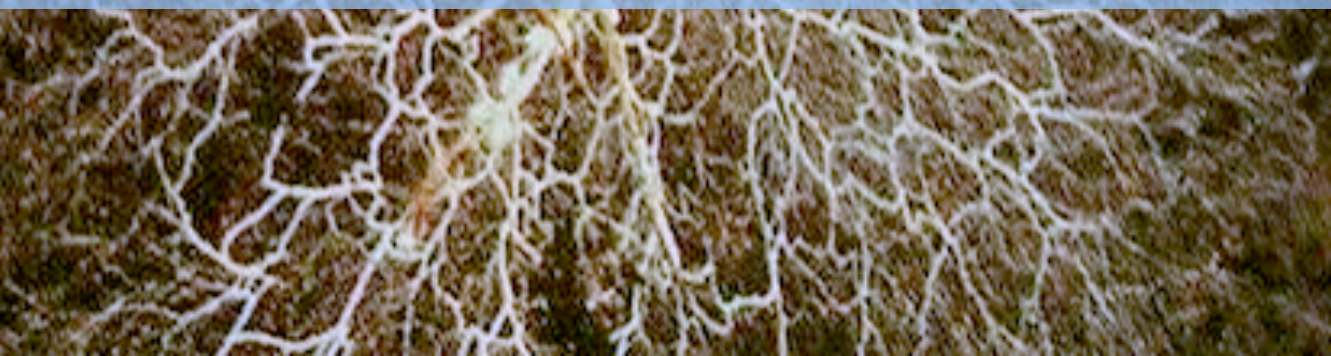
ephemera: theory and politics in organization

Organized ignorance



What is *ephemera: theory & politics in organization*?

ephemera is an independent journal, founded in 2001. *ephemera* provides its content free of charge, and charges its readers only with free thought.

theory
ephemera encourages contributions that explicitly engage with theoretical and conceptual understandings of organizational issues, organizational processes and organizational life. This does not preclude empirical studies or commentaries on contemporary issues, but such contributions consider how theory and practice intersect in these cases. We especially publish articles that apply or develop theoretical insights that are not part of the established canon of organization studies. *ephemera* counters the current hegemonization of social theory and operates at the borders of organization studies in that it continuously seeks to question what organization studies is and what it can become.

politics
ephemera encourages the amplification of the political problematics of organization within academic debate, which today is being actively de-politized by the current organization of thought within and without universities and business schools. We welcome papers that engage the political in a variety of ways as required by the organizational forms being interrogated in a given instance.

organization
Articles published in *ephemera* are concerned with theoretical and political aspects of organizations, organization and organizing. We refrain from imposing a narrow definition of organization, which would unnecessarily halt debate. Eager to avoid the charge of 'anything goes' however, we do invite our authors to state how their contributions connect to questions of organization and organizing, both theoretical and practical.

ephemera
theory & politics in organization

ephemera 23(1), April 2023

Organized ignorance

Tore Bakken, Morten Knudsen and Justine Grønbæk Pors

Published by the *ephemera* editorial collective: Bernadette Loacker, Birke Otto, Christian Garmann Johnsen, Christos Giotitsas, Ekaterina Chertkovskaya, Emil Husted, Hannah Grün, Justine Grønbæk Pors, Jette Sandager, Karolina Mikołajewska-Zając, Lena Olaison, Lisa Conrad, Lisa Wiedemann, Márton Rácz, Mie Plotnikof, Nick Butler, Ozan Nadir Alakavuklar, Randi Heinrichs, Rowland Curtis, Yousaf Nishat-Botero and Yousra Rahmouni Elidrissi.

First published for free online at www.ephemerajournal.org.

ISSN (Online) 1473-2866

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 Unported. To view a copy of this license, visit http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/ or send a letter to Creative Commons, 171 Second Street, Suite 300, San Francisco, California, 94105, USA.

ephemera
theory & politics in organization

Table of contents

Editorial

Organised ignorance 1-18
Morten Knudsen, Justine Grønbæk Pors and Tore Bakken

Articles

Digitalize and deny: Pluralistic collective ignorance in an algorithmic profiling project 19-48
Ursula Plesner and Lise Justesen

Constructing unknowers, destroying whistleblowers 49-74
Kate Kenny

Unintended ignorance: The narrative of 'the missing patient voice' 75-105
Betina Riis Asplin

A shared zone of ignorance: Considering practices of seeing and unseeing in and around nursing stations in two psychiatric wards 107-131
Holger Højlund and Thorben Simonsen

Economization: The (re-)organization of knowledge and ignorance according to 'the market' 133-159
Theresa Steffestun and Walter Otto Ötsch

The organization of ignorance: An ethnographic study of the production of subjects and objects in an artificial intelligence project 161-187
Line Kirkegaard, Anders Raastrup Kristensen and Tomas Skov Lauridsen

Notes

You can't report what you don't know: Methodological considerations of an ethnographer navigating organizational secrecy 189-200
Elise Lobbedez

Seeing blindness: A combined psychodynamic and interactional approach to the study of ignoring 201-215
Christian Dyrlund Wåhlin-Jacobsen and Elisabeth Naima Mikkelsen

How to study strategic ignorance in organizations: A material approach 217-230
Meghan Van Portfliet and Mahaut Fanchini

Reviews

Oracles, ignorance and expertise: The struggle over what not to know 231-242
Philipp Arnold

ephemera
theory & politics in organization

© the author(s) 2023
ISSN 1473-2866 (Online)
www.ephemerajournal.org
volume 23(1)

Organised ignorance

Morten Knudsen, Justine Grønbæk Pors and Tore Bakken

This special issue explores the role of ignorance in contemporary organisations.[1] In recent years, ignorance has received growing attention in sociology, organisation studies and cultural studies (Gross and McGoey, 2015). Scholars have taken an interest in how corporations invest time and resources in producing and maintaining ignorance (Proctor, 2008). Organisations' ability to marginalise potentially uncomfortable knowledge can be crucial and rich and important work has illuminated how organisations manage ignorance strategically. Studies of ignorance have revealed how ignorance is weaponised as individual and corporate actors gain from the production of ignorance and the concealment of information from the public. While ignorance and knowledge are often thought of as opposing phenomena, research demonstrates how ignorance may be a carefully manufactured and productive asset that helps individuals and organisations to command resources, deny liability and continue with operations that have harmful effects (McGoey, 2012b; Michaels, 2008; Oreskes and Conway, 2011; Proctor and Schiebinger, 2008).

With this special issue we aim to move the field of ignorance studies forward – conceptually, methodologically and empirically – by exploring the work and practices involved in producing and maintaining ignorance. The contributions are characterised by conceptual developments and empirical

[1] The cover depicts the arbuscular mycorrhizal fungi. The authors thank Professor Emeritus David Read for kindly allowing us to use the photo.

studies that go beyond an understanding of ignorance as something driven by strategic intentions and performed by individual or collective actors. With the construct of organised ignorance, we do not treat organisations as unitary strategic entities; instead, organised ignorance references what Justesen and Plesner (in this issue) call pluralistic collective ignorance. This highlights how ignorance is produced and reproduced in daily interactions between multiple social actors and the recognition that they may have differing and ambivalent agendas. As such, ignorance is conceptualised differently when we zoom in on organisational processes and the plurality of actors involved in acts of ignoring and the (re)production of ignorance.

The articles in this special issue explore the constitution, dynamics and functions of diverse forms of ignorance with a special focus on the different kinds of work it takes to produce and sustain ignorance. The contributions investigate the work involved in ignoring or repressing what is known, and the practices of 'unseeing' that allow organisational actors to know what not to know (Otto et al., 2019). Such practices of ignoring are entangled with artefacts, affects, infrastructures, dynamics of power and diverse organisational rationalities. Thus, we suggest conceptualising organised ignorance as an emergent result of the entanglement of practices, processes, structures and power. With this construct we are able to ask questions regarding how ignorance emerges and unfolds in organisations – without assuming that organisations are unitary strategic entities.

The organisation of ignorance tends to remain in the background of organisational self-descriptions and may therefore be a challenging phenomenon to study. A set of methodological problems accompany this research, as does the study of absences in general (Frickel, 2014). Ignorance seldom flags itself as such and the obvious answer to the question 'what do you not know?' is 'I do not know'. To go beyond such answers, methodologies are required that make it possible to identify the processes, infrastructures, organisational structures and dynamics of power that allow people and organisations to not know. In this special issue we have therefore devoted a special section reflecting on methodological questions in the study of organised ignorance.

Below, we first review and discuss previous work on ignorance in organisation and management studies and beyond. Thereafter, we offer some reflections on how we can think about organised ignorance. This sets the scene for a presentation of the individual contributions. Finally, we read across the contributions to summarise the offerings of this issue to fields of ignorance and organisation studies.

Ignorance studies

In the concluding remarks following his review of studies of ignorance in organisations, Jalonen (2023) states, 'the fundamental question remains what exactly is meant by ignorance in organisations'. Indeed, numerous concepts have been offered to unpack ignorance in organisations. Conceptual discussions of ignorance (Croissant, 2014; El Kassar, 2018) have not developed typologies of ignorance per se but of observers' consciousness of ignorance (such as known unknowns, unknown unknowns, unknown knowns) (Gross, 2007, 2010; Kerwin, 1993; Roberts, 2013). Moreover, studies of ignorance experiment with different conceptualisations. Concepts like nescience (Gross, 2010), negative knowledge (Cetina, 1999: 63ff), non-knowledge (Luhmann, 2022), active ignorance (Medina, 2013), strategic ignorance (McGoey, 2012a) and wilful ignorance (Alvesson et al., 2022; Schaefer, 2019) all consider different aspects of ignorance.

Ignorance is often conceived of as an absence or a lack; however, this does not mean that it is without importance, impact and consequences (Croissant, 2014). In her 'sociology of nothing', Scott (2018) notes that 'nothing is always productive of something'. As nothing, as absence, ignorance may very well have organisational preconditions, functions (Moore and Tumin, 1949) and constitutive effects (Paul and Haddad, 2019). Ignorance – and especially its other side, knowledge – has been associated with selection. In the book *Information, Mechanism and Meaning* MacKay (1969) examines how information is always a form of selection and not merely a transfer in the physical sense. Information includes an observer and the selections made by the observer. Different observers obtain different information depending on the frameworks of meaning that guide their observations. Something is selected as information – the rest remains in the

dark. Knowledge – and thus also ignorance – is a result of complexity and necessary selection processes from this perspective.

Along with selection and ignorance are concepts such as uncertainty (Smithson, 1989) and risk. Gross (2016) suggests that Beck's theory of the risk society should be complemented with a theory of non-knowing. The argument is that 'numerous spheres of action and politics in contemporary societies are conditioned by non-knowing rather than by knowledge' (Beck and Wehling, 2012: 33). From this perspective ignorance is a condition, while the reaction to it is politicised. The politicisation of non-knowing was illustrated in the different reactions to Covid-19. No one knew how the disease would develop and what the adequate reactions would be. This raised the question of how to navigate the ignorance regarding the disease. Ignorance about the disease and its dynamics was an important element in the decision-making (Parviainen et al., 2021).

A number of studies have explored ignorance not only as a condition, but also as socially constructed. Across fields such as economics (Davies and McGoey, 2012), psychology (Hertwig and Engel, 2016), anthropology (High, Kelly and Mair, 2012), environmental studies (Gross, 2010; Kleinman and Suryanarayanan, 2013), sociology of medicine (Duttge, 2015; Heimer, 2012), feminist and race studies (Sullivan and Tuana, 2007; Staunæs and Conrad, 2019) scholars have explored how ignorance is constructed and negotiated. This focus on the social construction of ignorance brings attention to relationships between ignorance and power. Studies demonstrate how ignorance is a resource for those in a position of power (McGoey, 2012b). Knowledge is power, but so is the control of ignorance and to control the line between knowledge and ignorance is clearly a form of power – what McGoey (2019) calls oracular power. Ignorance and self-interest are indeed related. This has triggered studies on the strategic social production and maintenance of ignorance. Ignorance may be related to specific facts and information such as the relationships between smoking and cancer (Proctor, 2008), between antidepressants and suicide (McGoey, 2007) or between fossil fuels and the climate crises (Oreskes and Conway, 2011). But it may also be of a more generic nature. Terms like situated knowledge (Haraway, 1988), standpoint theory (Harding, 2004) and white ignorance (Mills, 2015) emphasise how knowledge – and thus ignorance – is tied to certain

perspectives and categories (gender, race, class etc). In this context, Kleinman and Suryanarayanan (2013) discuss 'epistemic forms', referring to the concepts, methods and interpretational perspectives that shape what is known and thus also what cannot be known.

Attention to how ignorance is (also) socially constructed, strategic and wilful has opened questions about the different and complex manners in which ignorance is produced. Perhaps the most obvious strategy is to hide and suppress knowledge in the form of secrets which make others ignorant. A growing number of studies explore processes of hiding and secrecy in organisations (Alvesson et al., 2022; Bakken and Wiik, 2018; Costas and Grey, 2014; Essén et al., 2022; McGoey, 2012a, 2012b, 2019; Knudsen, 2011; Knudsen and Kishik, 2022; Roberts, 2013; Schaefer, 2019). Scholars analyse how ignorance can be produced by casting doubt on certain knowledge (Michaels, 2008; Oreskes and Conway, 2011), suppressing knowledge (McGoey, 2019), organisational compartmentalisation and decoupling (Heimer, 2012; Schaefer, 2019) and an overabundance of data (Schwarzkopf, 2020). Studies also investigate how actors themselves can strive to be ignorant – to avoid liability (Brice et al., 2020; Luhmann, 2022) or to avoid uncomfortable (Rayner, 2012), awkward (Heimer, 2012), potentially destructive (Goffman, 1990) or disconfirming (Schaefer, 2019) knowledge. Terms like 'unseeing' (Otto et al., 2019) and forms of inattentiveness (Knudsen, 2011) indicate the ways in which actors ignore information that they do not want (Dedieu et al., 2015). Relatedly, Essén et al. (2022) study how self-inflicted ignorance is made possible by 'ignoring rationales' understood as actors' explanations and justifications of why they ignore data which they have themselves produced. Ignorance can be used as means to preserve power but may also have positive functions as it can guard against prejudices or unwanted knowledge regarding medical issues (Hoeyer et al., 2015; Wehling, 2015).

While most of the existing literature tends to focus on strategic ignorance, recent work moves beyond assuming that ignorance is always intentional (Frickel and Edwards, 2014). Paul, Vanderslott and Gross (2022) broaden the perspective under the title 'institutional ignorance', conceiving of ignorance as an integral aspect of institutions and institutional operations. Recognising the significance of this institutional perspective, with this issue,

we seek to move the concept of ignorance beyond actor-based terms. We endeavour to explore ignorance as an organisational phenomenon – not (only) as intentional, strategic, deliberate or wilful but as a distributed, collective, enacted and emergent phenomenon. Thus, we offer the concept of organised ignorance in addition to a range of contributions that all empirically investigate how ignorance becomes possible through different forms of organising.

Contributions

This special issue includes six articles exploring organised ignorance, three notes discussing the methodological challenges of studying ignorance and one book review.

Based on a study of a digitalisation flagship project that failed to fulfil its promises of efficiency gains and improved services, Ursula Plesner and Lise Justesen offer the term 'pluralistic collective ignorance'. This construct references ignorance in the form of collective denying, as almost all actors contribute to it, but it is also plural as the members do not necessarily agree, share norms or act in consistent ways. Multiple and diverse motivations and strategies are involved in the collective denial of the failing digitalisation project. The article investigates the different ways human and non-human actors maintain ignorance about the failing project. A core concept is denial which involves perception but also a refusal to accept the potential implications of this perception. Tech optimism and tech determinism are among the factors that enable the denials. The article demonstrates how organised ignorance may be the emergent result of different actors with different purposes, tasks and ways of denying.

The second article is Kate Kenny's study of whistleblowing as a form of counter-ignorance practice. Like the other contributions to this issue, Kenny's study demonstrates the ways in which ignorance rests on processes of organising and foreground questions of power and the political in relationship to ignorance. Drawing on the work of Judith Butler, the paper develops a framework of censorship that is appropriate for investigating how some speech acts are deemed impossible, un-hearable and non-sensical with

the concomitant dismissal and exclusion of the speaker. By examining how national security and intelligence organisations react to whistleblowers, the article demonstrates how ignorance depends on maintaining and reinforcing an organisational and institutional matrix of control that creates an implicit, normative 'domain of the sayable'. Kenny argues that whether and how whistleblowers are listened to can depend on the framing of their subjectivities by others with whom they interact. Thus, she reveals how ignorance is maintained via the organisation of the authority to influence what can be known and what must not be acknowledged; what can be said and what is successfully upheld as un-sayable. Ignorance is thus maintained via the censorship of certain speech acts and the vilification of those who make them.

Betina Riis Asplin examines how what she calls 'unintended ignorance' can arise when patients are involved in redesigning health services. In the Norwegian health service, there has been a desire for patients to be more involved when it comes to designing tomorrow's health service – so-called user participation. The research presents an ethnographic study based on the actor–network theory (ANT), emphasising translation processes. In ANT, knowledge is a consequence of a wide range of material resources, actors and networks that involve heterogeneous bits and pieces; test tubes, reagents, organisms, skilled hands, scanning electron microscopes, radiation monitors, other scientists, computer terminals and other elements. Riis Asplin's study uses the concept of translation from ANT to illustrate how ignorance emerges when the desire for a patient-centred project was translated into a specific concept of 'the missing patient voice', in which actors were enrolled and unintentionally contributed to the actual patients' voices being ignored. This is how 'labels' and/or other non-human actors can help to create ignorance. A paradoxical effect is thus established in which the patient-centred care project translated into the label of 'missing patient voice', which gradually enrolled other actors and which, paradoxically, resulted in ignoring patients' voices.

Holger Højlund and Thorben Simonsen show how a psychiatric hospital built of glass would generally be thought to ensure a space that is open and transparent for both patients and staff; however, the use of glass walls creates conditions in which patients and care providers place 'self-imposed

restrictions' on their actions and observations. Ignorance is not only an objective occurrence but a relational concept. The study shows how patients react as ignorant individuals when they observe staff communicating but cannot hear what they are saying when they are behind glass walls of the nursing stations. In such a circumstance, an interaction can easily be created that is the opposite of what was intended by the transparent glass walls. Højlund and Simonsen draw on the philosopher Peter Sloterdijk's (2016) concepts of spheres and social spaces. Spheres are arranged in such a way that they create fragile compromises between the parties in an interaction when they separate an inside and an outside between them. Spheres require attention and supervision when people have to engage with one another, as material surroundings then become important. In Højlund and Simonsen's contribution, we gain insight into how a psychiatric hospital can be thought of as a sphere of sociality, where the intention is to maintain co-sociality, but where spatial and material conditions structure the way people interact and how the parties see and do not see each other. This results in unintended consequences from an architecture that was meant to contribute to openness and transparency. In this way 'zones of ignorance' are created. The empathetic intentions regarding openness and visibility shaped into the architecture are not realised but replaced with new forms of boundaries.

Theresa Steffestun and Walter Ötsch highlight processes of economisation in modern societies, particularly how economisation can be an act of epistemic imperialism which is understood as an act of subsuming the diversity of reality under one singular concept – the market. Viewed from the organisational ignorance perspective, epistemic imperialism (based on a pure market interpretation of the economy) knows no boundaries, while complementary disqualifying knowledge of those boundaries as illegitimate. The dichotomy of legitimate and illegitimate knowledge controls and organises the landscape of knowledge and ignorance in societies. The article discusses and challenges economist Friedrich A. Hayek's concept of the market as 'efficient' in terms of information, which is crucial when it comes to what is interpreted as knowledge. To Hayek knowledge is information about market prices and prices are like languages, and buyers respond to prices in rational ways. As with language, prices are the building blocks from which people form mutual expectations of the market. The efficient market

hypothesis claims that financial markets are efficient because prices always reflect all available information. Hayek's approach in which economic behaviour is an unconscious reaction to a given set of market rules implies that the problem of human ignorance has its solution in the market. Drawing on a wider perspective of analysing the economic system, the article challenges the concept of economisation and 'market-based' knowledge.

Drawing on Deleuze's interpretation of the Nietzschean concept of a 'will to ignorance' Line Kirkegaard, Anders R. Kristensen and Tomas S. Lauridsen analyse how ignorance has organising effects as it fosters fantasies. The authors do not treat ignorance as strategic or intentional but as a productive force that forms subjects and objects of ignorance. The paper presents a fascinating case based on a public administration artificial intelligence (AI) project. An algorithm for decision support forms an object of ignorance as the management team in charge of the project does not know how the algorithm works. The algorithm originally targeted case workers working with the unemployed but ignorance about the algorithm triggers a process in which a general question about the reasons for unemployment is raised. Ignorance (now about the reasons for unemployment) leads to the idea that ongoing unnecessary unemployment is due to a lack of creativity, professionalism and knowledge among employees and a lack of initiative among the unemployed. A line of wishful fantasies regarding the algorithm follows. In these fantasies the unemployed are highly motivated, able to read and write unhindered in Danish and able to use this kind of app. A new caseworker is also imagined who is able to identify opportunities that are invisible to the unemployed and is an expert in handling tough conversations and motivating people to lose weight if relevant. Obvious objections against the fantasies are ignored and the fantasies proliferate on the ground of ignorance. The original ignorance about the algorithm thus instigated a process in which both the algorithm, case workers and unemployed were re-interpreted and re-imagined. The article demonstrates how fantasies can compensate for the empty space left by ignorance.

