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# Ignorance

## How to study what is not known?

As humans and as researchers there is more that we do not know than there is that we do know. Our analysis, and the decisions eventually based on them, are significantly shaped by this fact. Yet, while there is an abundant literature on the epistemology of knowledge, there has been much less attention for ontologies and epistemologies of ignorance. This entry provides an overview of the emerging field of ignorance studies, offering definitions, conceptualizations, and an outline of the key debates in this

growing cross-disciplinary field of study. It also discusses the analytical and methodological implications of engaging with that which is not known.

### *Definitions and concepts*

Ignorance might have intuitive connotations with backwardness or irrationality. In ignorance studies, however, ignorance simply refers to the opposite of knowledge, to not-knowing. As such, however, ignorance can regard many things and therefore requires several specifications. First, whose ignorance are we talking about? Is it a lack of knowledge on the researcher's side that will eventually be remedied throughout the progressing research project? Or is it an empirical phenomenon that concerns the absence of knowledge on behalf of the researcher's data sources or respondents? If so, does this regard specific categories of sources or respondents? Second, if the identified ignorance concerns data sources, do specific people or documents really not know or do they claim not to know? If the professed ignorance seems deceptive, what might be the reasons for alleging not to know about something? And if data sources are genuinely unaware about particular issues, how such ignorance kept in place?

These questions demonstrate how ignorance studies approaches the absence of knowledge as a socio-political phenomenon that can be empirically investigated. Ignorance, therefore, becomes a research object that is 'made, maintained, and manipulated' (Proctor, 2008, p.9) and which can be captured and explained through exploring the structural as well as agential processes that produce it. The above questions also illustrate how ignorance is closely related to a wide array of other concepts that feature prominently in the social and political sciences. Ignorance is associated with silence and taboo, with uncertainty and with ambiguity, as well as with risk and unpredictability, to name but the most prominent of the many relevant concepts available here. Drawing on Michael Smithson's taxonomy, ignorance can be understood as an overarching category that encompasses various forms and states of not-knowing, ranging from doubt to incomplete, faulty, or distorted knowledge.

### *Disciplines, theories, and debates*

The existential epistemological relevance of the notion of ignorance means that it is pertinent to almost all disciplines in the broader social and political sciences. There is a long tradition of psychological and linguistic engagement with the theme of 'silence' (the work of Adam Jaworski and Chalice Randazzo offers a good starting point here). The influential discussion of 'ambiguity' by scholars of management and organization (see for instance Alberto Alesina and Alex Cukierman's work and that of Sally Davenport and Shirley Leitch) similarly resonates with the idea of ignorance. Indeed, uncertainty, ambiguity and 'informational boundedness' have been pivotal issues in psychology, economics, and organization and management, where scholars have been interested in, for instance, the cognitive and managerial effects of withholding information from others on the one hand and 'deliberate inattention' to information inconvenient to the self on the other. An emergent 'anthropology of ignorance' (rising to prominence through the research of Casey High, Ann Kelly, Jonathan Mair, Ilana Gershon, and Dhooleka Sarhadi Raj) has explored and theorized ignorance in the realm of cultivated secrecy and ritualism as well as culturally suppressed knowledge and exclusionary practice. It has thereby pioneered the study of the various ways in which not-knowing is interpreted, enacted, and utilized in everyday life and the related significance of ignorance in processes of identity formation and group and boundary making.

Building on seminal work on the dialectic between power and knowledge, scholars working in the field of political sociology have more explicitly engaged with the political utility and strategic functionality of ignorance. A key premise here is that ‘what we do not know, as much as what we do know, tracks power as it operates in social contexts both past and present’ (Wylie, 2008, p.187-8). Such work on ‘strategic ignorance’ (by, among others, Linsey McGoey, Jennifer Croissant, and Matthias Gross) and ‘epistemic politics’ (for instance by Claudia Aradau) aims to locate instances of deliberate ignorance and explore how the related deniability can help shirk societal responsibility as well as political liability and accountability.

