkable potential for dialogue on all the investigated subjects; overall, we have, there is a consistent perception of sociological research, valued as a precise and truthful source of information capable of countering the continuous dissemination through the media, of long-standing stereotypes in the manipulation of public opinion on the "Arab world", a strange term, emotionally charged and with unjust ideological connotations. Therefore, we questioned virtually all Muslim women in Timisoara and a group of Arab women in Israel in order to be able to compare the perception of women who practice Islam and who live within the Muslim collective mentality, with the same parameter for women living outside this collective mentality, some of whom being even Romanian of Israeli residents who married European citizens of different nationalities. Also in the chapter of documentary analysis, we included exploring the current writings on Islam by authors who practice or practiced this religion, in order to acquire undistorted views of various

stereotypes or clichés very common in the writings of anthropologists, or other researchers from outside the Muslim world, and in conformity with the aforementioned principles borrowed from feminist epistemology (Samih, 2023, ch. 4).

In order to build the research database, we operationalized the instrumental concepts in the two questionnaires we used, which differ only in the wording of the items, the content being practically identical to ensure comparability of the results. We could not compare the results with other similar research, as we did not find other research in sociological literature in Romania, or in other countries. As a method, we used a sociological survey based on a questionnaire. As already mentioned, the database was created through the snowball method, for the reasons outlined above. In a nutshell, our study validated the hypothesis about the perceptions – not in the least at intuitive level – of modernization and Islam among muslim women, a hypothesis which invalidated the mainstream views on these topics. The whole research (Samih, 2023) is a plea for and an application of experimental philosophy fed by sociological research and philosophical practice work on intuitions.

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