Elise Lobedez's note indicates the start of the methodological section. It reflects on the methodological challenges she faced as an ethnographer navigating organisational secrecy in the context of an ethnographic study of the French yellow vest movement. In this politically charged context of high

risk activism, the researcher regularly weighed up the pros and cons of knowing versus not knowing to evaluate the potential consequences for her research trajectory, position on the field and the production of the ethnographic accounts as well as in relationship to her personal life and safety. As the activists that Lobedez studied shared a common motto: 'You can't report to the police or leak information you don't know', the ethnographic work became an oscillation between becoming a knowledgeable agent and accepting the state of remaining in the dark. Thus, the reflective note offers a mapping of the dilemmas of studying communities in which the distribution of ignorance has a key role as an immune mechanism against legal sanctions and prosecutions.

Christian Wåhlin-Jacobsen and Elisabeth Naima Mikkelsen ask how we can examine that which is ignored and thus is not directly observable. Their answer draws on a discursive psychological perspective and suggests combining a psychodynamic perspective with conversation analysis. While the psychodynamic perspective is associated with the study of unconscious processes, conversation analysis is strictly focused on the observable. The authors suggest that the unconscious may become manifest in interactions in the form of irrational or unreasonable practices and contradictions which work as defences against unconscious emotions. Traces of defence mechanisms are revealed through conversation analysis of interactions. The authors demonstrate how ignoring practices (conceptualised as 'blindness' in psychodynamics) can be observed by means of an exemplary and detailed analysis of an interactional sequence between a nurse at an emergency call centre and a man calling for help. The analysis shows how unconscious processes can promote ignoring, and how this ignoring can be examined by means of conversation analyses.

Finally, in their note, Meghan Van Portfliet and Mahaut Fanchini suggest a methodological strategy for studying ignorance by focusing on the role of objects in producing or maintaining ignorance. Rereading Susan Leigh Star's (1989) work on boundary objects, they explore how attention to objects that travel between parties can be sites of ignorance. Star (1989: 46) famously defines a boundary object as an object which is plastic enough to adapt to local needs and constraints of the several parties employing them, yet robust enough to maintain a common identity across sites. While this concept is

often used in research regarding how knowledge and knowledge practices are shared and translated, Van Portfliet and Fanchini propose that boundary objects are sites where knowledge and ignorance co-exist, as meanings are both present and absent for those involved. As such, boundary objects have an influence in the production and maintenance of ignorance as well as making collective practices of ignoring possible. This assertion makes it possible to develop a methodology for observing practices of ignoring that are often hidden from the ethnographer's view.

The special issue also includes a book review. In 'Oracles, ignorance and expertise: The struggle over what not to know', Philipp Arnold reviews *The Unknowers: How Strategic Ignorance Rules the World* (McGoey, 2019). The book is a philosophical and sociological investigation of strategic ignorance. It approaches ignorance not in contrast to knowledge or interest, but as an arena of a social power struggle. Arnold reviews the book and discusses its aspirations to offer at once a political intervention and a sociological analysis.

Key learning points and new agendas

Across the contributions of this issue, a set of insights emerges that advances our understanding of organised ignorance. While it is clear that many aspects of this construct remain to be explored, these contributions expand our understanding of what characterises organised ignorance.

Ignorance is enacted. Albeit in diverging manners, all the contributions in this issue theorise and examine ignorance as a practice rather than as a cognitive phenomenon in which knowledge may be available but does not make a difference as people act as if they are ignorant. Organised ignorance may thus be understood as enactment rather than a question of cognition. What is enacted is the selection of knowledge and ignorance. Organised ignorance can be understood as both selective structures ordering what people should know and not know *and* as the enactment of these selections in specific situations.

Ignorance is enabling. The contributions document how ignorance can enable the continuation of certain practices despite the fact that knowledge that

might challenge or threaten this practice could be selected. The contributions clearly demonstrate how this practice has functions and functions that often benefit the continuation of the existing practice and organisational projects – as demonstrated by the analyses of Kenny (this issue) and Justesen and Plesner (this issue).

Ignorance is productive. It *does* something; it holds agency. Kirkegaard, Kristensen and Lauridsen (this issue) and Højlund and Simonsen (this issue) show how the lack of knowledge triggers different kinds of activities and fantasies. Ignorance may instantiate a replacement logic as the lack of knowledge is replaced by guesses and fantasies.

Ignorance is relational. As illustrated in Højlund and Simonsen's article ignorance is not only an objective occurrence but a relational concept (for instance between patients and staff and material structures). To know something means to have something in an attention-observing horizon. In this horizon a recognition-object is constituted as an 'epistemic object' without being able to articulate the object with complete certainty. The completeness of knowledge is replaced by a search for relevant knowledge. Is our current knowledge regarding the impact of material structures to our lives all too limited? Should we always consider transparency as advantageous? Here, it is not calculation and justification, but judgement and responsibility that are emphasised.

Ignorance can be socially constructed. Several of the contributions enhance the understanding of ignorance as a collective rather than solely individual accomplishment (e.g. Højlund and Simonsen, this issue; Kenny, this issue; Plesner and Justesen, this issue). Ignorance emerges via communities. We have experienced how communities of ignorance are supported by organisational arrangements (in the form of IT-systems, decision making procedure and architectural arrangements). The organisation is geared in ways which make it possible to remain ignorant, e.g. about things that do not work (Plesner and Justesen, this issue). This also means that ignorance is not necessarily driven by clear intentions. Organisational members may also be ignorant about the reasons for their ignorance and denial, as demonstrated in the contribution by Wåhlin-Jacobsen and Mikkelsen (this

issue), in which the actors are not conscious about the drivers of their own acts of denial.

Ignorance is non-human. Ignorance involves human collaboration as well as non-human actors such as glass walls (Højlund and Simonsen, this issue), contracts (Van Portfliet and Fanchini, this issue) and apps (Plesner and Justesen, this issue). Several contributions explore the role of materiality in supporting, mediating and or enabling ignorance. Rather than computer supported decision systems, we get computer supported ignorance systems and ignorance-supported computer systems. Information systems that could produce more information and knowledge co-produce ignorance but also presuppose ignorance.

In summary, the contributions move beyond the understanding of ignorance as a cognitive and/or individual phenomenon and expand our understanding of what we have termed organised ignorance. The analyses contribute to our understanding of organised ignorance as well as our understanding of the politics of organising. If the political is the constitutive moment of the social (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985) then ignorance is definitely political. Ignorance involves deciding what can be talked about and what cannot be talked about; what should be remembered or forgotten; known or not known; seen or unseen.

references

Alvesson, M., K. Einola and S.M. Schaefer (2022) 'Dynamics of wilful ignorance in organizations', *The British Journal of Sociology*, 73(4): 839–858.

Bakken, T. and E.L. Wiik (2018) 'Ignorance and organization studies', *Organization Studies*, 39(8): 1109–1120.

Beck, U. and P. Wehling (2012) 'Politics of nonknowing: An emerging area of social and political conflict in reflexive modernity', in P. Baert and F.D. Rubio (eds.) *The politics of knowledge*. London: Routledge.

Brice, B., A. Donaldson and J. Midgley (2020) 'Strategic ignorance and crises of trust: Unanticipating futures and governing food supply chains in the shadow of Horsegate', *Economy and Society,* 49(4): 619–641.

Cetina, K.K. (1999) *Epistemic cultures: How the sciences make knowledge*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard UP.

Costas, J. and C. Grey (2014) 'Bringing secrecy into the open: Towards a theorization of the social processes of organizational secrecy', *Organization Studies*, 35(10): 1423–1447.

Croissant, J.L. (2014) 'Agnotology: Ignorance and absence or towards a sociology of things that aren't there', *Social Epistemology*, 28(1): 4–25.

Davies, W. and L. McGoey (2012) 'Rationalities of ignorance: On financial crisis and the ambivalence of neo-liberal epistemology', *Economy and Society,* 41: 64–83.

Dedieu, F., J.N. Jouzel and A. Jacobs-Colas (2015) 'How to ignore what one already knows', *Revue française de sociologie*, 56(1): 105–133.

Duttge, G. (2015) 'Rechtlich-normative Implikationen des Rechts auf Nichtwissen in der Medizin', in P. Wehling (ed.) *Vom Nutzen des Nichtwissens. Sozial und kulturwissenschaftliche Perspektiven.* Bielefeld, GE: Transcript Verlag.

El Kassar, N. (2018) 'What ignorance really is. Examining the foundations of epistemology of ignorance', *Social Epistemology*, 32(5): 300–310.

Essén, A., M. Knudsen and M. Alvesson (2022) 'Explaining ignoring: Working with information that nobody uses', *Organization Studies*, 43(5): 725–747.

Frickel, S. (2014) 'Absences: Methodological note about nothing, in particular', *Social Epistemology*, 28(1): 86–95.

Frickel, S. and M. Edwards (2014) 'Untangling ignorance in environmental risk assessment', in S. Boudia and N. Jas (eds.) *Powerless science?: Science and politics in a toxic world*. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books.

Goffman, E. (1990) *The presentation of self in everyday life*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Gross, M. (2007) 'The unknown in process: Dynamic connections of ignorance, non-knowledge and related concepts', *Current Sociology,* 55(5): 742–759.

Gross, M. (2010*) Ignorance and surprise: Science, society, and ecological design*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press.

Gross, M. (2016) 'Risk as zombie category: Ulrich Beck's unfinished project of the "non-knowledge" society', *Security Dialogue*, 47(5): 386–402.

Gross, M. and L. McGoey (eds.) (2015) *Routledge international handbook of ignorance studies*. London: Routledge.

Haraway, D. (1988) Situated knowledges: The science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective', *Feminist Studies*, 14(3): 575–599.

Harding, S. (ed) (2004) *The feminist standpoint theory reader: Intellectual and political controversies*. New York: Routledge.

Heimer, C. (2012) 'Inert facts and the illusion of knowledge: Strategic uses of ignorance in HIV clinics', *Economy and Society,* 41: 17–41.

Hertwig, R. and C. Engel (2016) 'Homo ignorans', *Perspectives on Psychological Science,* 11(3): 359–372.

High, C., A.H. Kelly and J. Mair (eds.) (2012) *The anthropology of ignorance: An ethnographic approach*. London: Palgrave Macmillan

Hoeyer, K., A.M. Jensen and M. Olejaz (2015) 'Transplantation as an abstract good: practising deliberate ignorance in deceased organ donation in Denmark', *Sociology of Health & Illness*, 37(4): 578–593.

Jalonen, H. (2023) 'Ignorance in organisations – a systematic literature review', *Management Review Quarterly*: 1–42.

Kerwin, A. (1993) 'None too solid: Medical ignorance', *Knowledge*, 15(2): 166–185.

Kleinman, D.L. and S. Suryanarayanan (2013) 'Dying bees and the social production of ignorance'*, Science, Technology, & Human Values,* 38(4): 492–517.

Knudsen, M. (2011) 'Forms of inattentiveness: The production of blindness in the development of a technology for the observation of quality in health services', *Organization Studies*, 32(7): 963–989.

Knudsen, M. and S. Kishik (2022) 'Multiplying ignorance, deferring action: dynamics in the communication of knowledge and non-knowledge', *Social Epistemology*, 36(3): 344–359.

Laclau, E. and C. Mouffe (1985*) Hegemony and socialist strategy: Towards a radical democratic politics*. London: Verso.

Luhmann, N. (2022) 'The ecology of ignorance', in N. Luhmann, *Observations on modernity*. Stanford University Press.

MacKay, D.M. (1969) *Information, mechanism and meaning*. MIT Press.

McGoey, L. (2007) 'On the will to ignorance in bureaucracy', *Economy and Society*, 36(2): 212–35.

McGoey, L. (2012a) 'Strategic unknowns: Towards a sociology of ignorance', *Economy and Society,* 41(1): 1–16.

McGoey, L. (2012b) 'The logic of strategic ignorance', *The British Journal of Sociology,* 63(3): 533–76.

McGoey, L. (2019) *The unknowers: How strategic ignorance rules the world*. London: Zed Bloomsbury.

Medina, J. (2013) *The epistemology of resistance: Gender and racial oppression, epistemic injustice, and resistant imaginations*. New York, NY: Oxford UP.

Michaels, D. (2008) *Doubt is their product: how industry's assault on science threatens your health*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Mills, C.W. (2015) 'Global white ignorance', in M. Gross and L. McGoey (eds.) *Routledge international handbook of ignorance studies*. London: Routledge.

Moore, W.E. and M.M. Tumin (1949) 'Some social functions of ignorance', *American Sociological Review*, 14(6): 787–795.

Oreskes, N. and E.M. Conway (2011) *Merchants of doubt: How a handful of scientists obscured the truth on issues from tobacco smoke to global warming*. New York, London: Bloomsbury Publishing USA.

Otto, B., J.G. Pors and R. Johnsen (2019) 'Hidden in full view: The organization of public secrecy in Miéville's The City and the City', *Culture and Organization*, 25(2): 91-103.

Parviainen, J., A. Koski and S. Torkkola (2021) '"Building a ship while sailing it." Epistemic humility and the temporality of non-knowledge in political decision-making on COVID-19', *Social Epistemology*, 35(3): 232–244.

Paul, K.T. and C. Haddad (2019) 'Beyond evidence versus truthiness: toward a symmetrical approach to knowledge and ignorance in policy studies', *Policy Sciences*, 52(2): 299–314.

Paul, K.T., S. Vanderslott and M. Gross (2022) 'Institutionalised ignorance in policy and regulation', *Science as Culture*, 31(4): 419–432.

Proctor, R.N. (2008) 'Agnotology: A missing term to describe the cultural production of ignorance (and its study)', in R.N. Proctor and L. Schiebinger (eds.) *Agnotology: The making and unmaking of ignorance*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Proctor, R.N. and L. Schiebinger (eds.) (2008) *Agnotology: The making and unmaking of ignorance*. Stanford University Press.

Rayner, S. (2012) 'Uncomfortable knowledge: The social construction of ignorance in science and environmental policy discourses', *Economy and Society,* 41: 107–125.

Roberts, J. (2013) 'Organizational ignorance: Towards a managerial perspective on the unknown', *Management Learning*, 44(3): 215–236.

Schaefer, S.M. (2019) 'Wilful managerial ignorance, symbolic work and decoupling: A socio-phenomenological study of 'managing creativity'', *Organization Studies*, 40(9): 1387–1407.

Scott, S. (2018) 'A sociology of nothing: Understanding the unmarked', *Sociology*, 52(1): 3–19.

Schwarzkopf, S. (2020) 'Sacred excess: Organizational ignorance in an age of toxic data', *Organization Studies*, 41(2): 197–217.

Sloterdijk, P. (2016) *Foams: spheres volume III: Plural sphereology*. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e).

Smithson, M. (1989) *Ignorance and uncertainty: Emerging paradigms*. New York: Springer.

Star, S.L. (1989) 'The structure of ill-structured solutions: Boundary objects and heterogeneous distributed problem solving', in L. Gasser and M.N. Huhns (eds.) *Readings in distributed artificial intelligence*. San Francisco: Morgan Kaufmann.

Staunæs, D. and J.S.B. Conrad (2019) 'The will not to know: Data leadership, necropolitics and ethnic-racialized student subjectivities', in A. Heffernan and R. Niesche (eds.) *Subjectivities and educational leadership*. London: Routledge.

Sullivan, S. and N. Tuana (eds.) (2007) *Race and epistemologies of ignorance*. Albany, NY: SUNY.

Wehling, P. (Hg.) (2015) *Vom Nutzen des Nichtwissens. Sozial und kulturwissenschaftliche Perspektiven*. Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag.

the editors

Morten Knudsen is an Associate Professor at the Department of Organization, Copenhagen Business School.
Email: mk.ioa@cbs.dk

Justine Grønbæk Pors is an Associate Professor at the Department of Busines Humanities and Law and a member of the editorial collective of ephemera.
Email: jgp.bhl@cbs.dk

Tore Bakken is Professor Emeritus at the Department of Communication and Culture, BI Norwegian Business School. He is also affiliated with the Inland Norway University of Applied Sciences.
Email: tore.bakken@bi.no

ephemera
theory & politics in organization

© the author(s) 2023
ISSN 1473-2866 (Online)
www.ephemerajournal.org
volume 23(1)

Digitalize and deny: Pluralistic collective ignorance in an algorithmic profiling project

Ursula Plesner and Lise Justesen

abstract

The digital transformation paradigm, marked by optimistic tech determinism, pushes contemporary management to constantly consider the usefulness of cutting-edge digital technologies for their organizations. When experiments with such technologies fail, the same optimistic tech determinism seems to play a role in actors' denial of that failure. Based on an ethnographic study of a public organization, this paper analyzes an empirical case involving an unsuccessful digitalization flagship project. Despite encountering fundamental problems and clearly failing to fulfill its promises, the project was allowed to continue, and daily work took place unabated. This study explores how managers, project managers, and employees reacted to the numerous problems and failures related to the project in both the development and implementation phases. Our paper is situated within the literature on organizational ignorance and denial, and it advances the concept of 'pluralistic collective ignorance'. Inspired by science and technology studies, the term 'pluralistic collective ignorance' is developed to account for the diversity in how organizational members ignore a phenomenon and the diversity of actors who do so. Tech optimism seems to prevent otherwise reflective actors from asking certain kinds of questions about technological solutions. However, as it is often unknown whether a digitalization project will have a positive impact in practice, it remains on open question whether denial should be viewed as supportive or destructive for organizational development.

Introduction

In contemporary management discourse, we hear a resounding catch phrase: 'Digitalize or die'. A quick Google search will convince you. This command implies that if an organization ignores the possibilities offered by digital technologies, it will be outperformed by more vigilant competitors or find itself unable to achieve its goals. In this paper, we demonstrate the relevance of a twist of this expression. We claim that some digital transformation projects that are designed and implemented to improve organizations make little sense in practice or simply do not work. Yet, they are not discarded, and their continued existence seems to rely on organizations' abilities to 'digitalize and deny'. As such, experimental digitalization projects offer an interesting context for studying organizational denial. Drawing on an empirical study of the introduction of an algorithmic profiling project in an organization, we develop the concept of 'pluralistic collective ignorance' to better understand how organizational denial can be achieved through varied everyday practices carried out by different actors rather than through group thinking, shared organizational norms and values, or a particular organizational function.

Futurist discourse on digital transformation, as reflected in the 'Digitalize or die' catch phrase, builds on a familiar combination of tech optimism and tech determinism where technologies are seen as having certain properties that will eventually lead to particular social outcomes (MacKenzie and Wajcman, 1999). Such assumptions underlie the widespread acceleration discourse, which conveys the message that due to rapid digital technological development, the future is coming at full speed (Rosa, 2013). The often-invoked image of a high-speed train suggests that both organizations and individuals need to jump on the train if they do not want to be left on the platform. Such images contribute to creating an impression of inevitability and speed (Vestergaard, 2021). They leave little space for agency, much less reflection: either we join and follow the preset pace, or we are left behind (cf. Plesner and Justesen, 2020). Technological determinism comes in both pessimistic and optimistic versions (Plesner and Husted, 2020). In the optimistic version, technological determinism is equated with social progress (Wyatt, 2008). Optimistic technological determinist assumptions guide many organizational digitalization projects, and the digital

transformation paradigm pushes contemporary management to constantly consider the usefulness of cutting-edge digital technologies for their organizations. Informed discussions of 'whether' to adopt a new technology easily glide over into 'when' to adopt that technology.

When new and untested digital technologies are implemented in organizations, they can be expected to have various effects (e.g. Wajcman, 2015). In cases where cutting-edge technologies cannot solve the problems they are intended to solve, organizations can react in a multitude of ways: they can abandon the project, they can redesign or adjust the project, or they can ignore the dysfunction. In this paper, we are interested in understanding the latter reaction. We analyze an empirical case in which a digitalization flagship project was allowed to continue, and daily work took place unabated, even though the project encountered fundamental problems, and clearly failed to fulfill its promises of efficiency gains and improved services. We explore how managers, project managers, and employees reacted to the numerous problems and failures related to the project in its development and implementation phases. We examine how the organization managed to ignore a number of problems and continued to develop, support, and implement the project.

This paper is situated within the literature on organizational ignorance (e.g. Bakken and Wiik, 2018; Essén et al., 2022; McGoey, 2012a; 2012b; Roberts, 2013). Specifically, we draw on work on denial and relate this to work on organizational change and digital transformations. The concept of denial derives from the psychological literature, especially the psychoanalytic tradition (e.g. Freud, 1937/1992). Variants of the concept are also found in economic psychology where similar mechanisms are conceptualized in terms of biases and cognitive errors (Kahneman, 2011). Research on ignorance has theorized denial as a socially constructed and organizational phenomenon (Rayner, 2012; Zerubavel, 2006).

Denial may occur when a strong desire for a specific object — or an outcome — conflicts with the external reality (Freud, 1937/1992). This contradiction leads to a disavowal of the external reality even though it is perceived by the actors, at least to some extent. The actors refuse to recognize the obvious implications of their perceptions (Trunnell and Holt, 1974). This socially

reinforced mechanism, in which a group refuses to see what is manifestly present, is captured by the proverbial 'elephant in the room' (Zerubavel, 2006). Empirical studies of organizational change and digital technologies have revealed that denial can be conservative, such as when organizations ignore impulses to change and are left behind (e.g. Munir, 2005). Denial can also be future-oriented, as when organizations ignore the obstacles posed by new technologies in a race towards the future, attempting to mimic the advances of other organizations (Caplan and boyd, 2018).