The concept of agnotology (developed by Robert Proctor and Londa Schiebinger) in particular has furthered thinking on strategically produced and cultivated ignorance. Agnotology is the scientific study of ‘agnogenesis,’ the process of generating or maintaining ignorance. It can thus be conceived of as an ‘anti-epistemology:’ Whereas epistemology investigates how knowledge can be uncovered, anti-epistemology asks how it might be obscured. Departing from the premise that ignorance is pervasive; that it is socially constructed; and that it can be advantageous, agnotology thus seeks out the influence of ignorance on human behavior and cognition and aims to investigate how it ‘is constructed, the work it does, and the impact it has’ (Smithson, 2008, p.209). It aims to ‘explore how ignorance is produced or maintained in diverse settings, through mechanisms such as deliberate or inadvertent neglect, secrecy, and suppression, document destruction, unquestioned tradition, and myriad forms of inherent (or avoidable) culturopolitical selectivity’ (Proctor and Schiebinger, 2008, p.vii).

The notion of strategic ignorance reveals how not-knowing has multiple dimensions. On the one hand, social actors – which can be individuals, communities, groups, or organizations – protect or profess their own ignorance. On the other hand, they manufacture the ignorance of others. These two dimensions are closely intertwined: the response to imposed ignorance often takes the form of maintained or feigned ignorance. As Michael Taussig once concluded, knowing what not to know is a crucial kind of knowledge. As such, ignorance studies is not so much concerned with individual ignorance, but with socially salient ignorance. Through diverting attention, exploiting doubt, and ignoring (or actively marginalizing) alternative understandings, ignorance can be used to justify inaction and evade responsibility. This also resonates with work on the ‘politics of uncertainty’ and the ways in which intentional institutional ambiguity can operate as a governance modality (as explored by, for example, Andreas Schedler, Toby C. Jones, Jacqueline Best, and Nora Stel). The work by these scholars thereby draws on previous sociological work on ‘structural amnesia’ (prevalent in the writings of Hanna Arendt), ‘non-thinking,’ and ‘states of denial’ (by Stanley Cohen). It was also inspired by the analyses of James C. Scott on infrapolitics, which he describes as political action that is explicitly designed to disclaim its purpose.

Central here is the observation that, like knowledge, ignorance can be a ‘tool of governance and usurpation’ (McGoey, 2012, p.10). Some actors are economically, socially, culturally, intellectually, and/or politically better positioned or equipped to shape their environment and context. What is knowable and discussable, after all, is not decided on an individual level but negotiated socially and enforced politically. This means that silence and ambiguity can and will be embedded in the organizational structures (such as policies, agreements, and practical precedents) that govern public life. Such institutions (as also apparent in the logics of diplomacy and military intelligence, for example) make sure that either respondents do not have information on certain issues or, if they do, that they see it as disadvantageous to share this information. This can regard institutional silence, when certain issues are

censured or driven into the realm of taboo. Or it can manifest itself in a less conscious attempt to prevent having certain knowledge in the first place. Like silence, ambiguity often also takes institutional forms. In management studies, tellingly, ‘strategic ambiguity’ is defined as ‘the deliberate use of ambiguity in strategic communication in order to create a “space” in which multiple interpretations by stakeholders are enabled and to which multiple stakeholder responses are possible’ (Davenport and Leitch, 2005, p.2).

The investigation of the origins and implications of strategic ignorance as described above has also been taken up by political geographers, which have explicitly explored the material and spatial manifestations of knowledge gaps, thereby bridging research on ignorance with the more established scholarship on informality and informal institutions. Extending, and revising, Giorgio Agamben’s seminal notion of ‘spaces of exception’ that are placed outside regular governance modalities, Elizabeth Dunn and Jason Conns (2014, p.102) have developed the influential twin concepts of ‘sensitive space’ and ‘aleatory sovereignty’ to capture the spatial aspects of what they call ‘the constant making and remaking of shifting landscapes of unpredictable power.’ Scholars such as Oren Yiftachel, Noga Kadman, and Nora Stel have also unraveled how spatial socialization processes have been instrumental in manufacturing social obliviousness and institutionalizing political ignorance. Through documenting physical, cartographic, and institutional erasure strategies, political geography can offer a particularly potent tool to physically locate and analytically pinpoint that what is not known.

