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## Management of social ignorance: a cognitive & constructive approach

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### Abstract

Contrary to the view of ignorance and uncertainty as primarily negative, human engagement with ignorance or uncertainty is almost always a mixed-motive enterprise. People sometimes are motivated to discover or create, maintain, and use ignorance (their own as well as others'). The very concept of research, for example, presupposes conscious ignorance about the object of research at the outset; otherwise there is nothing to research. Numerous social relations depend on systematic ignorance arrangements. Trust and politeness are obvious examples. The cohesion and smooth operation of many organizations and institutions hinge on ignorance arrangements, and not only (or even typically) for maintaining power differentials.

**Keywords:** Ignorance, Non-Knowledge, System, Cognitive, Social, Psychology, Constructive.

### 1. Introduction

Common metaphors for ignorance are negative. For example, ignorance is blindness; to know is to see. Or knowledge is power; ignorance is helplessness and impotence. Some of the best illustrations of the overwhelmingly negative bias toward uncertainty and ignorance in the human sciences occur in the psychology and communications literature. However, both of these disciplines also yield valuable concepts and insights for agnotology. Despite of these negative bias, problems and paradoxes, it is possible to attain useful knowledge about ignorance. For Western intellectuals, four characterizations can clear a path to initial insights:

1. Ignorance is socially constructed but this realization neither necessitates relativism nor a denial of "real world" influences.
2. Ignorance is not always a negative aspect of human affairs. In fact, it is an essential component in social relations, organizations, and culture. People are motivated to create and maintain ignorance, often systematically.
3. Ignorance is not invariably a disadvantage for the ignoramus.
4. Ignorance is neither marginal nor aberrant in its impact. It is a pervasive and fundamental influence in human cognition, emotion, action, social relations, and culture.

### Definition & Its terminology

One difficulty plaguing "ignorance" is that the scattered literature on the topic lacks an agreed-on nomenclature. Let us begin by considering terms for the overarching concept in this domain. Böschen and Wehling use the term *nichtwissen*, whose English equivalent is "nonknowledge." This usage echoes earlier proposals for a "sociology of nonknowledge." A related, if less common, term is *nescience* (total ignorance). Alternative usages have referred to a social theory of *ignorance*. Knorr-Cetina introduces the term *negative knowledge*, that is, knowledge of the limits of

Knowing, mistakes in attempts to know, things that interfere with knowing, and what people do not want to know. This concept is quite similar to *closed ignorance* in Faber and Proops. Outside the social sciences, the most popular general term seems to be *uncertainty*. For example, this is so in artificial intelligence. The intuition that there might be different kinds of ignorance has motivated a number of scholars to propose various distinctions and taxonomies. One of the most popular distinctions is absence or neglect versus distortion. Another popular distinction is reducible versus irreducible ignorance, as suggested in the negative-knowledge concepts articulated by Knorr-Cetina and Faber and Proops. A third,

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Often implicit, distinction is between that which can be known versus that which must not be known

### **Ignorance: A Social Construction and Its Cultural Source**

Whereas it is very difficult to know anything directly about our own or anyone else's ignorance, it is not as hard to find out about people's representations and accounts of ignorance. Ignorance, like knowledge, is largely socially constructed. The study of how people represent, explain, justify, and use ignorance also has plenty of room for debates among constructivist positions ranging from relativism to realism.

Most of the literature on uncertainty in disciplines such as economics, psychology, and (to a lesser extent) communications presupposes agreement among all stakeholders on what constitutes knowledge and ignorance.

Yet it seems obvious that the behavior of a dugong in waters off Cape York, Australia, will convey rather different "information" to a marine biologist and a Torres Strait Island fisherman. Accordingly, an in-depth understanding of how ignorance is construed and constituted requires attention to the following particulars. First, what claims are made regarding who is ignorant about what? Second, how do these claims match on aspects of what knowledge and ignorance are, and what can and cannot be known? Third, how are stakeholders using and responding to their own and others' claims about ignorance? What are the consequences of these notions about ignorance in social interaction?

Conversely, constructivist theories have tended to be biologically, psychologically, and economically blind. This error should be avoided in social theories of ignorance, which, after all, concern attributions about mental states and processes. Material from cognitive psychology, ethnology, communication studies, and behavioral economics can help establish connections between ignorance and relevant phenomena, such as selective attention, denial, forgetting, miscommunication, privacy, and trust.

Where, in our cultural stock, do our ideas about ignorance come from? There are two principles, though not exhaustive, sources: *commonsense realism* and *commonsense sociality*. Commonsense realism encompasses everything we believe or think about how the nonsocial world works, including sacred as well as profane domains (to invoke the Durkheimian distinction). Commonsense sociality refers to our beliefs about the social world and includes our theories of mind. Both kinds of common sense are essentially realist. Regardless of the ontological or epistemological positions adopted by scholars and researchers, as Rosa points out, "realism—the idea that a world exists independent of percipient human observers . . . is the bedrock of our commonsense ideas of the world around us" and, more pointedly, many laypersons are ontological realists

### **Management of Social Ignorance**

Put simply, a social theory of ignorance should be about ignorance and it should focus on ignorance with sociocultural origins. The literature on uncertainty and ignorance frequently conflates theoretical concerns. This is an attempt to provide some elementary but helpful

clarifications by distinguishing among four different kinds of accounts that focus on ignorance.