Based on an empirical study, this paper shows how denial can be seen as a collective act produced by the members of the organization. However, rather than analyzing denial as a consequence of a dysfunctional culture or 'group think' (Fox, 2019), we advance the concept of 'pluralistic, collective ignorance' inspired by science and technology studies (STS). We thereby challenge some of the basic assumptions underlying much of the organizational ignorance literature. First, we problematize the view that the ignoring organization is a unified collective with a strong, shared set of norms and values that make members of the organization act as one. Second, we problematize the idea that ignorance 'in reality' serves a latent or manifest function in the organization. Third, our STS approach helps us cultivate theoretical alternatives to more individualistic accounts of denial. In an STS-inspired understanding, cognition is collective and distributed among heterogeneous actors (Callon and Muniesa, 2005; Hutchins, 1995). We propose that if cognition and knowledge can be collective, then ignorance and denial can as well. Hence, we argue that ignorance and denial are collective, plural and distributed in a manner similar to organizational knowledge. We contribute to the literature on organizational ignorance by developing this perspective, and by theorizing organizational denial as related to larger social phenomena like tech determinist and tech optimist paradigms.

Towards pluralistic collective ignorance

Functions of ignorance in organizations

Ignorance has been theorized as the absence of knowledge in different forms, but it is also increasingly recognized as a social and organizational

phenomenon (e.g. Bakken and Wiik, 2018; Davies and McGoey, 2012; McGoey, 2012a, 2012b, 2019). Organizational scholars have argued that various forms of ignorance have different functions in organizations. For instance, public authorities actively produce blindness to avoid the actualization of potentially destructive information (Knudsen, 2011). McGoey argues that 'unsettling knowledge is thwarted from emerging in the first place, making it difficult to hold individuals legally liable for knowledge they can claim to have never possessed' (2012b: 559). Alvesson and Spicer (2012) introduced the term 'functional stupidity' to explain how certain forms of ignorance help organizations function smoothly and efficiently. Stupidity is functional because it has not only negative, but also positive effects seen from a managerial perspective (for a critique of the managerialist implications, see Butler, 2016). Organizations that sustain their ignorance can continue to employ their established practices and strategies even if they have proven inadequate, which allows them to learn and develop slowly, as Brunsson (1998) showed in his work on non-learning organizations.

The literature has also conceptualized different degrees of intentionality behind ignorance. McGoey (2012a, 2012b, 2019) developed the concept of 'strategic ignorance'. Hertwig and Engel (2016) discussed 'deliberate ignorance', Costas and Grey (2014) highlighted acts of 'intentional concealment', while Schaefer (2018) presented 'willful managerial ignorance' in which managers intentionally disregard or actively avoid collecting relevant information that could lead to transformative consequences in their actions. Nevertheless, as Heimer has pointed out, 'we should not assume a constant degree of intentionality' (2012: 19). Various types of ignorance may prevent people from reacting to organizational malfunction. Moreover, when managers and employees collectively contribute to ignoring phenomena in their everyday practices, it may be more difficult to identify intentionality. Sometimes there is little awareness of that ignorance. In some cases, 'denial' seems to be a more appropriate term than 'ignorance'.

Denial as a form of ignorance

Denial is a concept with a somewhat loose meaning and contested status. Nevertheless, the term captures the basic element of ignorance that is puzzling to bystanders; namely that people fail to comprehend what is right in front of them. In psychoanalytical accounts, denial is one of several defense mechanisms used to deal with emotionally uncomfortable or painful knowledge (Freud, 1937/1992). In line with this tradition, Trunnell and Holt defined denial in the following way: 'Disavowal or denial as originally described by Freud involves, not an absence or distortion of actual perception, but rather a failure to fully appreciate the significance or implications of what is perceived' (1974: 771). Denial differs from other defense mechanisms, such as repression. Whereas repression blocks any awareness of the 'painful' object, denial is more ambiguous. The concept of denial captures how it is sometimes possible to register and even acknowledge something, but still fail to take it in, fail to realize its implications, and fail to act on it. As Stanley Cohen puts it:

> People react as if they do not know what they know. Or else the information is registered – there is no attempt to deny the facts – but its implications are ignored [...] I became stuck with the term 'denial' to cover this whole range of phenomena. (2001: x)

As described here, denial can be seen as lying somewhere between knowledge and ignorance.

Cohen's examples include grave atrocities, but the mechanism is observable in more mundane contexts as well. In an organizational context, denial is most often disconnected from individual traumatic and painful experiences, and it is more relevant to study failures to appreciate the significance or implications of 'uncomfortable knowledge' (Rayner, 2012) than deeper, traumatic psychological issues.

When denial is theorized as an organizational phenomenon there is a tendency to focus on *sharedness*, as in Roberts' definition, which highlights the centrality of 'values and norms embedded in the organization' (2013: 223), as well as 'frameworks of understanding' that help us grasp how organizational denial comes about. Roberts suggests that 'organizational

denials occur when the values and norms embedded in the organization blind its members to knowledge that does not fit easily with the existing frameworks of understanding' (*ibid*.). In this definition, the organization appears to be a unified whole with a shared unconsciousness that drives its members in the same direction. When other scholars similarly elevate denial to the organizational level, they tend to portray the organization as an *agent* that actively denies issues that other agents try to problematize. According to Rayner,

> In a more sociological sense, denial does not refer to the cognitive or affective state of individuals, but to the refusal or inability of organizations at any level to acknowledge information, even when external bodies or even individuals within the organization seek actively to bring it to the collective attention. (2012: 114)

Similarly, organizations may be portrayed as unwilling to acknowledge chosen paths that seem untenable. As Heimer writes, 'organizations prefer to ignore, conceal, obfuscate and deny evidence that core activities bring unwanted side-effects' (2012: 31). In other words, organizations 'prefer' to be ignorant in order to protect their reputations or continue their core activities. In this perspective, organizations are portrayed as singular entities with specific motivations.

Even though the psychoanalytic and organizational concepts of denial differ in terms of level (i.e., the individual or the collective) and explanations (e.g., sexuality, childhood trauma, group think or dysfunctional culture), they share the basic intuition of the 'elephant in the room'. The concept of organizational denial allows us to bracket single individuals' intentions and motivations, while paving the way for investigating how it is possible for a collective to fail to acknowledge the malfunctioning of an organizational project, even when it has been challenged in everyday practices over an extended period of time. However, in much research on organizational denial, this comes at the cost of portraying organizations as unified agents or as strong collective identities in which individuals' truth-telling is ignored.

In this paper, we challenge such views by arguing that ignorance is sometimes produced by organizational members who do not necessarily

agree, who do not always act and talk in consistent ways, and who do not necessarily subscribe to the same norms and values, but who still contribute to the collective achievement of ignorance as denial. To better understand this, we develop the concept of 'pluralistic collective ignorance'. Before turning to our discussion of this concept, we briefly review the literature on digital transformation through the lens of organizational denial.

Organizational change, digital technologies, and organizational denial

In the literature on organizational change and digital technologies, the concept of denial can be relevant in different situations. In some cases, denial has a conservative function, whereas in others, it is more future-oriented. Denial has conservative effects when organizations ignore significant changes in the technological and organizational environment and insist on holding onto established business models despite those changes (Munir, 2005). One emblematic case is Kodak, which 'denied the possibility' that digital photography could become a technology with wide potential, and stubbornly insisted that it was a cumbersome and unnecessary technique relevant only for professionals (*ibid.*: 100-101). Another case of conservative denial is that of Microsoft, which 'actively ignored' the emergent standard of Java and instead tried to develop its own alternative (Garud et al., 2002: 15). In some cases, the conservative stance is clearly detrimental to an organization, as in the oft-cited cases of Blockbuster and Nokia, but it need not be. Cases of organizational refusal to engage in technological adventures have a parallel in organization theory, which argues that overly adaptive processes may be self-destructive (March, 1991), and that a slow type of learning may be most advantageous to organizations (Brunsson, 1998: 421; Levitt and March, 1988). From an institutional theory point of view, we would expect organizations to follow the rules and the standard operating procedures until 'environmental shocks' force them to radically change to survive (March and Olsen, 1989).

At the other end of the spectrum, denial allows organizations to ignore uncertainties, warning signs, and problems with new technologies in the race towards the future. Organizations may, for instance, mimic other organizations' technology investments or devise ambitious digitalization strategies to allay fears of being left behind or of appearing illegitimate

(Caplan and boyd, 2018). As Caplan and boyd write, 'this has been seen in the adoption of algorithmic and data-driven processes across a wide spectrum of sectors and institutions'(*ibid*.: 4).. They add that 'the narrative of technology as that which could disrupt existing institutional structures can be traced to the ideologies embraced by many of early proponents of the internet' (*ibid*.). Such mechanisms of isomorphism resonate with neo-institutional theory, which describes how organizations engage in change and renewal because the opposite appears illegitimate (e.g. DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Røvik, 1998).

While the digital transformation paradigm can be argued to have real effects on organizations, the literature on digital transformation and organizational change in general indicates that organizational responses can range from skepticism and denial of technological developments to enthusiastic adoption and subsequent denial of unintended consequences and problems. In this paper, we are concerned with the consequences of optimistic and future-oriented approaches to digitalization. We argue that organizational denial is a fruitful arena of exploration, if we wish to understand how such optimistic and future-oriented approaches play a role in determining organizational strategies and investments, even when technologies do not work in practice. However, whether something 'works' depends on the specific contexts in which the technologies are entangled with the social. It is in these social contexts that specific forms of ignorance are produced and reproduced. To address these questions, we turn to STS.

Beyond functions and intentions: Pluralistic collective ignorance

STS has a long tradition of examining the production of knowledge as an active, collective, and distributed process (e.g., Callon and Muniesa, 2005; Hutchins, 1995; Latour, 1987). The view of knowledge as a social phenomenon stands in contrast to individual psychological perspectives on knowledge, but it also contradicts explanations that invoke the collective as an overarching and homogenizing system of norms, values, or economic structures. In STS, the collective is understood as a multiplicity of both human and non-human actors, all of which contribute to knowledge production, although in different ways.

In a similar vein, we suggest that both knowledge and ignorance – including the type of ignorance that we call denial – are collectively produced in distributed processes to which human and non-human actors actively contribute. The concept of 'pluralistic ignorance' has already been applied in social psychological research where it refers to a certain set of biases and misperceived beliefs about others (Zhu and Westphal, 2011). Thiel (2015: 256) describes pluralistic ignorance as a situation in which members of groups inadvertently reinforce each other's different misunderstandings of a situation. In contrast, we apply the term 'pluralistic' in line with an STS-inspired ontology. More specifically, we wish to emphasize that instead of pointing to mutual reinforcements of the *same* norms and beliefs, we view pluralistic ignorance as connoting the diversity in how organizational members ignore a phenomenon, and the diversity of the actors who do so. Also inspired by STS, our analysis of the production of ignorance includes both human and non-human actors, such as different visualizations and technologies (Latour, 1987). In other words, actors and networks organize knowledge, and they can also organize ignorance.

The concept of pluralistic collective ignorance can help to account for a type of denial produced by different actors in different ways, rather than being a result of particular organizational members' willful ignorance. The pluralistic collective ignorance concept also allows us to stay at the level of interaction and the actors' own explanations of their encounter with problems, rather than explaining their reactions as a type of shared delusion caused by invisible social structures or groupthink. The concept underscores ignorance as a multiple phenomenon.

Methods

Empirical background

The study is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in a unit ('the Unit') of a large Scandinavian public organization over a period of one year. The Unit was selected because it stood out as a prime example of a development-oriented organization engaged in various ambitious digitalization initiatives. It had introduced a number of digitalization projects aimed at supporting its daily work in different ways by improving the employees' handling of cases

and, hence, the services provided to clients. Overall, the Unit had a high level of employee satisfaction and a management team that was consistently praised by employees during our fieldwork for its leadership, engagement, and clear style of communication.

During our fieldwork, the Unit launched an ambitious new project. The project aimed to profile citizens who called the Unit through an automated prediction of which 'type' a caller would be, with the purpose of matching a particular type and purpose of a call with an employee who possessed the relevant skills to deal with the issue. When they called the Unit, citizens would enter their personal identification number, and an algorithm would then retrieve that citizen's personal data and place the caller into a specific 'profile', which was then visualized on the screen of the relevant employee. The goal was to make the best use of employee skills, deliver better and more 'targeted' services, and reduce the time employees spent on calls, as well as citizens' waiting times. While our fieldwork generated insights into many different digitalization projects, we found this algorithmic profiling project to be the most interesting because it was considered a prestigious flagship project and required resource allocations on many levels. Moreover, it was discussed in most of the meetings we attended and was expected to have a significant impact on daily work and productivity.

Data collection and analysis

The longitudinal character of the fieldwork allowed us to follow the algorithmic profiling project during its development and implementation phases. Our methodological approach was inspired by STS, which implies an open and agnostic approach to the workings and effects of technology in practice (e.g. Justesen, 2020; MacKenzie and Wajcman, 1999). As such, we paid attention to both human and non-human actors, where the latter included the algorithm, visualizations, and documents (Latour, 1987), leaving open the question of the role played by these non-human actors in practice. Our approach was based on the ontological assumption that the social and the technological are always entangled in practice (Orlikowski, 2007), and that an algorithm is not a separate and stable object but part of specific 'assemblages' (Lee, 2021).

Over nearly twelve months in 2018-2019, we regularly visited the Unit (from one to ten times per month) to observe meetings and conduct interviews. Both before and after the implementation of the algorithm, we spent full working days following different caseworkers' interactions with callers by sitting next to them, listening to their phone conversations, and viewing their screens. Prior to the implementation, we spent two full days at the Unit, and we spent six full days after the implementation. In total, we observed more than 200 phone conversations. Our data consists of fieldnotes, documents from the organization, and recorded and transcribed interviews and meetings. In addition to interviewing eight caseworkers both before and after the implementation, we conducted interviews with two top managers, three office managers, two project managers, and an IT person responsible for the development of the algorithm. The first round of interviews with the caseworkers focused on their work and their expectations of the algorithm, while the second round aimed at examining how the algorithm influenced their work. The interviews with managers revolved around expectations and evaluations of the project and were also conducted both before and after the launch. Finally, the IT person was interviewed to help clarify the choices that had been made in the design process. In addition, our data includes a group meeting (recorded in full), during which we presented and discussed our findings to the Unit's management team.

In the course of our fieldwork, we observed that the profiling project encountered a number of severe problems. We found it puzzling that the project was rolled out anyway, and that it was widely praised by different actors in the organization. Towards the end of our study, when the first version of the technology had failed, we asked ourselves how plans of a 'version 2.0' could be implemented, seemingly as if no problems had been encountered. For us, it seemed that numerous problems related to 'version 1.0' — problems that were clearly visible to key actors in the organization — had been ignored. We had our 'elephant in the room'.

When we began to examine the organizational dynamics related to ignorance and thought about our findings in terms of denial, we had to address several ethical considerations. We had been allowed into the organization in a spirit of trust and goodwill and were given permission to

come and go as we liked. In addition, we benefited from the openness of managers and staff members, who took time out to talk with us. As we could have focused on other successful digitalization projects in the Unit and on the professional management, our focus on an unsuccessful project could be perceived as a sign of disloyalty to our informants. We certainly felt awkward when we presented our findings to the management group. However, it also felt like the right thing to do, and so we provided the organization with our findings and reflections. We ended up having fruitful discussions about these findings and reflections during which the management team proved to be open-minded and oriented towards learning. We have written this paper in a similar spirit with the intention to foster a better understanding of what can be learned from unsuccessful projects and the organizational processes around them. We have carefully anonymized the organization and informants.

In our data analysis, we followed a thematic approach in which the first step was to familiarize ourselves with the entire corpus of data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Again, we found ourselves puzzled over the problems with the project. It seemed that the actors were seeing and, sometimes explicitly discussing the problems with the algorithm project, and then ignoring them as if they did not exist. This observation led us to consider the concept of denial. We then decided to analyze our data by first identifying the different types of problems related to the project. Throughout the research process, we had no intention of identifying what the 'real problems' were. Instead, we were interested in how the problems were articulated by different actors (Essén et al., 2022), as well as the unintended consequences they had. We also sought out instances in which problems were ignored, and development work continued, as if they did not exist. We asked how managers and employees 'dealt with these problems' or, in our terms, 'how they succeeded in denying their existence'. The problems were often described by the actors, or they were visible during our observations. However, the actors' accounts revealed how their focus quickly changed. They did not seem to draw implications from their perceptions of these problems, much less take any consequent action.

At the core of our analysis, we identified different problems through the interviews and observations, and our analysis focused on how employees

and managers collaborated to ignore those problems. As the empirical material showed that many organizational actors contributed to ignoring the problems, the concept of collective ignorance seemed to have some explanatory power. However, the multiplicity of means used to deny the problems led us to further explore the diversity in perspectives and responses. It was through our analysis of the data that we realized how organizational ignorance — although collectively achieved — may not be a result of the same motivations or strategies or carried out in the same way by the same people over time. The multiplicity of means to deny problems that we identified in the empirical material led us to qualify our use of the term 'collective' with the term 'pluralistic'. We thus developed the concept of pluralistic collective ignorance to capture the organizational denial observed in our case.

Denial is a tricky analytical concept because it traditionally points to psychological mechanisms and hidden structures at work, which stands in stark contrast to an STS approach. However, we adopted the concept, and used the STS inspiration to analyze the data at the level of interaction and the actors' own explanations when they encountered problems with the project. Our actor-centered approach allowed us to account for the heterogenous and distributed nature of ignorance without resorting to explanations for 'behind the scenes' mechanisms. As this case study is situated in a particular organizational context and draws conclusions based on the actors' use of multiple means to deny problems, we cannot assess precisely the extent to which the observed phenomena are common. However, our results can be generalized in the sense that in other organizations that are experiencing a future-oriented push to experiment with new technologies, a similar multiplicity of means to deny problems may be observed and understood through the lens of pluralistic collective ignorance.

Seeing and ignoring problems: Denial at work

Denying the technological limitations of digital solutions: Acting anyway

The Unit was part of a large public organization that had an ambitious digitalization agenda and funds to support local digitalization initiatives. In

the Unit, the digitalization ambitions were pursued through various idea-creation workshops. At one such workshop, an idea emerged about creating better service with greater efficiency in the Unit through the automated profiling of citizens. The Unit applied for funding to develop an algorithm to handle this scoring and the project was launched.

The first project phase was filled with remarkable tech optimism as well as uncertainties. The tech optimism was reflected in interviews with two managers who expressed excitement about being first movers with this new application based on machine learning. One manager saw the experiment as having a positive impact on the organization's external image. In this manager's view, a positive result would also be highly motivating for employees:

> Being a first mover has given us some spotlight, and being mentioned as the exemplary digitalization project, being praised, getting attention from the outside world – of course our employees are getting a rush from that.

While remaining proud and optimistic, another manager noted the uncertainty in tackling the project, an uncertainty common to first movers:

> We are moving into unknown territory. We do not know yet and we cannot learn from others' experiences, because no one else has done this. We are happy to admit that. Also, the excitement – I mean, it is like we are taking up the mantle of leadership. We have dared to do something new.

Indeed, there were several fundamental uncertainties associated with the design of the algorithm, but they co-existed with the tech optimism and the acceleration discourse in which 'being at the forefront' was emphasized. After funding for the project had been secured, a small working group was established to define how the algorithm should score citizens and how value could be created by handling the different categories of citizens in different ways. The group collaborated with a data scientist who was to program the algorithm. In an interview, the data scientist described the process:

> I read all of the material about the project. Even after that, it was as if there was little connection between people's ideas at the conceptual level and what was doable in practice. […] One of my main tasks in the beginning was to find out precisely what they wanted, what exact problem they wanted to solve, because that was not obvious.

The data scientist explained that he found the ideas for how to categorize citizens to be a bit 'loose'. There was a need to clarify which data should be used, how precise the algorithm should be, how it should learn, and so on. As the data scientist explained, 'you have this idea that we have a lot of fantastic data but, at the end of the day, there is very little that you can actually use'.

One of the first important tasks for the working group was to define proxies in terms of which types of data could be used as indicators for the type of caller. In the early stages, the working group operated with a long list of possible proxies. However, as the project developed, the number of proxy types was reduced because it was only technically and legally possible to collect and use certain kinds of data to feed the algorithm. The issue of assigning weights to proxies was also a challenge for members of the project group. After a lengthy discussion during an interview with a manager and another group member, they gave up trying to explain to us how the data weighting and the training of the algorithm was supposed to work. They ended up by saying, 'I cannot explain how' and 'neither can I'.

The aim was to develop an algorithm with a relatively high accuracy because the success of the project would hinge on that accuracy. However, the technological solutions were much less accurate than expected. Good proxies were difficult to find because the problem was only vaguely defined and which data to use was not obvious. In addition, there was a problem of how to train the algorithm. The management team and the project managers were made aware of these design problems early on, but those revelations did not cause them to pause. Instead, despite the uncertainties, management and some employees remained enthusiastic and continued to prepare for the launch of the algorithm. Management was working on organizational change activities and some employees were appointed as 'change agents'.

At this point, management developed several communication tools visualizing different aspects of the project: 1) flow diagrams of the idealized process of scoring citizens who phoned in and matching them with the appropriate employees; 2) flow charts of idealized 'user journeys'; and 3) visualizations of the employees' new roles. Management used these items

during different meetings and toured the Unit with a PowerPoint 'roadshow' containing the visualizations. A video of a roadshow presentation captured several questions from employees about how the algorithm works, and many of the answers revealed that the project was fraught with uncertainties. This is not unusual for a digitalization project in an early phase. However, in this case, the major uncertainties and technical limitations continued to haunt the project.

At this early stage, it was possible to overlook or deny the fundamental problems by simply carrying out the work with multiple, future-oriented tasks and scenarios. Project leaders and managers talked new organizational realities into being by invoking new categories and new work descriptions, and highlighting the hope of improved efficiency and quality, which were expected to follow from the implementation of the algorithm.