While ignorance studies thus draws on and develops work rooted in a wide variety of disciplines, there are several recurrent central debates. These regard, first, causality and intentionality – the question of what drives socio-political ignorance – and, second, researchability. The latter will be taken up in the subsequent sections. The issue of intentionality is per definition elusive when it regards ignorance. How, after all, are we to ‘prove the existence of something for which the very ability to evade detection is a key criterion for success’? (McGoey 2012, p.559) Ignorance studies, however, can help get at the structure-agency dialectic that institutionalizes not-knowing by, as noted above, linking the professed or deliberately maintained ignorance of some with the ignorance that is thereby imposed on (and often reproduced by) others. What is at stake here is to differentiate between ‘things we don’t know we don’t know and things we know we don’t know.’ Such differentiation also demands a distinction between ignorance in the active form (‘ignoring’) and ignorance in its passive form (‘being ignorant’), however hard to capture.

In this regard, different disciplines and scholars operate on a continuum between predominantly structuralist explanations and mainly agency-oriented analyses, often depending on their disciplinary background. Agnotology and related paradigms put a premium on teasing out the political and socio-economic interests that motivate social actors to generate, exacerbate, or keep in place ambiguity, uncertainty, and not-knowing. Anthropological and geographical perspectives tend to focus less on such conscious production of ignorance and instead are more interested in the systemic and often implicit and innate reproduction of institutional ambiguity and societal taboo or silence. These variations in approaching ignorance are also related to the question of whose ignorance is at stake. Whereas political scientists are mostly dealing with the feigned ignorance of those in power, scholars working in a more anthropological fashion tend to focus on the coping mechanisms and resistance strategies of those subjected to such strategic ignorance – as well as the related entrenchment of this imposed ignorance.

## **Ignorance studies as a heuristic device**

Ignorance, in many ways and shapes, is thus a relevant socio-political phenomenon that can and should be academically investigated. Ignorance studies agendizes it as such and offers the heuristic perspective to do so as well as the analytical and methodological insights needed to practically pursue such studies of that which is (professed to be) unknown. What ignorance studies first and foremost demands is an anti-hegemonic understanding of socio-political meaning-making and an appreciation, rather than erasure, of things that ‘do not add up.’ It requires researchers to not take knowledge gaps – their own or their respondents’ – for granted.

### *Analytical implications: Appreciating silences, gaps, and inconsistencies*

Clearly, it is ‘much easier to study what people do discuss than what they do not’ (Zerubavel, 2006, p.13). Yet, for those interested in studying the (allegedly) unknown it is exactly the gaps, silences, contradictions, inconsistencies, taboos, and sensitivities in people’s behavior and discourse and in other data sources that merit attention. As a heuristic device, then, the added value of ignorance studies is that it points scholars such as silence (the absence of any (explicit) response) and ambiguity (inconsistent and/or contradictory responses or accounts). By combining constructivist and institutionalist approaches highlighting the process of generating and maintaining ignorance, and systematically engaging with ignorance as a social creation, ignorance studies can help shed light on the interests that drive the (re-)production of silences and ambiguities (or resistance against them) and the more structural mechanisms that enable it.

As noted above, the relevant social and political science literatures agree on two meta insights on such silence or ambiguity. First, that such ‘non’-responses serve a purpose. And, second, that they are often linked to a broader institutional context. Building on these insights, omissions and ambiguities in the data should be approached not as ‘non-responses’ or deficiencies, but, conversely, as significant clues about the very institutional matters that they ignore or confound. They can be productively understood as ‘knowledge that fails to travel’ rather than as knowledge that does not exist (Mathews, 2008, p.490). The researcher’s concomitant task then becomes to investigate why this is the case.

As such, the analytical strategies associated with ignorance studies stem from two important research traditions: first, work on critical discourse analysis and, second, feminist and postcolonial research. From critical discourse analysis, ignorance studies analysis takes its focus on the relational perspective on agency and structure and the interest in revealing the ways in which power constructions and constellations of hegemony ‘determine which perspectives are preferred and whose voices are heard’ (Schröter, 2013, p.4).