1. *Ignorance as encountered in the external world*: Accounts of how ignorance and uncertainty arise in the nonsocial world. These include science (and scientific accounts of the limits of science, compare Horgan), as well as epistemological and religious frameworks that make claims about nonknowledge.<sup>26</sup> These accounts make strong claims about meta-knowledge and explain ignorance in exogenous (and usually nonsocial) terms.

2. *Ignorance as emergent, constructed, and imposed*: Accounts of how ignorance and uncertainty are constructed, imposed, and manipulated by agents. These accounts treat ignorance as at least partly socially

Constructed. In some cases, ignorance is deliberately or intentionally constructed, whereas in others it emerges as a by-product of some social process. Either way, these can be genuinely social theories of ignorance.

3. *Managing under ignorance*: Accounts of how people think and act in uncertain environments. Some of these accounts may invoke or refer to ignorance and uncertainty, but they are not necessarily theories about those topics.

4. *Managing ignorance*: Accounts of how people think about ignorance or uncertainty and how they act on it. The distinction between this kind of account and (2) is admittedly fuzzy. Accounts in (2) tend to emphasize the notion that the construction and distribution of knowledge and ignorance are implicated in power relations. Accounts that fall in this fourth category place greater emphasis on individual agency, the micro-level, focusing on how people conceptualize, represent, negotiate, and respond to ignorance.

### **Normative Orientations to Handle Social Ignorance**

There are, broadly speaking, three traditional normative orientations regarding how people deal with the unknown in psychology. Perhaps the oldest is the "Knowledge Seeker," contained in the psychoanalytic canons for the well-adjusted individual and found in most branches of ego psychology. This view champions the person who seeks novel information and experience, is open to full and honest communication, can tolerate uncertainty and even ignorance in the short run in order to gain knowledge, and who is not defensive about prior beliefs.

The second tradition, the "Certainty Maximizer," concerns the debilitating consequences of uncertainty, unpredictability, and uncontrollability for the affective, cognitive, and physiological capabilities of the affected organism. Most of the evidence for this viewpoint originates from research concerning learning and adaptation. But an entire set of emotion-based theories also proposes that anxiety is a consequence of uncertainty. Thus, there is a natural tension between this tradition and that of the "Knowledge Seeker."

The third tradition, the "Intuitive Statistician-Economist," originates from psychophysics, perception, and cognitive psychology, and reflects information-processing models of cognition. It is primarily concerned with criteria for rationality in judgment and choice, and the dominant normative viewpoints have been Bayesian probability and a view of humans as hedonic (seeking pleasure and avoiding

pain). This view has a lot in common with neo-classical economics.

### Social Ignorance: A Cognitive Deficit Approach

Ignoramuses are not always worse off than knowledgeable folk; in fact there are plenty of contexts in which it can be demonstrated that they are better off. Imagine for a moment that humans were endowed with the ability and a compulsion to indiscriminately absorb all information that came their way and retain all of it for a lifetime. As Luria concluded in his study of just such a person, higher cognitive functions such as abstraction or even mere classification would be extremely difficult. Information acquired decades ago would be as vividly recalled as information acquired seconds ago, so older memories would interfere with more recent and usually more relevant recollections.

William James proposed that forgetting is just as important as remembering and to link it with selectivity of information processing. A more elaborate version of this functionalist argument is that “the memory system (a) meets the informational demands stemming from environmental stimuli by retrieving memory traces associated with the stimuli and (b) acts on the expectation that environmental stimuli tend to recur in predictable ways.”

### Adaptive Interest and Function of Social Ignorance

Specialization is a social ignorance arrangement. The stereotypical explanation for specialization is that it arises when there is too much for any one person to learn everything. But viewed from an adaptation standpoint, specialization is an example of spreading risk in three respects. First, the risks of direct learning (versus vicarious learning, which is less risky) are spread across the population by diversifying learning. Second, the risk of being ignorant about crucial matters is spread by diversifying ignorance. Third, the risks associated with bearing knowledge also are diversified. As with any kind of risk spreading, specialization requires various forms of social cooperation to yield these benefits.

Privacy is an example of another kind of social ignorance arrangement. Privacy often has been construed as control over access by others to information, mainly about the self. As Warren and Laslett point out, privacy involves a consensual and essentially cooperative ignorance arrangement, whereas secrecy is unilaterally imposed.

Polite social interaction is another important example of how social relations trade on ignorance. In polite conversation, conversationalists do not expect to deal in the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Brown and Levinson elaborate various strategic requirements of politeness. As pointed out, those strategies often are achieved via disinformation (for example, promoting a false impression of approval), or by referential abbreviation (particularly vagueness and ambiguity, as in tactful utterances).

Finally, let us consider ignorance as a legitimating influence. Ignorance is used in various guises to justify inaction, maintenance of the status quo, opportunism, evasion of responsibility or culpability, and risk management policies. For example, Western legal traditions distinguish between civil cases in which a guilty verdict may be returned on the

“balance of probabilities” and criminal cases wherein guilt must be established “beyond reasonable doubt.”

### Conclusion

The study of ignorance almost inevitably confronts us with prescriptive questions, that is, how people “should” deal with ignorance. As has already been the case in debates about rationality, it is very likely that cross-disciplinary Debates about the study of ignorance will also encompass debates about prescriptions for dealing with it. Nor should the consideration of prescriptions be limited to the “rational.” They should encompass moral philosophy as well. When is ignorance “virtuous” and why?

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