Some employees focused on their new roles and the implications of the project for their tasks. Many explicitly referred to their willingness to be part of organizational development projects. One employee, who referred several times to herself as a 'change agent', told us that her team had won a contest to determine which icons should pop up on employees' screens to symbolize a citizen category. When she was asked how she thought the icons would make a difference for her work, she did not raise any questions about the data, the proxies, the precision, or the algorithm's learning process. Instead, she discussed her own reactions:

> We will have to see about that. On the one hand, I get a second to prepare myself. On the other hand, I do not know. It can go two ways. Either you just get two seconds to prepare [mentally], or you just get your barriers up. I do not know, so it will be fun and exciting to see what it does.

Other employees voiced skepticism. For instance, one employee who was contemplating resigning observed that the 'management works systematically on standardization and uses robotics for everything'. However, despite his critique of the profiling project, the criticism was not about the fundamental problems with the algorithm: 'The idea is cool – the thing about knowing your customers'. Instead, he was worried about how the categorizations and icons would affect the work of his colleagues. He envisaged that the algorithm and the icons would make absolutely no

difference in his own work: 'I really do not need an icon to do my work. I can look at the data in two seconds and form an opinion'. Another employee was enthusiastic and articulated tech optimism:

> I have to say, I am the type of person who likes change. I like it when new technologies are brought to the market, and I think you should test them. […] I think the concept of matching the right citizen with the right case worker is super cool, and it is an innovative way of thinking.

This employee expected to be allocated to all the citizen categories because of his broad skill set. Therefore, the difference the project would make for him would be the increase in the amount of time available to prepare before answering a call.

At an early stage, managers and employees seemed to ignore the fundamental problems related to the design of the algorithm, the trustworthiness of the proxies on which it was based and, thereby, the accuracy and validity of its predictions. Instead of focusing on these difficulties and ensuring that they were addressed, managers and staff continued to move towards implementation. The denial during this stage occurred through the redirection of focus towards the algorithm's potential or its future effects on case handling. Notably, however, the employees did not expect these effects to be significant.

Denying implementation problems: Finding positive signals

In the implementation phase, many events indicated that employees were not reacting to the algorithm's classifications in practice in the way they were supposed to. In our fieldwork, we observed that employees often did not notice the icons on their screens, although these icons indicated which type of citizens they could expect to have on the line. In situations where they noticed the icons, they did not align their responses with the instructions developed for communication with citizens in each category. When we asked employees which types of calls, they were matched with, they were often unsure. One said, 'I do not know' but then guessed, which later proved to be incorrect. While observing the work of another employee, she admitted that she did not really notice the icons and, therefore, neglected to react to the categorizations of the citizens. Instead, she carried

on talking to them with an open mind. In interviews, managers were frustrated that not all employees paid attention to the icons and changed their behavior accordingly. Some employees were portrayed by management as being 'resistant to change'. After several months, one manager sat beside an employee, who did not have a single icon pop up in connection with the calls she received. Afterwards, at a meeting, the manager was clearly upset. As it turned out, the algorithm had not been activated on all of the employees' workstations, but its absence had gone unnoticed. The employees just continued their case handling and client contact as usual.

Another problem was that the planned matching of specific types of calls and particular employees was complicated by staffing issues, such as, when employees had days off, they were assigned to administrative tasks, or the like. A large whiteboard with employees' names on magnets was supposed to show who had been assigned to which types of calls each day. In practice, however, moving employees among the different phone lines was coordinated through real-world talking across the open-office landscape. This was how they solved issues of client wait times (on the phone) and employee availability. The issue was illustrated in this interview with a case worker:

> Employee: Let me show you the whiteboard in here. Look at how they have named the employee groups to keep track of who answers which types of calls [points at the board]. This is what it looks like.
>
> Interviewer: Ok. Is this changed on a daily basis?
>
> Employee: Yeah, well, this is tricky. I just noticed that we need to take [a call agent] out because he is actually ill, and there are others…who are not… [Another agent] is working on something different…and [a third agent]… This is all wrong – he has left for the day.
>
> Interviewer: No one is assigned to the 'unknown' category?
>
> Employee: Ok, now I will do something here [moves magnets with names around]. It seems they have set up the board using the standard plan, but this does not take vacations into account.
>
> Interviewer: Who uses this board? Do you all use it?
>
> Employee: No, not really, but that is because it is so cumbersome to set it up.

The value of the algorithm hinged on 1) the categorizations making it easier for employees to take a call, and 2) a match being made between a particular category of citizens and an employee with the relevant skills to deal with their problem. If this match was not made, little could be gained from the project. Despite these types of problems in the implementation phase, a great deal of praise and enthusiasm regarding the project could be heard in both management and employee communication in the same period. At weekly section meetings, managers presented statistics showing increased efficiency, and the meeting agendas had a fixed item asking for examples of how the algorithm supported employees in their work. One day, a team leader presented a graph showing that the average time of client calls was significantly reduced – the slide included the words 'loud applause'. However, when the team leader asked the employees to explain how they had begun to handle calls differently after the introduction of the algorithm, the employees did not think there were any connections between the increased efficiency, the algorithm, and the new communication strategies. Instead, they agreed that the previous week's increased efficiency was a result of an unusual number of calls about cases that did not belong to their Unit. The employees had simply quickly passed the calls onto another unit, and this had boosted the productivity numbers.

While some employees interpreted the statistics differently from management (according to them, the algorithm slowed their work down, not the opposite), many employees enthusiastically told us about how much easier their work had become, and how they felt more prepared to take the calls because the icons popped up on their screens beforehand. Employees contributed to denying the lack of an impact from the algorithm's classifications in different ways. One employee explained how the way he was matched with a particular citizen type meant that the calls were now much shorter. When we asked if it was his impression that the algorithm scored citizens correctly, he said 'yes' with emphasis and enthusiasm. Another said that it was his gut feeling that the algorithm was right most of the time, and yet another went into detail saying that whereas she got all types of calls before, she could feel a difference now that the more difficult calls went directly to other colleagues. As she explained: 'When I listen to

my colleagues I can hear that they work harder to clarify issues with the citizens'.

Managers and employees contributed to denying the implementation problems by interpreting the data and their phone contact with clients as proof of concept and as evidence that the project was going well. They used enthusiastic expressions about how 'mega cool' the project was, and how 'happy' they were to see the icons pop up on their screens. At one meeting, for instance, a manager celebrated the reduced client waiting times (on the phone) with comments such as 'these are almost North Korean numbers' (implying high discipline), 'this is mega cool' and 'something is working here'. In an interview, one employee said that it 'made her happy' to see an icon pop up on her screen. When we asked her why, she explained that she had been on the winning team that had decided on the format of the icons. Taking these statements together, managers seemed to interpret the algorithm project in terms of positive numbers, while employees relied on positive stories and symbols.

Denying dysfunctionality: Continuing the good work

When the algorithm was finally up and running, we observed that it did not function in the intended manner. In our observation notes, we registered whether the icon corresponded to the content of the call and how employees responded to those calls. As we observed a systematic lack of the expected correspondence between the icon and the content, we decided to analyze our observation notes quantitatively and offer management some systematized feedback on how the algorithm seemed to work in practice. In a meeting with management, we presented a quantitative analysis of more than 200 calls that highlighted different types of problems with the algorithm. For instance, often the algorithm simply failed to correctly classify the calls. In the conversations between callers and caseworkers, we would hear that the algorithm's classification rarely corresponded to the content of the call. Moreover, a large number of calls could not be classified according to the categories used – they were in an amorphous 'other' category.

Managers explained these design problems in two ways: by highlighting the complexity of the organizational context or by pointing to the complexity of citizens' situations. One manager explained:

> I just want to point out that you came into the organization at the most complex time you could imagine, especially now that we are implementing a new finance and accounting system that cuts across units in the organization. That is just a fact, because some of the things that have been mailed to citizens have had faults in them.

At the meeting, a manager added that the complexity of the algorithmic profiling project did not just stem from the new finance and accounting system, but also from the varied nature of citizens' problems. Hence, 'in the statistics you presented, we could see that [the algorithm] categorized most calls as 'unknown' [...]. It is extremely difficult to guess what people call about because of the enormous diversity of their questions'.

In another interview, the same manager explained the difficulties of having the algorithm correctly categorize citizens, and the manager acknowledged that the project team knew of the mismatch between the content of the calls and the classification made by the algorithm:

> We know that ourselves, because in the project group we also observed the calls and noted what they were about. At that point, we could see, "Hey, the project is a bit off in relation to the real world. It does not match reality at all".

When prompted to clarify this realization, the manager explained:

> Well, I think there was some kind of infatuation with the project and maybe that sometimes overshadowed reality. Maybe we became too far removed from reality. I am not sure if we should have changed the project...or if we should... When we do rethink it, we need to learn from it as a project team. We need to know more about the reality we are trying to change.

Later, in the same interview, the manager told us about a new idea – to apply for funding to develop a 'version 2.0' of the algorithm to extend its uses to other domains. When asked why the Unit would apply for additional funds, the manager explained:

> The idea is that if you can roll out the algorithm on more phone lines, it is going to generate value, especially because there will be a larger analysis or understanding of the citizens and the match groups. We have not bought that analysis, but we would like to see it.

Employees contributed to denying the dysfunctionality in various ways. One blamed herself for not being good enough at interacting with the algorithm. In a situation where an icon did not appear on the screen as it should have, this employee suggested that she had probably picked up the phone too quickly. A trainee who had been part of the project group had little faith in the project. He stated, 'you might ask, "Does it need to be that complex, is it necessary, or is it waste of money and resources?"'. At the end of the day, however, he took the algorithm as a *fait accompli* and chose to write his thesis on change management, arguing that the change of culture in the organization was more important than the implementation of technology. In addition to such explanations, employees often would ignore the categorizations and icons produced by the algorithm without questioning them and go on with their work as they were accustomed.

Thus, the dysfunctionality seemed to be denied by working around the algorithm and in the pursuit of new, similar projects. In this sense, a single malfunctioning algorithmic profiling project did not fundamentally challenge or alter the belief in the need to develop the organization through advanced digitalization projects.

Concluding discussion

Based on an ethnographic study, this paper aimed to examine how an organization managed to ignore a multitude of problems occurring during the development and implementation of an algorithmic profiling project. In addition, it analyzed how ignorance can be collectively achieved in an organization dominated by a digital-transformation imperative. Our analysis showed that actors ignored the malfunctioning of the algorithmic profiling project in three overall ways: by 'acting anyway', by 'finding positive signals' and by 'continuing their work'. These different ways of accomplishing ignorance were marked by optimism and a future orientation, and our analysis revealed numerous instances of positive tech determinism playing a

role in organizational strategies and investments, even when the technologies did not work in practice. There was talk about being first movers, carrying the mantle of leadership and daring to move forward, as well as expressions of excitement about and pride in a visionary project. Various visualizations supported the positive narrative of the hopes attached to the technology, while challenging and opposing narratives were interpreted as signs of being 'resistant to change'.

In contrast to accounts that explain organizational ignorance as strategic (McGoey, 2012a, 2012b), willful (Schaefer, 2018) or even deceitful, our study has shown that different forms of ignorance production can take place. Our findings have demonstrated how actors can become aware of fundamental problems from the very beginning of a project, and sometimes even discuss them among themselves or in interviews. However, they do not draw the implication that the project needs to be drastically revamped or stopped altogether. Moreover, even when they recognized problems in the fundamental design (e.g., very low predicative accuracy) or implementation (e.g., the icons do not appear, are ignored, or do not match the caller), they continued to treat the project as a great success. This resonates with the definition of denial – 'not an absence or distortion of actual perception, but rather a failure to fully appreciate the significance or implications of what is perceived' (Trunnell and Holt, 1974: 771). Fundamental uncertainties relating to technologies are bracketed through the means mentioned above. Even when actors acknowledge the non-functioning of the project – including the admission that they may be infatuated with the technology – they continue to look ahead and plan to extend the project.

The paper contributes to the literature on ignorance by presenting an alternative to the functionalist and intentionalist explanations that have highlighted strategic ignorance (e.g. McGoey, 2012a, 2012b, 2019), willful ignorance (Schaefer, 2018) or functional stupidity (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012). Instead of seeing ignorance as a solution to 'latent' organizational problems, such as creating group coherence or reducing unmanageable complexity, our analysis suggests that different actors actively contribute to the collective production of ignorance while applying various and inconsistent methods of denial. Our analysis does not identify a unified activity, but instead a pluralistic and distributed type of collective ignorance.

It is collective in the sense that almost all organizational actors contribute to it. However, they do not contribute to the collective ignorance in the same way or for the same purposes. Some ways of denying the problems are common (e.g., tech optimist attitudes, a focus on being future-oriented, the carrying on of daily work and problem-solving). Other methods are more diverse (e.g., blaming oneself for not reacting appropriately to the algorithm's categorizations, blaming others for not playing the game, interpreting data in conflicting ways). Non-human actors play a role as well, not only because the data and the software are at the heart of the fundamental problems, but also because the project encompasses new types of notifications, new visualizations of work, PowerPoint presentations, and so on.

Through a focus on the common and the diverse as well as the human and the non-human, we can analyze denial as plural and as achieved through different everyday practices, rather than through a collective future-orientation, a belief in technological progress, a unified belief-system or groupthink (Fox, 2019). Rather than an explanation based on underlying or overarching mechanisms, our STS orientation prompts analyses of everyday workarounds, activities, and explanations.

Our findings indicate that the digitalization imperative and strong tech optimism affect organizational dynamics by coloring actors' denial strategies. With the imminent threat being 'if you don't digitalize, you will die', they prefer to 'digitalize and deny'. The findings also illustrate how it is possible to sustain tech optimism by denying that the technology might be the problem. Challenging the technology seems to be out of the question for managers and employees alike, who instead resort to different explanations, blame themselves or others, or ascribe it to other contingencies. They never consider the possibility that the project should be discarded.

In some ways, our study seems to tell a story that contradicts those about 'competence traps' and organizational denial of the need for an organizational response to a changing technological environment, such as the stories of Kodak or Microsoft (Munir, 2005; Garud et al., 2002). In our case, tech optimism seems to prevent otherwise reflective actors from asking certain kinds of questions about the technological solution. However, our

point is not that a belief in technological solutions and progress is either inherently good or problematic. Instead, our claim is that whether problems are solvable or unsolvable is often unknown. Moreover, as whether a digitalization project will have a positive impact in practice is often an open question, we do not know in advance whether denial should be viewed as supportive or destructive for organizational development.

references

Alvesson, M. and A. Spicer (2012) 'A stupidity-based theory of organizations', *Journal of Management Studies*, 49(7): 1194-220.

Bakken, T. and E. Wiik (2018) 'Ignorance and organization studies', *Organization Studies*, 39(8): 1109-1120.

Braun, V. and V. Clarke (2006) 'Using thematic analysis in psychology', *Qualitative Research in Psychology,* 3(2): 77-101.

Brunsson, K. (1998) 'Non-learning organizations', *Scandinavian Journal of Management,* 14(4): 421-432.

Butler, N. (2016) 'Functional stupidity: A critique', *ephemera*, 16(2): 115-123.

Callon, M. and F. Muniesa (2005) 'Peripheral vision: Economic markets as calculative collective devices', *Organization Studies,* 26(8): 1229-1250.

Caplan, R. and d. boyd (2018) 'Isomorphism through algorithms: Institutional dependencies in the case of Facebook', *Big Data & Society*, 5(1): 1-12.

Cohen, S. (2001) *States of denial: Knowing about atrocities and suffering*. Cambridge: Polity.

Costas, J. and C. Grey (2014) 'Bringing secrecy into the open: Towards a theorization of the social processes of organizational secrecy', *Organization Studies*, 35(10): 1423-1447.

Davies, W. and L. McGoey (2012) 'Rationalities of ignorance: On financial crisis and the ambivalence of neo-liberal epistemology', *Economy and Society,* 41(1): 64-83.

DiMaggio, P. and W. Powell (1983) 'The iron cage revisited: Institutional isomorphism and collective rationality in organizational fields', *American Sociological Review,* 48(2): 147-160.

Essén, A., M. Knudsen and M. Alvesson (2022) 'Explaining ignoring – working with information that nobody uses', *Organization Studies*, 43(5): 725–747.

Fox, S. (2019) 'Addressing the influence of groupthink during ideation concerned with new applications of technology in society', *Technology in Society*, 57: 86-94.

Freud, A. (1937/1992) *The ego and the mechanisms of defense*. London: Routledge.

Garud, R., S. Jain and A. Kumaraswamy (2002) 'Institutional entrepreneurship in the sponsorship of common technological standards: The case of sun microsystems and Java', *The Academy of Management Journal,* 45(1): 196-214.

Heimer, C. (2012) 'Inert facts and the illusion of knowledge: strategic uses of ignorance in HIV clinics', *Economy and Society*, 41(1): 17-41.

Hertwig R. and C. Engel (2016) 'Homo ignorans: Deliberately choosing not to know', *Perspectives on Psychological Science,* 11(3): 359-372.

Hutchins, E. (1995) *Cognition in the wild*. Cambridge Massachusetts: MIT Press.

Justesen, L. (2020) 'Actor-Network theory analyses', in M. Järvinen and N. Mik-Meyer (eds.) *Qualitative analysis: Eight approaches*. London: Sage.

Kahneman, D. (2011) *Thinking, fast and slow*. NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Knudsen, M. (2011) 'Forms of inattentiveness: The production of blindness in the development of a technology for the observation of quality in health services', *Organization Studies*, 32(7): 963-989.

Latour, B. (1987) *Science in action*. Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

Lee, F. (2021) 'Enacting the pandemic: Analyzing agency, opacity, and power in algorithmic assemblages', *Science & Technology Studies*, 34(1): 65-90.

Levitt, B. and J.G. March (1988) 'Organizational learning', *Annual Review of Sociology*, 14(1): 319-340.

MacKenzie, D. and J. Wajcman (1999) 'Introductory essay: The social shaping of technology', in D. MacKenzie and J. Wajcman (eds.) *The social shaping of technology*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

March, J.G. (1991) 'Exploration and exploitation in organizational learning', *Organization Science,* 2(1): 71-87.

March, J.G. and J.P. Olsen (1989) *Rediscovering institutions: The organizational basis of politics*. New York: The Free Press.

McGoey, L. (2012a) 'Strategic unknowns: Towards a sociology of ignorance', *Economy and Society,* 41(1): 1-16.

McGoey, L. (2012b) 'The logic of strategic ignorance', *The British Journal of Sociology,* 63(3): 533-576.

McGoey. L. (2019) *The unknowers: How strategic ignorance rules the world*. London: Zed Book.

Munir, K.A. (2005) 'The social construction of events: A study of institutional change in the photographic field', *Organization Studies*, 26(1): 93-112.

Orlikowski, W.J. (2007) 'Sociomaterial practices: Exploring technology at work', *Organization Studies,* 28(9): 1435-1448.

Plesner, U. and E. Husted (2020) *Digital organizing: Revisiting themes in organization studies*. London: Red Globe Press.

Plesner, U. and L. Justesen (2020) 'Managerial work with digitalization: A multi-sited ethnographic approach to data and data-driven management in practice', in R. Mir and A-L. Fayard (eds.) *The Routledge companion to anthropology and business*. New York, Routledge.

Rayner, S. (2012) 'Uncomfortable knowledge: The social construction of ignorance in science and environmental policy discourses', *Economy and Society*, 41(1): 107-125.

Roberts, J. (2013) 'Organizational ignorance: Towards a managerial perspective on the unknown', *Management Learning,* 44(3): 215-236.

Rosa, H. (2013) *Social acceleration: A new theory of modernity*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Røvik, K.A. (1998) *Moderne organisasjoner. Trender i organisasjonstenkningen ved årtusindskiftet*. Oslo: Fakboklaget.

Schaefer, S.M. (2018) 'Willful managerial ignorance, symbolic work and decoupling: A socio-phenomenological study of "managing creativity"', *Organization Studies,* 40(9): 1387-1407.

Thiel, D. (2015) 'Criminal ignorance', in M. Gross and L. McGoey (eds.) *Routledge international handbook of ignorance studies*. London: Routledge.

Trunnell, E. and W.E. Holt (1974) 'The concept of denial or disavowal', *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association,* 22(4): 769-784.

Vestergaard, M. (2021) 'The need for speed – Technological acceleration and inevitabilism in recent Danish digitalization policy papers'*, SATS,* 22(1): 27-48.

Wajcman, J. (2015) *Pressed for time*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Wyatt, S. (2008) 'Technological determinism is dead: long live technological determinism' in E. Hackett, O. Amsterdamska, M. Lynch and J. Wajcman (eds.) *The handbook of science and technology studies*. Cambridge Massachusetts: MIT Press.