Marxist, feminist, and postcolonial theories have conclusively demonstrated that class, gender, and race ‘produce absences of knowledge’ (Croissant, 2014:11; Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana’s theorization has been central to the field in this regard). Gender and race studies, then, have been at the forefront of developing the emerging field of ignorance studies through theorizing three key insights. First, the consideration of knowledge production – and thereby also the generation of ‘ignorance’ – as contentious and the act of (not) knowing as a political activity (as Lorraine Code, Miranda Fricker, and others have theorized through the notion of ‘epistemic injustice’). Second, the use of the technique of ‘rhetorical listening’ to question the reasons that people use to support truth claims. Third, the centrality

of idea of deconstruction, or to ‘question what seems self-explanatory and turn it into a research puzzle, in a sense, by making the familiar strange’ (Kronsell, 2006, p.110).

### *Methodological tools: Making sense of ‘non-responses’ and recognizing ‘metadata’*

An important aspect of ignorance studies is to capture and analyze what Lee Ann Fujii has coined as ‘meta-data,’ implicit and unspoken thoughts and understandings which are not articulate in data sources, but manifest themselves in rumors, inventions, denials, evasions, and silences. Many topics would lend themselves well to deliberately seek out such metadata as expressions of ‘excluded information’ (or ‘repressed voices’). Such an early awareness of the importance of what is not known or said would indeed be an advantage to studies interested in not-knowing as it allows for more targeted and strategic probing. But, in principle, an ignorance studies lens can be applied to any form of data and need not be adopted throughout the data generation process. It might very well be that only when commencing with analysis, a researcher notes the intriguing amount of gaps and silences or high levels of uncertainty and ambiguity. However, because context and reflexivity are highly important in the analysis of the data, the type of data that can most fruitfully be analyzed through an ignorance studies approach is likely to be qualitative and originating from different data sources.

Exactly because studying what is not there is so elusive, context is essential. In studying what people know and do not know and why, and especially in identifying the linkages between individual and collective forms of silence and ambiguity, we need to take into account all material, spatial, relational, socio-cultural, and political clues available. Analyses grappling with ignorance cannot be based merely on what people say and do not say, but depends on understanding the context in which it is said, exploring timing, intended audience, and reception of what is said and not said. The subject of ignorance studies, as Proctor (1995, p.12) points out, is instances where ‘the dog did not bark;’ data that, at least initially, seem to signal cases in which it is ‘the *absence* of a discovery’ that is in need of explanation.

Apart from a keen awareness of context, scholars venturing into the realm of ignorance studies cannot do without systematic reflexivity. While, as with context, reflexivity is always a requirement for valid research, it becomes even more essential when the topic of interest is inevitably illusory and thereby highly dependent on interpretation. The ‘epistemic uncertainty’ that is the core business of ignorance studies demands that researchers explicitly reflect on their own position. Reflecting on expectations is perhaps the most salient here. Why would we expect people to know or not know something? Do we implicitly assume that uncertainty or ambiguity are exceptional, temporary, or undesirable? How do these expectations and judgments relate to our own institutional, disciplinary, socio-economic, and cultural contexts as scholars? While listening for information that disrupts one’s expectations is a good starting point, this should always be accompanied by a critical reflection on the foundations of these expectations. In the end, researchers play a fundamental role in the societal production of knowledge, but such knowledge should be more than the reification of one’s own cognitive bias or respondents’ knowledge (or the absence thereof). As Proctor (2008, p.26) reminds us: ‘Decisions of what kind of knowledge “we” want to support are also decisions about what kinds of ignorance should remain in place.’

The importance of context and reflexivity for the study of not-knowing means that it will benefit most from a qualitative type of data. The sensitive, complex, situational, and likely inaccessible nature of data on silences, gaps, and uncertainties demands an often predominantly inductive approach.

Understanding context favors an in-depth and local/micro-level approach that is able to capture the nexus between individuals and collectives and between institutions and practice. Practicing reflexivity, moreover, entails immersion through fieldwork, a practical experiencing of what is known and can be known (and by whom) in certain instances and settings. Drawing data from a variety of data sources is essential as well as only this allows researchers to triangulate and to juxtapose what people say and what people do. In investigating the authenticity, origin, function, and scope of specific silences and ambiguities, it is indispensable to contrast information from different target groups and from different sources.

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