Zerubavel, E. (2006) *The elephant in the room: Silence and denial in everyday life.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Zhu, D.H. and J.D. Westphal (2011) 'Misperceiving the beliefs of others: How pluralistic ignorance contributes to the persistence of positive security analyst reactions to the adoption of stock repurchase plans', *Organization Science,* 22(4), 869-886.

the authors

Ursula Plesner is Associate Professor at the Department of Organization, Copenhagen Business School. She conducts research on digitalization and organization, mostly in a public sector context. Her work has been published in journals such as *Organization, Strategic Organization,* and *Journal of Organizational*

Change Management. She is the co-author of *Digital Organizing – Revisiting themes in organization studies*.
Email: up.ioa@cbs.dk

Lise Justesen is Associate Professor at the Department of Organization, Copenhagen Business School. Her research interests include the interplay between management technologies and organization, public sector digitalization and actor-network theory. She has published in journals such as *Accounting, Organizations and Society, Science, Technology & Human Values,* and *Organization* and she is the co-editor of the volume *Making Things Valuable* published by Oxford University Press.
Email: lj.ioa@cbs.dk

ephemera
theory & politics in organization

© the author(s) 2023
ISSN 1473-2866 (Online)
www.ephemerajournal.org
volume 23(1)

Constructing unknowers, destroying whistleblowers

Kate Kenny

abstract

How can ignorance persist in an era of ubiquitous information and increasing demands for transparency? The censorship of certain speech acts, and the vilification of those who make them, is critical to examine. In this article, I argue that whistleblowing is more than revealing secrets but can be understood as a practice of counter-ignorance. Within organizations, workers who speak truth to power about perceived wrongdoing play an important role in transgressing strategies of ignorance that are ever more nuanced and subtle. Whistleblowing can attract violent reprisals that generate chill effects, silence other would-be disclosers and shut down critique. This effectively upholds the positions of the 'unknowers' who possess the authority to influence what can be known and what must not be acknowledged in the organization of ignorance. In this article, I argue that a censorship lens is useful in showing how subjectivity can be denied to those who speak against ignorance, with the example of national security and intelligence whistleblowers offered to illustrate these dynamics. This article shows how a focus on organization is critical for understandings of strategic ignorance. Central to this is the worker, her capacity to speak out, and how she is framed as a result.

Organized ignorance: Positions of power and threats to positions of power

Why and how are we kept in the dark about things that matter to us? Ignorance is something that is produced. Ignorance is not merely a gap in

knowledge but rather the outcome of cultural and political struggle in which knowledge is withheld (Proctor and Schiebinger, 2008). Agnotology – the study of such struggles – has lately focused on elite power. Scholars examine how certain positions enable the deployment of superior resources to shape what can be known or unknown (McGoey, 2019). On this view, power and the structural conditions upholding it come to the fore. 'Oracular power' is 'defined as the capacity to determine where the boundary between knowledge and ignorance lies' (McGoey, 2019: 16). For oracular power to work, those who possess it must be perceived as legitimate and capable of making decisions even on aspects beyond their own capacities.

What happens when oracular power results in the promulgation of destructive forms of ignorance? When apparently authoritative sources of information work to obfuscate situations, withholding information and hindering the spread of knowledge? For some, 'more facts' are what is needed to challenge ignorance. Experts simply need to 'double down on the facts' in order to disarm the problematic oracular. Ideally, well-known individuals will act as champions who present the facts to a wide audience. The misinformation forwarded by someone like Donald Trump on climate change, for example, can be countered by a kind of David Attenborough figure, whose public appeal rivals the emotion invested in Trump (see for example Harford, 2017). The idea is that an increase in the volume of information on contentious topics, presented in a familiar and compelling manner, will naturally lead people to challenge ignorance and while doing so, challenge harmful oracular power. From this perspective, the position of oracular power is upheld by an absence of compelling facts.

For others, psychological studies provide an answer (see McGoey, 2019 for discussion). Research shows how people interpret information selectively, choosing for example to ignore painful or uncomfortable facts. If such research could be more widely shared, the argument goes, people would come to understand and correct their inherent biases, again leading to a greater number of individuals possessing a greater number of 'facts' thus arming them sufficiently to challenge power. Underlying both of these views is the notion that the individual who manages to overcome obstacles and finally possesses the 'true' facts, can defeat ignorance and work to change the world for good. But in an era in which information is so widely available

and yet ignorance increases, is this approach sufficient? Or is something else at work to support elite, oracular power? Perhaps the very lenses through which we view the bearers of 'facts' are already coloured in ways that encourage us to ignore both the tellers, and what they have to say.

The unknower as central to the question of ignorance

At the heart of organized ignorance is the figure of the unknower (McGoey, 2019). The unknower helps set the agenda for 'what is known and what is not known' and, crucially, has the power to disseminate this knowledge – or un-knowledge – far and wide (McGoey, 2019: 40). If we are to interrogate this power, we should surely examine the dynamics by which unknowing operates: how it emerges, how it comes to be shared, how its boundaries are enforced, and how transgressions are dealt with (Otto et al., 2019). We should examine the power that holds this position of unknower in place. The apparent acceptance of contemporary unknowers appears somewhat strange. Against a backdrop of ubiquitous information, demands for freedom of information, and calls for transparency, surely these positions are subject to continuous challenge? The impunity of the unknower makes little sense, and yet as we see again and again, it appears to persist. Questions emerge: How does the position of the unknower survive amid so many small incursions onto its turf, so many calls for its undoing? Under what conditions does it stay in place? Something powerful must be working to support the position of the unknower. But what?

Organizations play a central role in the spread of ignorance (Bakken and Wiik, 2017). As authoritative sources of expertise and knowledge, the statements and messages emanating from organizations can shape debate on important topics. The knowledge produced within and by organizations can support the perceived legitimacy of oracular power and the position of unknower from which it emanates, or it can challenge. If this is so, then the ways in which workers are enabled to speak truth to power about perceived misinformation – or are silenced when attempting to do so – can be a deciding factor in the maintenance of ignorance.

Continued and active denigration of those figures who most cast doubt on the position of unknower is part of the scaffolding upholding ignorance.

Those who seem not to get the memo about what we are supposed to know, and what we are supposed to ignore, pose a danger. They threaten the structures of knowledge that underlie the status quo and that ultimately protect the interests of powerful parties. These 'knowers' are considered loose cannons, because the normal social sanctions against transgression do not seem to work with them. The organizational cultures that encourage loyalty and complicity, the shared fear of speaking up and becoming stigmatized for doing so, all the reasons 'normal' employees tend to remain silent – these have little traction. Knowers break away from norms upholding informal and subtle strategies of organized ignorance.

Whistleblowers are among these individuals, and are particularly important figures in the context of organizational unknowing. Akin to parrhesiastic speakers of truth to power, whistleblowers dispense with reasons not to speak, and they speak anyway. This poses something of a problem for those who benefit from the ignorance that provides the scaffolding for structures of power. Courageous knowers could be their undoing, if their utterances gain traction with a listening public in a society that, ostensibly anyway, values truth and transparency. Such individuals are anathema to the perceived authority of organizations and organizational leaders (Alford, 2001).

In this article, I argue that organizational whistleblowers threaten the position of the unknower and, therefore, represent a critical challenge to ignorance; their disclosures are counter-ignorance in practice. Moreover, to echo Mary Douglas, the figure of the unknower – her legitimacy, her acceptability – is premised on the active and continued vilification of the figure that haunts its boundaries: the other – the 'knower', against which she is defined. Unknowers can only exist in place through direct and unambiguous denigration of their opposite, because of the very threat this opposite poses to their position which is, by all common standards, shaky at best. Simply maligning disruptive truth-telling is not sufficient; such transgressions must be relegated to the status of the impossible, the nonsensical: utterances that are just noise and nothing more.

This article adds to recent calls to foreground power and the political in studies of ignorance, in this case via attention to the position of the

unknower (cf. McGoey, 2019). Specifically, I argue that the concept of censorship inspired by psychosocial and poststructural thinking is valuable (Butler, 1997). Censorship sheds light on the way in which the organization of ignorance relates to the organization of subjectivity. We see this most clearly when the organization of subjectivity via censorship is resisted and refused, that is, when certain subjects upset the informal consensus around ignorance by insisting on speaking despite normative injunctions to desist. When such speech acts attract punishment, we can see the limits of strategies of ignorance: where they break down, but also how they in turn break those who are mad – and I use this term deliberately – enough to resist them. The proposed framing highlights how the power and status of the unknower is partly premised upon, amplified and enhanced by the censorship of those inexplicable people who seem not to get the memo, when it comes to norms of what we do and do not speak about. In certain settings, whistleblowers transgress the implicit rules that govern both macro and micro ignorance (McGoey, 2019). Their subjectivity is foreclosed from the start because of this transgression through speech; hence the extreme forms of retaliation to which they can find themselves exposed. This extreme retaliation serves a purpose; it acts to uphold and reinforce the position of the unknower, sending clear signals to others about the dangers of challenge.

While this theoretical framing draws on insights from psychoanalysis, this is not a psychological perspective in which the individual is the focus, and the social and political are ignored. In contrast a psychosocial approach foregrounds the ways in which the social and political both structure, and are structured by, the subject. Desires and attachments provide the glue for this dynamic (Butler, 2004). If the political plays a central role here, what kind of power is at stake? Agnotology is the study of how ignorance is constructed, produced by social, cultural and political processes. Lack of knowledge emerges 'either through selective choice and cultivation or through neglect and intentional acts of deception' (Khoo, 2020: 11). Taking a poststructural approach to these questions, a censorship framing is influenced by a Foucauldian perspective, which rejects the idea that some central agent is acting to deploy power. Rather, power works through discourse, forming coherent and comprehensive systems. These are diffuse;

'it is often the case that no one is there to have invented them and few who can be said to have formulated them' (Foucault, 1990: 94). In the context of this article therefore, and its study of unknowers, the focus is not simply on individuals who shape but rather on the position of the unknower that enables the shaping. The unknower is a position within the system, whose capacity to influence is upheld and supported as a valid authority on what can be said and what must be ignored. For sure, some individuals do benefit from the system. Their actions and identifications help maintain it. Our focus here, however, is on the capacity inherent to the position of the unknower and the discursive framework enabling it, rather than searching for the single locus of power from which it emanates (Foucault, 1990).

Following Flyvbjerg (2006), to study a phenomenon, it is useful to study an extreme example. In this case, the organization of ignorance in national security and intelligence organizations (NSI) is instructive. Whistleblowers in this sector are particularly vulnerable. Relative to other public sector whistleblowers, they typically have weaker legal protections, face greater risk of prosecution for their disclosures, and encounter more public ambivalence. Examining NSI whistleblowers as knowers sheds light on the organization of worker subjectivity in support of strategies of ignorance in other settings, specifically what occurs when certain subjects break the frames of knowledge that uphold these strategies, by speaking out about wrongdoing they witness while at work. Moreover, changes occurring in NSI organizations are increasingly visible elsewhere, thus this area is important to study.

In what follows, I introduce the case of NSI whistleblowers, before drawing out specific mechanisms of exclusion they face that go beyond the situations encountered by whistleblowers in other sectors. Next, questions of why these exclusions persist, and the effects that they have, are explored. A censorship framework inspired by Judith Butler sheds light on these issues. The article concludes by elucidating two key insights for the study of ignorance. The first involves the trends and tendencies exhibited in the NSI case that have increasing relevance for the role played by whistleblowers in counter-ignorance practices in other sectors, as well as the obstacles they face therein. The second insight is to conceptualize how the interrelationship between censorship, whistleblowers and unknowers can

help inform studies of ignorance more generally. Focusing on whistleblowing as a practice of counter-ignorance is instructive. Whistleblower reprisal involves censoring via subjectivity: differentiating between subjects considered valid speakers, and those who are not. This process of violent reprisal is needed in order to uphold the position of the authority organizing ignorance. Reprisal against such subjects is, on this view, important work that helps secure the status of the unknower, and signals to onlookers the dangers of challenge. This perspective suggests that future studies of ignorance might be attentive to the power dynamics inherent to the position of the unknower, specifically the exclusions of certain subjects in order to maintain this position, and the violence involved in these exclusions. Agnotology – at its core – involves examining structures of ignorance and the forms of power that uphold them. Workers in organizations who speak out against such structures are critical in counter-ignorance struggles, as are their experiences of reprisal. These cannot be overlooked in the ongoing development of this field.

Oracular power in NSI settings, and whistleblowers as threats

Some of the most grievous acts of destruction against humanity have been carried out by nation states, and the organizations that comprise them. Strategies of ignorance are frequently deployed in order to deter public disapproval, to obfuscate events and distract from what is taking place (Gurman, 2020). National security, intelligence and military organizations are central to these activities. They play a role in the dissemination of certain kinds of knowledge, and the obscuring of others. The position of such organizations and senior leadership within them, as unknowers, is well documented (Varon, 2020).

Since the 1970s, we have seen an increase of whistleblowers in NSI organizations, coming forward with information that challenges the authority of their leadership to dictate what should be known by the public. As some well-known cases attest, whistleblowers in this sector have threatened structures of ignorance, making critical information concerning corporate and state corruption, and human rights abuses public. Notable examples include Daniel Ellsberg's leaking of the Pentagon Papers to the

New York Times in 1971, a history of the United States' political and military involvement in Vietnam from 1945 to 1967 that contradicted official government narratives on the war and highlighted how the US public had been actively misled about what was taking place (Heinrichs et al., 2019; Maxwell, 2020). Katharine Gun's revelations were likewise profound; her disclosures informed US and UK citizens that their governments had attempted to manipulate United Nations support in order to pursue an illegal war in Iraq – a war causing the deaths of hundreds of thousands of civilians and thousands of coalition troops. Gun's impact was also significant leading to a formal investigation commissioned by UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, and the resignation of the UK attorney general's legal adviser and two senior Labour MPs, all of whom departed in protest of UK's involvement in the war relating to her disclosures (Mitchell and Mitchell, 2008). In 2013, Edward Snowden's leaking details of the National Security Agency's (NSA) programme of global mass surveillance to the *Guardian* newspaper led to new US legislation around data privacy, while his revelations continue to inform debates on international data transfers including between the US and the EU.

In each of these cases, the information brought forward by whistleblowers contradicted the official story. In secretive and complex organizations, only insiders are in a position to challenge in a convincing and authoritative manner the ignorance being promoted by organizational leaders. Most insiders remain silent; organizational ignorance prevails in plain sight with thousands of workers coming into the office every day without realizing, or allowing themselves to realize, or realizing but feeling afraid to do anything. Most insiders, but not all. People like Katharine, Daniel, Edward are interesting in that they are insiders challenging the organization's official message to the outside. They position themselves as knowers, a position that challenges the status quo.

NSI whistleblowers can suffer particularly extreme retaliation for acts of knowing

Despite the clear public interest, served by their resisting complicity with ignorance, NSI whistleblowers can find themselves subject to severe sanctions: these can come from their employers, the state and society more

generally. Once their names are disclosed, they can be fired from or blackballed in government service, or sometimes find themselves the subject of a smear campaign in the media, a position that is ever more precarious in today's polarized environment. Of course, this reflects the experiences of some whistleblowers in other sectors, as countless films and books depict. But the situation for NSI whistleblowers is particularly challenging (Melley, 2020; Terracol, 2019). The laws protecting whistleblowers across a range of industries and sectors have improved and strengthened over the past twenty years in many countries. Yet whistleblowing protections for NSI employees generally remain weak (Gardner, 2016; Gurman and Mistry, 2020).

In some cases, NSI whistleblowers are threatened with prosecution. The US Espionage Act is a hundred year old piece of legislation aimed at prosecuting spies and traitors, but today is also used to criminalize protest, where to speak out is to be guilty (Munro, 2019). Such laws are interpreted broadly in order to threaten NSI employees with prosecution if they disclose information that the government deems damaging to the defence of the country or its interests abroad, even if the supposed damage is highly questionable (Gurman and Mistry, 2020). Similar legislation exists elsewhere including the UK and Irish Official Secrets Acts for example. Under such laws whistleblowers are denied a public interest defence; they are unable to present evidence that could be used to support their case or to exonerate them (Jones, 2020). Breaching secrecy laws is the main reason NSI whistleblowers are threatened with prosecution (Mistry, 2020). As a result of the increasing tendency to classify more and more documents within these organizations, the potential to breach such laws likewise increases, and hence whistleblowers are more likely to be prosecuted (Gardner, 2016; Lebovic, 2020). Commentators note that the punishments levied at NSI whistleblowers have become increasingly severe since the 1970s, with cases such as Reality Winner's offering exemplars of this (Gurman and Mistry, 2020).

Where whistleblowers fail to secure the support of the law, are without institutional assistance from unions or professional associations, and find themselves targets of retaliation, public support can play a critical role in their protection. While public support does not necessarily lead to political change in an era of celebrity-whistleblowers (Melley, 2020), media

campaigns can and do improve a whistleblower's fortunes. Well-strategized campaigns can for example embarrass an organization, who is now in the spotlight both for the original wrongdoing and for subsequent retaliation against a well-meaning worker who spoke up (Devine and Maassarani, 2011; Maxwell, 2020). Politicians can find themselves under pressure to seek justice on behalf of the whistleblower, while the public outcry sees journalists rushing to cover the story.

In the search for popular support however, NSI whistleblowers find themselves at a particular disadvantage, vulnerable to being smeared as national traitors whose disclosures potentially endanger lives, and revealers of important secrets that protect us all (Mistry, 2020). Isolation, not support, can be a more common experience for NSI whistleblowers. Even their legal teams can find themselves the source of vilification for years afterwards as seen in Edward Snowden's case (Munro, 2018). The lawyer representing whistleblowers in President Trump's impeachment case was dropped by his insurance firm (Haberman, 2020), later receiving a death threat. Journalists who cover these whistleblowers' stories can also face retaliation.

Worldwide whistleblower protection, but not for NSI disclosers

While calls for better whistleblowing protection have never been louder, the desired protections do not extend to every kind of worker. NSI whistleblowers are not part of today's trend that sees policy-makers, legislators and even organizations demanding improvements in whistleblower rights. Whistleblowing laws have been present in the United States since the 1970s and the past twenty years have seen successive enhancements including protection against retaliation and the offering of rewards in certain sectors. The UK adopted its Public Interest Disclosure Act in 1998 followed by Australia, Canada, and Serbia to name just a few, and since 2020 a wide-ranging European Union directive instructs to member states to vastly improve protections for whistleblowers, to institutionalize support, and to ensure investigations take place into reported breaches of EU law. From the subject position of the whistleblower and how she is perceived in society, such changes do more than reinforce her legal rights. They enhance her acceptability, reduce stigma and help to dismantle the problematic association of whistleblowing with acts of treachery, informing

to authorities and other negative stereotypes that can persist, particularly in societies with a history of authoritarian government.

The figure of the whistleblower is arguably held in higher esteem than ever before. The potential for structures of ignorance to be challenged, therefore, increases with support from such eminent corners. While the balance of power is by no means reversed in favour of those who speak out, the capacity for resistance does increase against this backdrop. For some whistleblowers, but not for all. National Security and Intelligence whistleblowers remain out in the cold and continue to suffer the most severe retaliation of all groups (Gurman and Mistry, 2020; Terracol, 2019). The incoming EU directive, providing extensive protections for whistleblowers across many sectors, omits this group; those who disclose matters relating to security, defence and classified information are outside of its scope (Nad and Colvin, 2019). In the UK, ongoing calls to improve the Public Interest Disclosure Act tend to exclude NSI whistleblowers, instead focusing on the health and financial services sectors, in which a large number of high-profile cases have emerged to gain public support over recent years (Kenny, 2019). The increasing attention being paid to whistleblowers across a range of sectors and in many countries tends to overlook NSI whistleblowers.

Perhaps NSI 'knower-whistleblowers' should not be protected?

Perhaps, however, ignorance is important to maintain. After all, states need secrets in order to protect their people and to forward the national interest. Perhaps the position of the unknower in NSI organizations is misunderstood. They require authority and legitimacy because they have responsibility for forwarding narratives that keep us safe – curated versions of events and selective information that help us to act in our own best interests, interests that more knowledgeable and experienced authorities have carefully considered and diagnosed. This might suggest that in fact it is correct to curtail the freedom of the NSI whistleblower to speak out, because of the threat to the state's authority that she poses. Another argument is that the NSI whistleblower potentially represents a real danger to individual lives, if innocent people are named in public as a result of her disclosures.

The problem, however, as noted by the Council of Europe, is that the maintenance of secrecy and confidentiality within the inner workings of government is too often equated with absence of scrutiny and oversight (Terracol, 2019). The two issues are not the same. Wrongdoing can happen in any organization – governments, national security and intelligence bodies are by no means immune to abuses of power as successive scandals have shown. But punitive approaches to whistleblowing in these organizations hamper all kinds of other problems from being addressed. An example of this is Irish defence forces whistleblower Tom Clonan, who was threatened with prosecution for breaching that country's Official Secrets Act (Clonan, 2020). The content of his disclosure? Widespread sexual harassment and abuse against female colleagues. Serious wrongdoing was occurring, but it was not the kind of activity that jeopardizes state security. However, because he served in the defence forces, draconian security legislation was used as a threat in attempts to silence a whistleblower and conceal his information.

Even in cases where sensitive information is at stake, enabling workers to disclose genuine concerns about wrongdoing needs not automatically jeopardize secrecy and safety. This is the central premise of the Council of Europe's recommendations and the Tschwane principles, which advise how states might approach enabling proper channels for disclosure and outside scrutiny that do not, and should not, put national security at risk. The current situation simply acts to prevent effective scrutiny and oversight, stymie debate about activities and decisions within NSI organizations and hamper the ability to detect wrongdoing, as the United Nations argues (Terracol, 2019). In the absence of this, the two obstacles of weak whistleblower protections, and the threat of prosecution for those who speak out, sends a clear message to those who witness wrongdoing: remain silent. NSI whistleblowers are without protection. And, almost unique in terms of whistleblowers today, they are without the promise of protection to come.

The inexplicable, impossible NSI whistleblower

If the protection of the NSI whistleblower is demanded by such austere institutions such as the Council of Europe and the United Nations, along with many whistleblowing advocacy and expert groups, who for example

campaigned for her inclusion in the scope of the recent EU directive (Nad and Colvin, 2019; Terracol, 2019), then why does she remain so exposed and vulnerable, as if her words do not serve society? Why is she denied a public interest defence in court: a crucial right to enable cases involving ethical and moral decisions to be judged appropriately? Why is such extreme retaliation allowed to continue and why is she left out of the stampede to protect other kinds of whistleblowers?

In certain cases, the person who speaks out finds that she has no place in the accepted norms of behaviour within the organization. Rather than 'good' or 'bad', she is somewhat inexplicable. She eschews more commonly seen traits: a desire for belonging to the organization, commitment to the group, expectations around complying with organized ignorance, and she speaks out regardless (Perry, 1998). She is thus somewhat impossible in terms of the position she occupies within the cultural norms of both organization and society (Contu, 2014). Trying to make sense of this apparent inexplicability, C. Fred Alford cites Daniel Ellsberg to depict such individuals as 'spacewalkers' who appear to act like people from another planet (Alford, 2001: 120). But how and why does inexplicability – the crime of being from a different planet – lead to such drastic sanctions?

Censorship: An important mechanism in the maintenance of ignorance

Judith Butler's notion of censorship shows how people are constructed in and through speech acts that, in certain circumstances, can render them inexplicable and excluded from what is deemed to be a valid, legitimate person. Censorship is a form of discursive power that produces particular kinds of subjects by instating a boundary separating legitimate from illegitimate utterances. The production of this boundary works to delineate valid from 'invalid' subjects, excluding the latter and granting their speech the status of incomprehensible nonsense (Butler, 1997). Censorship helps to delimit what 'can and cannot be thought' within a particular cultural setting.

With censorship Butler develops earlier ideas on subjectivity and power inspired by psychoanalytic and feminist theory. These ideas have long shed light on experiences of workers in organizations and specifically the nature of complicity with, and resistance to, organizational norms. Butler's work on

subjectivity has enhanced understandings of organizational gender and sexuality, ageing, management and managers, and whistleblowing (Riach et al., 2016; Fotaki and Harding, 2018, Harding et al., 2013; Kenny, 2019; Pullen, 2006). Studies show how workers, as subjects, are compelled via psychic desires to adopt discursive positions that grant them much-needed recognition within their symbolic world. This desirous compulsion thus reinforces and maintains particular discursive norms in place, just as it can cause injury and pain to the subject who finds herself attached to norms that ultimately injure. Control operates through 'self-supporting signifying econom(ies) that wield(s) power in the marking off of what can and cannot be thought within the terms of cultural intelligibility' (Butler, 1990: 99–100). Subjectivity is thus always embedded in power. It is the desires of multiple subjects to find places of identification within them that enhances and buttresses these signifying economies.

An aspect of this work with particular relevance in the context of this article is the idea that exclusions – the 'marking off' described by Butler – can occur through acts of speaking, an issue Butler develops in her chapter *Implicit Censorship and Discursive Agency* in *Excitable Speech* (1997). Censorship works as a matrix of control that not only constrains, through prohibiting people from speaking in a certain way, but also produces, in that it produces certain kinds of subjects. Censorship is thus a constitutive dimension of the construction of the 'exclusionary matrix by which subjects are formed' that Butler describes in earlier work; the construction of such a matrix 'requires the simultaneous production of a domain of abject beings, those who are not yet "subjects", but who form the constitutive outside to the domain of the subject' (Butler, 1993: 3). In this case certain kinds of speech are considered to be 'legible as the speech of a subject' (Butler, 1997: 133). Others are not.

In certain cases, censorship thus produces boundaries that circumscribe viable 'candidate(s) for subjecthood' through dynamics of exclusion (*ibid.* 133). People engaged in speech considered to be 'impossible' within the terms of the exclusionary matrix, unrecognizable within 'norms of speakability', simply do not count as valid subjects. Their lives are vaguely recognizable as human but their status is 'not quite' that of subject (see also Butler, 2009). The place they occupy is not simply subordinate – if that were

the case, they might conceivably be able to lay claim to rights or needs that have been denied to them. Rather, they are unrecognizable amid any categories of signification – including that of 'other' – and thus their exclusion runs deeper still (Varman and Al-Amoudi, 2016). If violence occurs against such lives, it does not engender grief or sympathy because these were not subjects, nor even valid, to begin with. Returning to the speech acts that gave rise to such positions that are not recognized, these too are devalued and, therefore, ignored. Rather than heard as language, such utterances are considered 'precisely the ramblings of the asocial, the rantings of the "psychotic"' (Butler, 1997: 133). Mere noise, not speech, is what emanates from people that are not subjects. In practice, claims of psychological instability are often levied against whistleblowers and their supporters as part of smear campaigns (Kenny et al., 2019).

While Butler has used these ideas to interpret the role of censorship in the production of hate speech (Butler, 1997), it is useful to understand attempts to speak truth to power – to whistleblow – through this lens, specifically to examine the matrices of exclusion or otherwise that take place (Kenny, 2019). Censorship shows how whistleblowers can form part of a matrix of exclusion, in which some subjects are legitimized – for example as unknowers enjoying oracular power. Speakers that pose a threat to this power are not only demoted to the status of other, they are denied any recognizability at all. This all works in the service of upholding the position of the unknower, a position that, on the surface seems quite unstable. The unknower only exists because her counterpart's capacity to act as a speaking subject has been stamped out of all recognition.

In the case of NSI whistleblowers for example, the extraordinary reprisals this group can experience for speaking out in the public interest are only accepted by onlookers because these actions are not really seen as reprisals. Violent and destructive retaliation can only take place against 'real', valid employees, not inexplicable space-walkers, who are speaking language we cannot or do not want to understand. Hence this group is overlooked by the drafters of legislation who are trying to protect and support whistleblowers in most other sectors. NSI whistleblowers are overlooked because, as invalid entities engaging in impossible speech, there is no ontological basis for their inclusion as speaking subjects deserving protection. Their punishment by

hundred-year-old spy laws goes unremarked, while NSI whistleblowers can find themselves targets of vilification even by ordinary people who are served well by their disclosures. In this way, the subject position of the NSI whistleblower remains sadly impossible. Ignorance is managed and prescribed through framing the person transgressing as someone that must be ignored. She is not quite a subject, rather a fuzzy kind of entity engaged in psychotic ramblings.

What does this mean for the workers in NSI organizations, whose whistleblowing rights appear to be so radically curtailed? To paraphrase C. Fred Alford (2001), the experiences of whistleblowers tell us a lot about the organizations of which they speak. In this case, they are not to be considered subjects of speech with the ability and right to articulate their views as citizens, even where wrongdoing is at stake. It seems as though their selves, their positions as subjects, are merely extensions of the rules and bureaucracies of the places they work, and nothing more. The capacity for ethical judgement is foreclosed. This has significant implications for the work of public service in the traditional sense in such settings – where the ethos of serving the public interest is under attack, workers are denied the capability to exercise autonomy and dissent. Moreover, as the scope of classifications increases, and secrecy agreements ensure ever-greater opacity on the part of many kinds of organizations, will the phenomena described here have implications for public sector workers more widely?

At first glance, it may appear that the concept of censorship is somewhat overblown. Surely, figures like Edward Snowden cannot be said to be silenced, less still deprived of subjectivity? On this, it is important to note that, in practice, the vast majority of whistleblowers in this sector especially and many others also, are never heard at all. Most whistleblowers are either actively silenced, or they give up. Despite ongoing calls for change, whistleblowers typically lose their legal cases (IBA, 2021), while practical support for those that suffer remains rare or non-existent (Kenny and Fotaki, 2021). The whistleblowers mentioned here are, therefore, unusual because they have succeeded in gaining even a partial audience to which they can appeal. Drawing on a censorship lens to examine these extreme albeit unusual cases can help us to understand the dynamics of silence in relation to the upholding of ignorance more generally.

Concluding thoughts: Ignorance, unknowers and censorship

The case of NSI whistleblowers examined through a censorship lens offers some insights for the study of agnotology. First, scholars will acknowledge the critical role played by workers and organizations in the promulgation of ignorance, and the challenge to this. In an era of increasingly opaque work practices—in sectors from big tech to pharma and financial services—we often depend on insiders to tell us when deliberate strategies of ignorance are being forwarded. Many workers remain silent when faced with instances of serious wrongdoing but some speak out and 'blow the whistle'. Whistleblowers therefore represent a critical part of the fabric of counter-ignorance. Their disclosures can prove a direct challenge to the position of oracular power, and hold the potential to overturn it.

But whether and how whistleblowers are listened to can depend on the framing of their subjectivities by those others with which they interact. Following Butler, some speech acts are deemed impossible, un-hearable, and non-sensical with the concomitant dismissal and exclusion of the speaker. Other speech acts are upheld as emanating from valid authoritative sources. An attention to this framing of disclosers, the power activity therein, can help us to shed light on practices of ignorance and counter-ignorance, with the role of organizations front and centre. This work is important, not least because ongoing changes within NSI organizations are increasingly observable in other sectors. It may be that the capacities of whistleblowers to effectively disclose truth to power and challenge structures of ignorance will be eroded accordingly. The specific mechanisms of censorship and ignorance in the cases described relate to trends appearing elsewhere, as described next.

In retaliation campaigns emanating from their former employers, NSI whistleblowers are increasingly framed as 'hired hands' because of the growing prevalence of non-permanent employees. They are depicted as mere contractors bought-in from the outside and thus not to be trusted when disclosing apparently important information, as in the case of Edward Snowden among others (Melley, 2020). This smear tactic overlooks the fact that in the US, since the 1970s, the federal government and CIA are increasingly relying on contracting staff as part of moves to shrink the

permanent government, with similar changes happening elsewhere. However, this point often goes unmentioned in media articles that quote his former employers, who describe Edward Snowden as 'only a contractor', 'a former Dell employee', in other words not really 'of the organization' (Snowden, 2019). Such depictions also overlook Mr. Snowden's internal intelligence community and military background, but they are used nonetheless. In the wider world of work, short-term contracts are increasingly prevalent. These novel tactics of countering the efforts of whistleblowing 'knowers' have implications in other sectors.

Second, we are likely to see increasing deployment of censorship, chill effects and vilification in the upholding of oracular power in a wide range of sectors. The reason is that these tactics and strategies are increasingly seen as the only option, in an era of increasingly 'leaky' organizations. Changing technologies make leaks of huge volumes of data much easier (Munro, 2017; Weiskopf, 2021). Compare Daniel Ellsberg's many nights of photocopying documents and the labour involved in transferring information from inside to outside the organization, with Edward Snowden's micro-chip embedded in a Rubik's Cube carried in his pocket as he left for home from the NSA headquarters in Hawaii. The sheer volume of information that can potentially be transferred has increased exponentially, as has its ease of transfer. In addition to this, the profile of a potential whistleblower is shifting. People who speak out about systemic and deep-seated corruption are often at mid- or senior level in their organization, because they need to be in a position with at least some oversight of the overall system, insight into different silos and understanding of how they work together. It is often only from this perspective that serious wrongdoing can be diagnosed. Traditionally, this person was mid- or late-career due to the length of time needed for promotion. This is changing. As a result of the increasing digitization of NSI activities, junior staff and new joiners enjoy unprecedented levels of access to information across the organization; they are the only ones possessing the technological expertise required. With the increasing digitization of ever more types of work, the trend toward leakier organizations is reflected elsewhere.

Against such institutional shifts, what other tactics do organizations employ? One response involves dramatic increases in the kinds of

information that are deemed secret. This can be seen for example in recent years' proliferation of document classification (Immerman, 2020). The framing of an NSI whistleblower as a 'revealer of secrets' is an important strategy in defusing any public support that might be forthcoming. Such a framing precludes any debate on whether or not this kind of whistleblower is in fact fulfilling their duty as a public servant by speaking out about wrongdoing, a common argument in defence of this position (Ceva and Bocchiola, 2019; Tsahuridu and Vandekerckhove, 2008; Vandekerckhove and Tsahuridu, 2010). One's duty as a public servant becomes the duty to keep secrets even where problematic. It follows then that the broader the category of document that can be labelled secret, the greater the number of NSI workers falling within this frame. The widespread classification of all kinds of benign information grows. This concerning trend is seen even in private sector organizations via the increased use of non-disclosure agreements as part of whistleblowing dispute settlements for example. Additionally, there is the growth of pre-emptive secrecy clauses that new recruits must sign as part of employment contracts, promising not to exercise their whistleblower rights if they witness wrongdoing. While whistleblower protection laws technically override secrecy agreements in court, this fact is not well known; secrecy agreements confuse workers. The performative effect of signing secrecy contracts is to instill a fear of breaking them, a predilection for silence, and an overall chill effect around speaking out. Even if it is legal, who would want to risk it? In this way both bureaucratic practices and psychological attachments combine to uphold norms of secrecy in sectors beyond NSI.

A further effective tactic is to create examples of workers who do speak out and to ensure the message is loud and clear. In the case of organized ignorance, excessive reprisals have the effect of sending unambiguous messages to others who would challenge the position of the oracular. They can see what will happen if they try to hamper unknowers in the conduct of their knowledge-shaping activities. What legal experts describe as 'chill effects' emanate and circulate through the stories that are told by journalists, by film-makers, and by colleagues. The matrix of censorship is once again reinforced. The deployment of whistleblower reprisals as serious

warnings to other workers has been studied in a variety of sectors to date (Alford, 2001; Kenny, 2018; Rothschild and Miethe, 1999).

It is important to note that power is not a zero-sum game; the marking off of subjectivities, through mechanisms of control including censorship, is productive in that it produces new kinds of subject position (Butler, 1990, 1993; Foucault, 1990). In many of the examples given here, from Daniel Ellsberg to Edward Snowden and Katharine Gun, whistleblowers have themselves engaged in struggles over oracular power, speaking publicly in legitimate forums to challenge what they perceive as dangerous ignorance. Ongoing research usefully examines these moves, the strategies and 'truth-games' to which they give rise, and the inherent potential for whistleblowers to collaborate with others including activists, lawyers, politicians and journalists (Kenny, 2019; Munro, 2017). Future research into these collaborative counter-ignorance practices that aim to redefine 'where the boundary between knowledge and ignorance lies', is critical (McGoey, 2019: 16).

In the interlinked relationship between ignorance, the unknower and the whistleblower, we see how clear shifts in the balance of power are taking place, enabled by ongoing changes and capacities including technological ones, and in a wide range of sectors. The direction of these shifts remains ambiguous and indeterminate and further research is required into each of these aspects.

The dynamics of unknowing and the scaffolding of oracular power

This article speaks to agnotology more generally. First, it suggests organizations are critical loci for the promulgation of ignorance and must be examined in more depth, with specific attention to the framing of knowers and unknowers in organizational settings. Organizations tend to operate within what Mirowski, discussing the profession of economics, refers to as 'thought collective(s)', each coming with its own norms of acceptable speech. An examination of the relation between unknowers, whistleblowing and censorship in a particular setting demands attention to the implicit forces that govern the 'conditions of intelligibility' of speech (Butler, 1997: 134). As Butler notes, 'the question is not what it is I will be able to say, but

what will constitute the domain of the sayable within which I begin to speak at all' (1997: 133). This is no easy task. The elements for which we search are not readily available for examination. The underlying structures of power, or matrices of control, are rarely acknowledged as such, and of course to speak about them is to speak outside of the terms circumscribing legible speech. Perhaps, however, we can encircle the specifics of certain situations with an eye for what kinds of things are put to work in the demarcating of conditions of intelligibility. Perhaps we can examine what defines the sayable against the unsayable. Scholars have begun to examine how, for example, technological representations related to gender and sexuality frame what counts as valid truth tellers (Agostinho and Thylstrup, 2019), and how professional norms around silence and complicity determine who can speak out and about which topics (Kenny, 2019; Weiskopf and Tobias-Miersch, 2016). Future research will ideally examine the dynamics underscoring the way subjects who transgress are positioned and framed, and specifically how this relates to the ways in which unknowers are presented, in order to understand the workings of organized ignorance and their proliferation of harm. Methods that enable in-depth exploration of these issues including ethnographic and qualitative work, hold promise here.

Rendering whistleblowers unspeakable and impossible effectively upholds the position of oracular power, and benefits those who gain from the promulgation of ignorance. Ignorance depends on maintaining and reinforcing an organizational, and institutional, matrix of control that creates an implicit, normative 'domain of the sayable'. This domain produces certain kinds of subjects – legitimate ones operating within the boundary of what is deemed acceptable speech, and a set of unspeakable, impossible others whose statements must be discounted because the subjects were not valid. What NSI whistleblowers show us clearly is how this process does more than reinforce oracular power, it places others in serious danger. At the heart of genuine whistleblower disclosures is a person who is suffering. A victim of an illegitimate war, for example, a preventable terrorist attack, or a state-sanctioned coup that has since been covered up. If agnotology is ultimately about studying the struggles inherent to the structures of ignorance that lead to, justify and ultimately deny this suffering, we must always bear in mind that there are workers in

organizations trying to speak up, and understand the critical role that they play.

references

Agostinho, D. and N.B Thylstrup (2019) 'If truth was a woman: Leaky infrastructures and the gender politics of truth-telling', *ephemera*, 19(4): 745-775.

Alford, C. F. (2001) *Whistleblowers: Broken lives and organizational power*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Bakken, T. and E.L. Wiik (2017) 'Ignorance and organization studies', *Organization Studies*, 39: 1109–1120.

Butler, J. (1990) *Gender trouble*. London: Routledge.

Butler, J. (1993) *Bodies that matter*. London: Routledge.

Butler, J. (1997) *Excitable speech: A politics of the performative*. London: Routledge.

Butler, J. (2004) *Undoing gender*. London: Routledge.

Butler, J. (2009) *Frames of war*. London: Verso.

Ceva, E. and M. Bocchiola (2019) *Is whistleblowing a duty?*. Cambridge, UK: Polity.

Clonan, T. (2020) 'Surviving whistleblowing in the military- A personal, professional and ethical journey' [https://www.euroisme.eu/images/Documents/OccasionalPapers/Clonan_EuroISMEOccasionalPaper_2_2020.pdf].

Contu, A. (2014) 'Rationality and relationality in the process of whistleblowing: Recasting whistleblowing through readings of Antigone', *Journal of Management Inquiry*, 2: 393-406.

Devine, T. and T. Maassarani (2011) *The corporate whistleblower's survival guide*. Oakland: Berrett-Koehler.

Flyvbjerg, B (2006) 'Five misunderstandings about case study research', *Qualitative Inquiry*, 12: 219–45.

Fotaki, M. and N. Harding (2018) *Gender and the organization: Women at work in the 21st century*. London: Routledge.

Foucault, M. (1990) *The history of sexuality, Vol. I: An introduction*. London: Penguin.

Gardner, L. (2016) *The war on leakers*. New York: The New Press.

Gurman, H. and K. Mistry (2020) 'The paradox of national security whistleblowing: locating and framing a history of the phenomenon', in K. Mistry and H. Gurman (eds.) *Whistleblowing nation*. New York: Colombia University Press.

Gurman, H. (2020) 'Unfit to print: The press and the Contragate whistleblowers', in K. Mistry and H. Gurman (eds.) *Whistleblowing nation*. New York: Colombia University Press.

Haberman, M (2020) 'Insurer drops whistle-blower lawyer, citing high-profile work', *New York Times*, August 24.

Harding N., J. Ford and M. Fotaki (2013) 'Is the 'F'-word still dirty? A past, present and future of/for feminist and gender studies in Organization', *Organization,* 20(1): 51–65.

Harford, T. (2017) 'The problem with facts', *FT Adviser,* March 9th 2017.

Heinrichs, R., B. Loacker and R. Weiskopf (2019) 'The ethico-politics of whistleblowing: Mediated truth-telling in digital cultures', *ephemera: theory and politics in organization*, 19(4): 671-696.

IBA (2021) 'Are whistleblowing laws working? A global study of whistleblower protection litigation' [https://www.ibanet.org/article/EE76121D-1282-4A2E-946C-E2E059DD63DA].

Immerman, R. (2020) 'From the mundane to the absurd: The advent and evolution of prepublication review', in K. Mistry and H. Gurman (eds.) *Whistleblowing nation*. New York: Colombia University Press.

Jones, M. (2020) 'Creating uncertainty, casting doubt: U.S. intelligence leaks from reform to spyware for sale', in K. Mistry & H. Gurman (eds.) *Whistleblowing nation*. New York: Colombia University Press.

Kenny, K. (2018) 'Censored: Whistleblowers and impossible speech', *Human Relations*, 71(8): 1025-48.

Kenny, K. (2019) *Whistleblowing: Toward a new theory*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Kenny, K. and Fotaki, M. (2021) The costs and labour of whistleblowing: Bodily vulnerability and post-disclosure survival, *Journal of Business Ethics*. DOI: 10.1007/s10551-021-05012-x

Kenny K., M. Fotaki and S. Scriver (2019) 'Mental health as a weapon: Whistleblower retaliation and normative violence', *Journal of Business Ethics*, 160(3): 801–815.

Khoo, S. (2020) 'Pandemic ignorance and the "worlds" of development', in P. Carmody, G. McCann, C. O'Halloran and C. Collera (eds.) *COVID-19 and the global south – Impacts and responses*. Bristol: Policy Press.

Lebovic, S. (2020) 'From censorship to classification: The evolution of the Espionage Act', in K. Mistry and H. Gurman (eds.) *Whistleblowing nation*. New York: Colombia University Press.

Maxwell, L. (2020) 'Celebrity hero: Daniel Ellsberg and the forging of whistleblower masculinity', in K. Mistry and H. Gurman (eds.) *Whistleblowing nation*. New York: Colombia University Press.

McGoey, L. (2019) *The unknowers: How strategic ignorance rules the world*. London: Zedbooks.

Melley, T. (2020) 'The public sphere hero: Representations of whistleblowing in U.S. culture', in K. Mistry and H. Gurman (eds.) *Whistleblowing nation*. New York: Colombia University Press.

Miethe, D. (1999) *Whistleblowing at work: Tough choices in exposing fraud, waste and abuse on the job*. Boulde, CO: Westview Press.

Mistry, K. (2020) 'The rise and fall of anti-imperial whistleblowing in the long 1970s', in K. Mistry and H. Gurman (eds.) *Whistleblowing nation*. New York: Colombia University Press.

Mitchell, M. and T. Mitchell (2008) *The spy who tried to stop a war: Katharine Gun and the secret plot to sanction the Iraq invasion*. Sausalito, California: Polipoint Press.

Munro I. (2017) 'Whistleblowing and the politics of truth: mobilizing 'truth games' in the WikiLeaks case', *Human Relations*, 70(5): 519-43.

Munro, I. (2018) 'An interview with Snowden's lawyer Robert Tibbo on whistleblowing, mass surveillance and human rights activism', *Organization*, 25(1): 106–122.

Munro I. (2019) 'An interview with Chelsea Manning's lawyer: Nancy Hollander on human rights and the protection of whistleblowers', *Organization*, 26(2): 276-290.

Nad, V. and N. Colvin (2019) 'Whistleblowing in the European Union: A new directive
to protect citizens, democracy and rule of law'. Blueprint for Free Speech [https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5e249291de6f0056c7b1099b/t/5ed119f3deae375165af97b4/1590761971728/EU_NEW_DIRECTIVE_ANALYSYS_V5_ONLINE.pdf]

Otto, B., J.G. Pors and R. Johnsen (2019) 'Hidden in full view: The organization of public secrecy in Miéville's The city and the city', *Culture and Organization*, 25(2): 91-103.

Perry, N. (1998) 'Indecent exposures: Theorizing whistleblowing' *Organization Studies*, 19(2): 235-257.

Proctor, R. and L. Schiebinger (2008) *Agnotology: The making and unmaking of ignorance*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Pullen. A. (2006) 'Gendering the research self: Social practice and corporeal multiplicity in the writing of organizational research', *Gender, Work & Organization*, 13(3): 277-298.

Riach K, N. Rumens and M. Tyler (2016) 'Towards a Butlerian methodology: Undoing organizational performativity through anti-narrative research', *Human Relations*, 69(11): 2069–2089.

Snowden, E. (2019) *Permanent record*. London: Macmillan.

Terracol, M. (2019) 'Building on the EU directive for whistleblower protection, Transparency International Position paper' [https://images.transparencycdn.org/images/2019_EU_whistleblowing_EN.pdf].

Tsahuridu, E. E. and W. Vandekerckhove (2008) 'Organisational whistleblowing policies: Making employees responsible?', *Journal of Business Ethics*, 82: 107-118.

Vandekerckhove, W. and E. Tsahuridu (2010) 'Risky rescues and the duty to blow the whistle', *Journal of Business Ethics*, 97: 365-380.

Varman, R. and I. Al-Amoudi (2016) 'Accumulation through derealization: How corporate violence remains unchecked', *Human Relations,* 69(10): 1909-35.

Varon, J. (2020) 'Winter soldiers of the dark side: CIA whistleblowers and national security dissent', in K. Mistry and H. Gurman (eds.) *Whistleblowing nation*. New York: Colombia University Press.

Weiskopf, R. and Y. Tobias-Miersch (2016) 'Whistleblowing, parrhesia and the contestation of truth in the workplace', *Organization Studies*, 37(11): 1621-40.

Weiskopf R. (2021) 'Dis/organising visibilities: Governmentalisation and counter-transparency', *Organization*, doi:10.1177/1350508421995751

the author

Kate Kenny is full Professor of Business and Society at NUI Galway. She has held research fellowships at the Edmond J. Safra Lab at Harvard University and Cambridge's Judge Business School. Professor Kenny's work has been published in *ephemera, Organization Studies, Organization, Gender Work and Organization, ephemera* and *Human Relations* among other journals. Her books include *Whistleblowing: Toward a new theory* (Harvard University Press, 2019), *The Whistleblowing Guide* (Wiley Business, 2019, with W. Vandekerckhove and M. Fotaki), *Understanding Identity and Organizations* (Sage 2011, with A. Whittle and H. Willmott), and *Affect at Work: The Psychosocial and Organization Studies* (Palgrave 2014, with M. Fotaki). Professor Kenny serves on the editorial boards of *Human Relations, Organization,* and *Organization Studies*.
Email: kate.kenny@nuigalway.ie

ephemera
theory & politics in organization

© the author(s) 2023
ISSN 1473-2866 (Online)
www.ephemerajournal.org
volume 23(1)

Unintended ignorance: The narrative of 'the missing patient voice'

Betina Riis Asplin

abstract

This paper brings attention to the production of unintended ignorance in the context of patient involvement in the re-design of healthcare services. Ignorance is usually treated as the result of human and intentional inattention. Recent calls stress that more empirical studies are needed that go beyond understanding ignorance as performed by individuals to explore ignorance as a sociomaterial practice, including all its heterogeneous elements. Actor-network-theory (ANT) assumes that power does not relate primarily to human intention, but instead to the capability of actors, human and non-human, to cause relational effect. Through the lens of ANT and translation, this ethnographic study illustrates how ignorance is produced throughout a service design process in Norwegian health care seeking to involve patients and include the patient voice. It finds that ignorance is produced as patient-centred policy translates into a label — 'the missing patient voice' — enrolling actors and contributing to unintentionally ignoring the real patient voices. This article brings empirical insight into ignorance as practice by giving voice to the non-human actors involved in such efforts, bringing conceptual attention to the material dimension of ignorance. Furthermore, this study affords nuance in understanding practices of patient-centred care by offering a critical perspective on how well-intended efforts of locating and including the patient voice in healthcare services can become symbolic and instead bring passive, token patients (with no voices) into being.

Introduction

Conceptualisations of ignorance usually distinguish between ignorance as a product of intentional, deliberate inattention and as something unintentional, a state of 'being ignorant' in terms of lacking knowledge about certain conditions (Roberts, 2012; Gross, 2010, Smithson, 1989). Recent research of ignorance in the organisational context has tended to focus on intentional ignorance relating it primarily to human agency tied up in the individual's ability or will to ignore. Ignorance is therefore usually explored as a resource that helps human or organisational actors, and as something actively and intentionally produced for different strategic purposes (Schaefer, 2018; Roberts, 2012; McGoey, 2012; McGoey, 2007).

In order to better grasp the phenomenon of ignorance recent calls have stressed the need for more empirical studies that go beyond understanding ignorance as performed by individuals and explore ignorance as a socially constructed and practiced phenomenon that also gives attention to all the heterogeneous elements involved (Bakken and Wiik, 2017; High et al. 2012).

Process perspectives focus on how and why things emerge and change over time (Tsoukas, 2017). One process perspective, actor-network theory (ANT), addresses how patterns or things stabilise in actor networks where human and non-human, macro- and micro-actors are empirically treated the same, with potential capabilities of causing relational effects (Latour, 1986; Callon and Latour, 1981). This study puts forward that an ANT perspective can provide insight into the practice of ignorance and bring nuanced understanding to the production of ignorance beyond human intention or the unintentional result of simply lacking knowledge. Specifically, this study critically investigates how a non-human actor, a label, contributes to the production of unintended ignorance in the context of patient-centred care.

By definition, the concept of patient-centred care implies that patients' subjective experience and voices have somehow been neglected in the organisation of health care. Hence, there is a need for care to be *patient*-centred; that patients should have a stronger voice and be more involved and empowered in the provision of health care services (Liberati et al., 2015; Tanenbaum, 2015; Mead and Bower, 2000). Traditionally, patient

involvement has been about empowering patients' voices through shared understanding and power in clinical decision making (Dent and Pahor, 2015; Dubbin et al. 2013; Greener, 2007; Mead and Bower, 2000). Recently, patient involvement has been called for in the context of public innovation and re-organisation of services. In public service strategies, innovation is encouraged (Andersen and Pors, 2017), and new methods and approaches centred on 'the user experience', such as service design, co-production, and user involvement. Such approaches are considered more suited to centre service provision and the organisation of care around the patient experience and voice (Greenhalgh et al., 2011; Bason, 2010).

Despite the intention to offer patient-centred health care services, research and policy point out that patients' voices are still easily disregarded in health and care services, and the issue continues to be on the global political agenda (Tanenbaum, 2015; El Enany et al., 2013; World Health Report, 2008; Crawford et al., 2002). Research looking into patient-centred care-related approaches, such as shared decision making or involvement in service development, point to the different and often conflicting meanings for service providers making it difficult both to conceptualize and operationalize patient-centred care (Liberati, 2015; Dubbin et al. 2013; Gillespie et al. 2004). Furthermore, patient or user involvement can also become a set-up that contributes to further marginalisation of patients (Fleming et al., 2017; Martin, 2008), sustains existing power relationships (El Enany et al., 2013), and that is unrepresentative and tokenistic in nature (El Enany et al., 2013; Crawford et al., 2003). Notions of involvement can create illusions that patients and providers are equal partners when in reality this is more symbolic than social (Kirkegaard and Andersen, 2018). Idealistic policy can result in organisational blind spots, where impossible ideals force health professionals to ignore that policy is unrealistic (Fotaki and Hyde, 2014). Increasingly, patient-centred care is approached as constructed in relational practice. Such studies look into how patient-centred care policies and care logics work out 'on the ground' and help uncover the micro power dynamics that play into patient-centred care practices (Habran and Battard, 2019; Liberati et al. 2015; Mol, 2008). In this paper, I build further on such research and ask; how may discourses of patient-centred care paradoxically end up silencing patient voices and excluding them in practice?

I explore the production of ignorance through an ethnographic study of a project in the Norwegian healthcare setting inspired by a user-centred service design methodology. The project sought to improve coordination between care providers and the service pathway to a vulnerable patient group based on foregrounding the patient experience and empowering the patient voice in service design and delivery. This study looks into how ignorance was produced despite intentions and ideals of inclusion and empowerment.

Specifically, I employ the concept of translation from ANT to illustrate how ignorance was produced as the mission of the patient-centred project translated into a label, 'the missing patient voice', enrolling actors and contributing to unintentionally ignoring the real patient voices.

This finding leads me to suggest that labels, as well as other non-human actors, can contribute to the production of ignorance. While most empirical work on ignorance in the organisation and management field has approached the production of ignorance from a human agency perspective (Schaefer, 2018; Roberts, 2012), I cast light on a performative and (socio)material dimension that can further elucidate the production of ignorance beyond understandings of ignorance as primarily the result of intended action. Instead, I argue that ignorance can be unintended, and at the same time, caused by capable actors. The contribution of this paper is thus to bring attention to the unintentional and material dimensions of ignorance as well as the role of ignorance in haltering patient empowerment in patient-centred care practices.

The paper proceeds as follows: In the next section, I present the concept of ignorance – specifically, ideas of ignorance relating to intentionality and agency. I then link this with a processual and performative perspective, namely, ANT, which considers non-human agency in social and organisational processes. The research design is then presented, followed by the narrative analysis, 'A project searching for a missing patient voice', and a concluding discussion, where I link the findings to the concept of ignorance and reflect on contributions for the practice of patient-centred care.

Theoretical and analytical framework

Ignorance as the result of intentional or unintentional unknowns

The idea that ignorance is 'intentionally fostered and maintained' (McGoey, 2012: 571) has been important in terms of looking at ignorance as a resource (known unknown) and something actively produced instead of just a 'lack of knowledge' (unknown unknown) one should seek to overcome (Roberts, 2012; McGoey, 2007; Smithson, 1989). It is about knowing what not to know and about selective 'seeing' (Otto et al., 2018). Scholars have drawn attention to organisational ignorance (Roberts, 2012), strategic ignorance (McGoey, 2012) and managerial wilful ignorance (Schaefer, 2018), to mention a few types. This intended production of organisational ignorance is usually understood as a result of individual (primarily human) agency. For example, in Schaefer's (2018) empirical study of innovation practices in a technology organisation, he illustrates how tensions between myths of rationality and pressures of working efficiently resulted in managers 'sticking to their visions' leading them to actively and wilfully ignore relevant information. Organisational ignorance connects with an idea of agency as 'the capacity of an individual or entity to cause an effect', where the organisation is the source of agency (Roberts, 2012: 219), or conversely, individual managers' willingness to ignore produces an intentional state of ignorance indicating that individuals are 'the prime movers of organisational knowledge creation' (Nonaka, 1994: 17 as cited in Schaefer, 2018: 3). In contrast, an unintentional form of ignorance connects with the idea of a state of 'being ignorant', when there is insufficient knowledge about certain conditions (Gross, 2010). Then, ignorance can appear through the revelation of a surprise that triggers awareness of one's ignorance and lack of knowledge (Smithson, 1989).

Then again, ignorance has also been seen as something existing between the intentional and unintentional. An active form of ignoring can be the result of unconscious suppressions derived from social taboos or constraints that make it difficult to process unsettling knowledge (Roberts, 2012). The analysis of pollution and taboo in the classic work of Mary Douglas looked at how societies organised untidy experiences by making clear distinctions between the sacred, the clean and the unclean (the polluted). The sacred

must be continuously protected via 'rituals of separation and demarcation and [...] reinforced with beliefs in the danger of crossing forbidden boundaries' (Douglas, 1966: 197). A taboo is the social prohibition of certain forms of knowledge that are either proscribed or seen as impure – hence, knowledge to be ignored (Roberts, 2012). Douglas argues that 'pollution can be committed intentionally, but intention is irrelevant to its effect – it is more likely to happen inadvertently' (Douglas, 1966: 12). It is the power inherent in the structure of ideas released by human action – not the power vested in individual humans – that produces pollution; this, in turn, creates the conditions for establishing social taboos.

Fotaki and Hyde's (2014) study of failing strategies in the British National Health System looks at the development of organisational blind spots from a socio-psychological and affective perspective. These researchers found that the split between policy formation and implementation enabled policymakers to become unrealistic and idealistic, whereas operational staff were faced with 'impossible ideals'. They were not able to implement these unrealistic policies or to have their difficulties heard. This resulted in affective, defensive psychological mechanisms, such as splitting and blame, leading to organisational blind spots. Knudsen's (2011) functional concept of 'forms of inattentiveness' explains how actively ignoring relevant information is neither intentional nor unforeseen; instead, it is a unity of a problem and a solution produced in activities. Knudsen (2011) illustrates how the use of signs of imagined knowledge, as well as inclusion and exclusion of specific actors and guidelines, is actualised as knowing of problems and solutions to such problems that inevitably produce ignorance or blind spots. Moreover, he proposes that these forms of inattentiveness have a function in under-structured decision-making processes (Knudsen, 2011).

As I have shown, several researchers point towards understanding the underlying visions, strategies and ideals that might lead to or play a role in producing ignorance. Recent calls stress the need for more empirical studies that go beyond understanding ignorance as performed by individuals and explore ignorance as socially constructed and practiced phenomena, including all its heterogeneous elements (Bakken and Wiik, 2017; High et al., 2012; Roberts, 2012; Smithson, 1989). To further such understanding, I will

elaborate on policy ideas as performative discourses, operating as performing actors that play a role in the production of ignorance. For this, I employ a processual and performative analytical lens inspired by ANT and the process of translation that I think can help bring attention to the material and performative side of production of ignorance.

Actor-network theory and translation

Performative and process perspectives focus on how and why things emerge and seek to understand instead of reducing complexity (Tsoukas, 2017). Hence, any phenomenon or social order can be approached as ongoing processes not primarily driven by intentions but resulting from associations or networks between actors (Latour, 2005; Barad, 2003). ANT assumes symmetry between all actors – with no a priori distinction between human and non-human actors (e.g., objects, texts, ideas) or micro- or macro-actors (individuals, organisations, institutions) (Hernes, 2005). The idea of following objects via a narrative is central to ANT, starting with the 'actant', as that which accomplishes or undergoes and act (Czarniawska, 2007). An actant can be a human; it can also be an animal, object, or concept (Czarniawska and Hernes, 2005: 8; Latour, 1994).

An idea can become an object – a linguistic artefact – when it is used repeatedly as a label (Czarniawska and Joerges, 1995: 24). This process of stabilisation is often known as 'translation', which explains how an actant brings on board actors, identities, patterns, and the relation between them as one collective actor – the actor network (Latour, 1999, 2005). Latour (1999: 70) stresses 'the chain of transformation' that enfolds one ordering into the other, enabling a tracing of reference through the network of translation to arrive at the original place of enquiry (Harris, 2005). In this process of translation or 'circulating reference', the original sample needs to be simplified and made less difficult to suit the context (Jensen et al., 2009). Since it associates with a range of prior knowledges now enrolled in the network, it stays the same while at the same time becoming something different. Hence, translation leads to a heterogeneity of actors and unpredictable outcomes (Latour, 1986; Callon and Latour, 1981). Discourses can travel across social levels and shift from being abstract ideas into objects, matter, or enacted practices. Thus, we can understand that

discourses or representations do not represent an external reality but rather constitute an internal reality (Latour, 1999; Foucault, 1977). Hernes (2005: 114) brings translation into the 'confined spaces of organizations' where different institutions, macro-actors, can be brought into being through the discursive enactment of individual organisational actors.

Actor networks are unstable constructions that require effort to stabilise. Hence, power is central in translation processes but not something actors possess as such (Jensen et al., 2009; Latour, 1986). Power (to change) relates not primarily to (human) intention but rather to the capability of actors (human and non-human) to cause effects to other actors within the network; in other words, it represents 'all the intrigues, calculations, actors of persuasion and violence, thanks to which an actor or force takes, or causes to be conferred on itself, authority to speak or act on behalf of another actor or force' (Callon and Latour, 1981: 279). Butler (1993, 1999) provides similar critical perspectives on how discourses work performatively. Building on Foucault and Derrida, she shifts focus from intention to citation as the underlying force of performativity: '[P]erformativity must be understood not as a singular or deliberate "act", but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names' (Butler, 1993: 2). Looking at this in relation to gender, Butler explores how norms work to constitute subjects and the materiality of bodies. In my analysis, I draw on the notion of 'translation' in following how a patient-centred care project process unfolds. Specifically, I show how the mission of the project translated via related policy into a label of 'the missing patient voice', and how it stabilized as an actant figuring as the 'true' representation of patients. Inspired by Butler (1993, 1999) I show how a missing voice is discursively talked into being through power struggles that paradoxically involved ignoring the real voices in the project. The label became a productive resource to bring attention to the patient voice that further stabilized as 'missing'.

Research design

This article is based on an ethnographic case study of a project inspired by service design in Norwegian health care in which the search for the missing patient voice contributed to producing ignorance.

Research context

Norwegian healthcare policy calls for patient-centred care. In 2014, the Minister of Health presented a political plan for Norwegian health care that was 'The patient's health service' with the ambition to place the patient in the centre and increase quality of care (Helse- og Omsorgsdepartementet, 2014). Policy literally tell health personnel to ask patients 'what matters to you' (Meld. St. 26, 2014-2015: 11). The explicit focus on the patient requires a shift in practices and how care is organised, and public authorities are calling for service design as a go-to innovation method to accomplish patient-centred healthcare services (Meld. St. 11, 2015-2016: 125):

> Service design is a new tool for improving and simplifying health care services. It combines process understanding with visualisation. Designers draw from today's situation. This way a common understanding is created among the actors of what is important to change and how it can be done.

Service design is a practice and 'a human-centred, creative and iterative approach to service innovation' (Sangiorgi and Prendiville, 2017: 2), combining a focus on service interfaces and interactions with co-production and 'engaging people in the design for better service experiences'(Sangiorgi and Prendiville, 2017: 2). User representation is central to all stages, from the problem formulation to the insight phase, piloting, organisational implementation, and further provision of services (Junginger and Bailey, 2017; Sanders and Stappers, 2008).

Research setting

The service design project was initiated by a university hospital to improve services and coordinate care for a particularly fragile and vulnerable patient group – elderly patients with multiple illnesses. Their medical picture is complex, and the patient voice is easily lost in the coordination between care providers. A central premise of the project was that the patients' voices

should be involved in both the design and delivery of a new service model; hence, a service design methodology was applied. More specifically, patients were observed and interviewed in their homes to learn about their needs and expectations of services. Furthermore, a service model of ten routines was designed to convey the patient voice in coordination. The routines were checklists, scripted dialogues, and templates for documenting the patient voice and experience based on the slogan, 'what matters to you'. The project included three clinics at the hospital and the home nursing units, service offices, rehabilitation institutions, and general practitioner (GP) representatives from two related municipal districts. A project manager from the university hospital administration was engaged with a project group consisting of hospital nurses, municipal case workers, home nurses and GPs. The project manager recruited patients and saw that the routines were tested and implemented throughout the service interfaces.

Methodology

The university hospital and business school where I am a PhD researcher were partners in a publicly funded research centre on patient-centred innovation, which allowed me to access the case for fieldwork. The case was purposely selected based on the mission to find ways of involving the patients in both the design and delivery of services (Flyvbjerg, 2006). I used participant observation and qualitative interviews to gain insight into the interactions between project participants in the search and inclusion of the patient voices. Documents, such as annual reports, formal presentations, and public documents about the project, were studied to better grasp the problem formulation of the project, the framing of service design and user involvement and how the process was planned and formally executed.

I followed the project over the course of eighteen months, with regular participation in project activities. I participated in eight out of eleven project meetings, and two out of four workshops, where I took comprehensive field notes (Wolfinger, 2002) and wrote down observations almost verbatim, organised temporally (Emerson et al., 1995). For the meetings and workshops that I was unable to attend (some had taken place before I entered the field site), I studied minutes of meetings and PowerPoint presentations that were distributed to participants via email. All notes were

written up and elaborated on from memory later the same day. From my observations, I realised that the practitioners had different ways of involving patients in their work. Therefore, I proceeded to interview the ten project participants that had been most present in the project meetings – namely, two hospital nurses, two GPs, two case workers, three home nurses and one head nurse at a rehabilitation institution. All interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed and coded with the field notes.

Together with the project manager, I interviewed eleven patients who participated in the project. We developed an interview guide covering patients' experiences of being involved in the project and in caring practices. This allowed me to explore notions of involvement from various perspectives. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed by the project manager. The joint affiliation with the research centre allowed the sharing of patient data.

Because some informants also engaged in ethnography-like types of knowledge seeking (searching for the patient voice), my study required multidimensional relationships with people in the field (Garsten and Nyqvist, 2013). In addition to conducting the patient interviews, I participated in nine meetings with the project manager, including planning meetings for a workshop about user involvement. Here, my role in discussions on user involvement was more participatory which would sometimes complicate my role as an observer. This required that I created strategies to address difficult situations when they happened, for example, by always being clear about my role, by avoiding questions, by playing them back, and by refraining from taking sides in discussions. I also developed sensitivity to these moments in my field notes (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004). Being included in the project manager's struggle to operationalise user involvement led us, however, to reflexively explore such topics in interviews, which revealed great insight into what was happening. Despite the efforts to avoid influencing the process, there is a possibility that my presence and affiliation with the research centre on patient-centred innovation added 'weight' to the trend-setting user-centred actant, contributed to the production of ignorance.

Data analysis

I followed a grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) approach, working with an open-ended approach from the data on 'the ground'. This involved systematic conceptualisation and comparison with similar and distinct research areas to reach conceptual saturation. Inspired by ANT, I started by identifying the key events (project workshops, project meetings, patient interviews), as well as the actors/actants (project manager, care workers, patients, project mandate, patient personas, project descriptions, discourses) and the connection between them, including how these connections changed along the way (Hernes, 2005). Following Latour (1999: 70), I traced 'the chain of transformation' back to the original place of enquiry and studied the formal project mandate and descriptions of the project, linking them with my observations and interviews to make sense of what was happening.

Analysing the project as a process of translation helped me see how the intention of finding and including the missing 'patient voice' seemed to persist despite being challenged by the 'real voices' of the patients. This led me to conceptually explore this as a case of organised ignorance. After going back and forth between actors and connections between them, a coherent story gradually emerged, and I felt it was sufficiently saturated as a narrative explaining how the process unfolded (Hernes, 2005: 118).

We can now look at what happened when the vision of patient-centred care was translated into a local project seeking to involve patients whose voices were assumed to be 'missing' in the provision and organisation of care.

A project searching for a missing patient voice

Identifying ignorance: 'The missing patient voice'

I entered the project site as an observer after the project had started, but luckily there were linguistic 'artefacts' allowing me to follow 'the chain of transformation' back to the original place of enquiry (Latour, 1999: 70).

The mission of the project was to contribute to 'The patient's health service' by developing a new service model. Policy ideas and evaluations were referred to in PowerPoint presentations introducing the project stating that there is 'little user involvement', that users experience fragmented health care services[1][2], and calling for the inclusion of patients' and users' voices in the organisation and coordination of health care services[3]. The mission translated into a task description that the project would locate and include 'the patient voice' and handle user involvement in both the development of and as an important part of the new solution. In order to locate and include the patient voice, which was presented as somehow neglected, the project adopted a service design methodology. The project manager explained:

> in coordination, out in the home service, with the GP, everywhere we wished to grasp the patient voice. And our approach was supposed to be user centric. And it [service design] was something we thought of – it is trendy, right, it is "the whole patient first", mastery, white papers en masse, it is written in all guiding documents – that we should have a greater focus on the user.

The patient voice referent was translated into a service design methodology. Service design did not originate specifically from healthcare policy but from information and communication technology (ICT) policy relating to public innovation and initiated to make public services more accessible and user-friendly.[4] Service design is also mentioned in healthcare plans as a tool for innovation in healthcare services[5] and matches the focus on user/patient

---

1 Meld. St. 26 (2014-2016) Fremtidens primærhelsetjeneste stating that users experience fragmented services and little user involvement

2 Forskningsrådet (2016) Evaluering av samhandlingsreformen, p. 14 stating that 'consideration of patient/user participation is one of the areas that ought to be given particular attention

3 Meld. St. 47 (2008-2009) Samhandlingsreformen, p. 25 stating that specifically patients' and users' voices are important when identifying good patient pathways. Patients and users are carriers of the needs and live the lives the services target

4 Meld. St. 27 (2015-2016) Digital agenda for Norge, p. 43: 'the government will stimulate for more uses of service design to contribute to more, good user-centered services'.

5 Helse- og Omsorgsdepartementet (2015) Omsorg 2020 Regjeringens plan for omsorgsfeltet 2015-2020., p. 49: 'some of the municipalities' most important

involvement spelled out in healthcare reforms and white papers.[6] As such, it was strategically in line with guiding policy, as well as being true to the mission of involving patients in the process.

In November 2015, the insight phase was initiated to learn more about how patients experienced healthcare services. The project manager worked with a professional service designer to sketch the service journey of four patients based on interviews of the patients and the different service providers (19 interviews in total). They found that

> the patient voice is unclear.... Summing up after 19 interviews, the patient voice is unclear, structures are deficient for listening, documenting, and conveying. The patient is often unable to speak their case.

The project manager further explained in an interview:

> it was brought to our attention that we to a small degree make use of the patient voice and that we neglect the patient voice in the information that we share.

The patient voice was referred to in the project as 'weak', 'not heard', 'unclear', 'neglected', 'not made use of', and something 'we are not good at listening to'. The problem with the patient voice also confirmed the initial assumptions of the project manager, stating in an interview that 'it was an assumption in the steering group – well, we thought it was like that', as well as the official discourse in health care.

This focus on 'the patient voice' as neglected, ignored, and somehow missing in the organization of care became a representation of the patient, and a label through which the project further developed. Since the project's mandate was to develop a new service model that included the patient perspective, a service model of ten routines was designed and piloted. The routines were different checklists, templates for how to dialogue with patients, routines for sharing information, and arenas for the different

---

collaborative partners on research, innovation, and service design will be given grants and instruments to aid the health care services'.

6 Meld. St. 34 (2015-2016) Verdier i Pasientens Helsetjeneste – Melding om prioritering., p. 1: 'Users and patients must be involved in the design of priorities of health services at all levels'.

service providers to meet with the patients. All routines included the requested question to patients – what matters to you? – as a tool to locate the patient voice.

'What matters to you' was a slogan that can be traced to a 2014 learning network concerned with elderly patient pathways. It came as a response to another, more common diagnostic question – that is, 'what is wrong with you' – and it was meant to redirect focus from the biomedical gaze and to patients' resources and ability to master their own lives.

It gradually became clear that the routines to improve service provision were not so much the result of an emerging service design process that involved the patients and care workers, rather it came directly from the project mandate. Most of the routines were already existing, called for specifically from the policy level (e.g., 'what matters to you'), and revisions of previous projects as 'best practices', and good organisational solutions to the established 'patient voice' problem:

> The mandate said that we should look at coordination, holistic care in hospitals… so we established a working group to operationalise these important things in concrete routines that we were going to do. So, the routines are collected from that mandate, right. (Interview, Project manager)

> They [the routines] are very similar to what the other [projects] are doing. It is similar to the coordination routines for some municipalities I have seen. It is the same; it goes [that way] again. This is also in relation to the revisions that are done of the coordination reform. There was some low-hanging fruit [existing routines], and one decided for ten [routines]. (Interview, GP 2)

This can be seen as a process of stabilization (translation), bringing on board different terms such as 'The patient's health service' with focus on patients' right to choose; the slogan – 'what matters to you'; and service design as a method to invoke user-friendly services. Tracing these terms back to the original place of enquiry (Latour, 1999), they reflected different practices and motivations for involving patients, approaching the patient voice from different levels; the individual level in patient-practitioner relationships, and a collective level of a common user voice as an organizing principle for inclusive services. Still, they shared the ability to underpin the focus of a neglected, weak, or missing patient voice. As I will show, the label 'the

missing patient voice' was strengthened and stabilized further throughout the project.

Dealing with ignorance in the project

The piloted service model was brought into the testing phase of the service design process, where the ten routines were tested with recruited 'project patients' throughout the service network. The care workers from each node in the service chain (home nursing units, hospital clinics, service offices, rehabilitation institutions, GP offices) met frequently throughout the process in formal project meetings organised by the project manager to share experiences and discuss how the new routines were working.

The patients were not physically present in these meetings, but they had been 'transported' via hospital records and digital touch points to PowerPoint presentations of 'patient personas'. The use of personas is a vehicle for representing 'the user experience' in service design (Stickdorn and Schneider, 2014). An example is as follows:

> Patient 1 (City district 1, Orthopaedic unit)
>
> Social woman, 76, lives on the first floor without an elevator. One son who lives [abroad]. She receives home nursing. The illness history resulting in admission was bone fracture. She then went to a rehabilitation home; two weeks later, she had a check-up with her GP and operation at the university hospital orthopaedic unit was considered.
>
> Other illnesses: Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, diabetes, osteoporosis

'The (missing) patient voice' was made present by the patient personas, which paradoxically seemed to focus more on 'what is wrong with you' than 'what matters to you'. This enabled the project manager, whose focus was to ensure that patients' voices were considered, to redirect focus from 'what is wrong with you' and mobilise 'what matters to you', calling upon 'the patient voice' as if it was missing.

The following field note is from Project meeting 3:

> Patient 6 is presented, and they discuss possible mental stress and anxiety. The project manager says that really grasping that anxiety will also be a question regarding patient involvement.... She turns to one of the home nurses, asks if they have a procedure for this when patients get home from hospital; a conversation that is about "how are you doing now". Home nurse (unspecified) says, "That is what we do". The project manager responds and wonders, "What matters to you in practice?" The home nurse responds: "That is our work, yes, that is what we do".

When I explored the problem of 'the missing patient voice' further, it was difficult to grasp. What was really the problem? 'The missing patient voice' was a label that patients and care workers did not really recognise, although this was never discussed openly in the project meetings, despite often being implied, as the vignette above illustrates. Rather, this was information that came out during the interviews, when I asked the participants to reflect on how user involvement had been handled in the project. Home nurses, GPs, service officers and hospital nurses had different practices of involving patients, but all emphasised that patient involvement was nothing new. Here, this is illustrated by statements from two different home nurses:

> But it has always been like that. That the user decides and that you should listen to the patient. I have not experienced anything new with that [in the project]. (Interview, Home nurse 2, City district 2)

> "What matters to you" is how the city district works.... We always collaborate with the patient. It is how we work every day. (Interview, Home nurse 3, City district 1)

The patients we interviewed seemed to generally feel involved. They talked about healthcare services as being part of their everyday life; the level of involvement always depended on what they were currently facing and what they needed. Sometimes, they would use their voice to decide on the level of assistance for daily activities, such as cooking or bathing:

> In the evening, they [home nurses] come and make me dinner.... They wanted to come in the morning too, to make coffee and butter my bread, but then I said no, I don't want to, because I like to make it myself. I can manage to butter my own toast. (Interview, Patient 7)

Other times, patients needed to be advised or told what to do, as in the following example:

> But that was a completely different situation [in the hospital]. I walked in the corridor, and they told me, "Madam, you should slow down, take it easy, get some rest!" … They told me at the hospital that I should just eat and relax and get as well as I could. I gained weight again when I was there, got back my appetite and had someone to talk to. (Interview, Patient 3)

Or, patients would use their voice to decide on treatment:

> -Did they involve you?
>
> -Yes, all the nurses helped and talked a lot…they asked questions about my symptoms prior to my operation. Two of the doctors stood together by my bed and asked me again and again if I was sure that I wanted the surgery. I decided all by myself, I want to be able to breathe better. (Interview, Patient 3)

User involvement activities were initiated throughout the project, for instance, in workshops organised specifically to locate the patient voice. When asked about these activities in interviews, few of the care workers seemed to remember them well, if at all, or be able to link them to the design of new routines:

> Researcher: In what ways has the patient voice been included in the development of the solution?
>
> GP 1: I can't say it has been all that clear, not in any other way than a little bit through the pilot that was done, picking up the user voice there, but… that is one way to get the user voice out, and it has been done through the after-interviews… asking them how was it for you, how did you experience it, but then we are sort of behind after the solution has already been developed…

The project manager was genuinely concerned about bringing the patient's voice out, and she was dedicated to the user involvement approach in the project. Still, at one point, even she questioned the idea of 'the missing patient voice' that had come to be a known truth in the project:

> [T]he question, "what matters to you" – does it take us where we want to go? But I think that when it comes to the user, it says that one of the most basic principles of service design is to work user-centred [refers to the official website for municipalities]. To work user centrically means to systematically make use of the user's voice in the whole development process. And we did that, don't you think? But it is interesting because the user voice that was missing, I did not really find it again in the project… (Interview, Project manager)

The multiple versions of patient involvement showed how the patient voice was always an 'unknown', emerging in care practices and not some empirical representation to be 'found'. Hence, there were hesitant voices, including that of the project manager; however, it seemed that 'the missing patient voice' representation persisted, legitimised by policy and the user-centred service design method now enrolled in the network (Latour, 1999, 2005). As the narrative develops, these multiple patient representations created frictions, which paradoxically enabled the label 'the missing patient voice' to grow stronger.

Production of ignorance in the project

On many occasions, there was frustration among the care workers because the new routines did not seem to fit their idea of what the patient needed. It was clear how the care workers had different notions of patient involvement and were ignoring each other's perspectives. This would often lead to negotiations and acts of persuasion between the care workers themselves, and between the care workers and the project manager, as illustrated in the following observation notes:

> The case workers argue that they know the patients and they know that they can function well at home. They seem to be frustrated by the hospital nurses who promise patients places in rehab centres. They want the hospital to start focusing on "selling home" to the patients. (Observation note, Project meeting 3)

> Hospital nurse 1 says that she misses medical information from the home nurses. Home nurse 3 responds that 'the thing about the home service, we don't measure the blood pressure unless there is a specific need'. Hospital nurse 2 says the home nurses measure too seldom. Home nurse 3 responds that they don't have a standard and that they don't have the opportunity to measure the blood pressure for all their users (Observation note, Project meeting 8)

The practitioners sometimes suggested changes to routines that they found were not working in practice:

> Home nurse 1 says, "Maybe we have to reconsider that routine?" The project manager responds, "Where is the patient's voice in that?" (Observation note, Project meeting 4)

> When discussing a routine, the project manager says, "As far as possible, we wish to complete this routine. We are in a project, and we have to test this." Case worker 1 points out that they experience some difficulties with this routine. The project manager responds, "I have to break through [the discussion] We can discuss [it] later…" (Observation note, Project meeting 3)

In these situations, the project manager would often redirect the discussion toward the patient – *Where is the patient's voice in that?* She would remind the project participants to consider the patient voice, thereby talking into being that it is missing. Hence, 'the missing patient voice' actant stood in the way of care workers using their voices to suggest possible changes to the routines that were not working and engage in co-creation. The new set of routines was treated as *the* patient-centred solution to *the* 'found' problem of a collective missing patient voice, whereas the patient voices that the care workers brought into the discussion were not treated as legitimate in representing the patient.

The voices of the care workers and their experience with the patients were ignored by informally enforcing a taboo – namely, that any insight that might be understood as not complying with 'the missing patient voice' representation is somehow polluted. In contrast, the idea of user centricity is clean, maybe even sacred (Douglas, 1966). Because of this, the project manager would not change the routines during the testing phase, arguing, 'We are in a project'. In this way, she ignored the voices of the project participants (and implicitly the patients) by reminding the practitioners to consider the patient voice. The frictions between the various patient voices represented through the care workers gave 'the missing patient voice' label authority to speak or act on behalf of the patients and gave the project manager an opportunity to get the care workers to align in the name of 'the patient voice' (Callon and Latour, 1981: 279).

The testing phase of the project went on for a little more than a year. The patients reported that they were generally happy with the care that they received but did not seem to notice much change in the service that they had received since the project started. Despite the frictions and disagreements illustrated above, I experienced that the practitioners gradually showed more awareness of their own and each other's perspectives and practices, and that they became more reflexively aware of the fact that they did not

know all aspects of patients' experiences. To further encourage implementation of a user-centric model, the project was absorbed into a larger project network in the municipality. Hence, the 'new' user-centred model was launched as a solution of 'best practice' to yet another set of problems concerning patient-centred care, and perhaps for new ignorance to emerge.

Discussion and conclusion

Recent calls stress that more empirical studies are needed that go beyond understanding ignorance as performed by individuals to explore ignorance as encompassing socially constructed and practiced phenomena, including all its heterogeneous elements (Bakken and Wiik, 2017; High et al., 2012; Roberts, 2012; Smithson, 1989: 6). Several researchers point towards understanding the underlying visions, strategies and ideals that might lead to or play a role in producing ignorance (Fotaki and Hyde, 2014; Knudsen, 2011). Hence, I want to elaborate further on ideas and discourses as actants with the agency to perform and play a role in the production of ignorance.

Ignorance is usually treated as the result of intentional or deliberate inattention, something that helps human actors or organisations obtain resources or deny liability (McGoey, 2007) or considered as strategically necessary, for example, to uphold 'the vision' (Schaefer, 2018). ANT assumes that power does not relate primarily to human intention, but instead, it relates to the capability of actors, human and non-human, to cause relational effect (Jensen et al., 2009; Latour, 1986). I have looked at the production of ignorance through the lens of ANT and translation, which enabled me to illustrate how non-human actors, specifically a label, can contribute to the production of ignorance. I analysed how a patient-centred care project translated into the label of 'the missing patient voice' that gradually enrolled other actors which paradoxically ended up ignoring the patient voices in the project.

A common and often true assumption accompanying discourses of patient-centred care is that the patient voice is insufficiently involved in healthcare services (Tanenbaum, 2015). It was acknowledged that there was ignorance

(i.e., lacking knowledge) about the patient experience in the coordination and provision of healthcare services for the elderly patient group. The project was set up to overcome ignorance by employing a user-centred service design methodology. The discourse of patient-centred care matches the premise of service design theory and method – that expert bias can be avoided by starting and evolving design in 'the user experience'. I found that the insight that the patient voice was neglected was already a premise and trendsetting actant in the project, a label that grew stronger as it enrolled other actors and enacted the project into further being by becoming embedded into the routines and the project manager's discursive practices. She would call upon the patient voice while ignoring the voices of care workers and patients in the project.

As such, service design became enrolled as an actor and was denied a process of emergent, iterative and user co-created design. Instead, the different service-design-inspired activities set up to test and iterate the service design (workshops, project meetings, patient interviews) became like separate and symbolic user involvement events, working to underpin the label of missing voice. The label had become 'sacred'; treated as a collective empirical finding instead of an inclusive method to bring on both individual voices as they emerged from experience. The care workers' notions of patient involvement were ignored, handled as 'polluted' (Douglas, 1966).

Hence, the label of 'missing patient voice', stabilized as an actor, was capable of contributing to the production of ignorance. This finding leads me now to critically reflect on understandings of ignorance that privilege the human intentionality perspective and that sees ignorance as either intentional or unintentional.

As the narrative analysis shows, the insight that the patient voice was missing was not really to be found in the project. Care workers and patients reported that patients were involved to the extent they were able and wanted to be involved. The missing 'missing patient voice' was also revealed as a surprise to the project manager, who became aware of a state of ignorance (Gross, 2010). Nevertheless, 'the missing patient voice' as a concept continued to be actively maintained throughout the project. How can we make sense of this?

I argue that this form of active ignoring of the patient and care workers' voices was not the result of deliberate inattention nor a complete state of 'being ignorant' in relation to the patient voice. The project manager's intention was to really see and listen to the patient. She would continuously bring focus to 'the patient voice', asking 'where is the patient voice in that?' Still, this recalling of 'the missing patient voice' became a way of iterating the expectation of the ignored patient, citing it, and thereby talking it into being (Butler, 1993). Interestingly, what was ignored was how caring always includes managing ignorance. Allowing patients to be vulnerable and unknowing was central to caregiving. It meant that home nurses needed to find out with Patient 7, when she needed help with her food, and when she could manage to butter her toast. It meant that Patient 3 felt involved, when the nurses and doctors asked questions, but she decided on surgery independently because she wanted to breathe better. She also felt involved when she was told to relax and rest and had someone to talk to. What was 'unseen' (Otto et al., 2018) in the problematisation was that involving patients was always ambiguous and emerging in caring practices; it was always an unknown. The insight that patient involvement was multiple was not treated as something to learn from, but rather as ignorance to be reduced (Gross, 2010). Hence, the label, underpinned by policy and the service design method, gained authority to speak and act on behalf of patients in the project. Despite the best intentions, patients were prevented from using their voice by the very operation of patient involvement, which paradoxically led to 'the missing patient voice' being performed into being.

An actor-network perspective opens up the black box and explains how processes end up with unpredictable and heterogeneous outcomes. We cannot know in advance what associations come about or who will cause effects (Latour, 1986). Butler (1993) argues that it is not intention and deliberate acts but citation that is the underlying force of performative discourses. Ignorance can be the result of discourse producing the effect that it names. Hence, I argue that we can understand this as an example of unintended ignorance. Conceptualisations of ignorance tend to differ between actively intended ignorance on the one hand and unintended ignorance as a state of 'being ignorant' on the other (Roberts, 2012; Smithson, 1989). I argue that there can be active, but still unintended,

ignoring coming from the best intentions. Inclusive and empathic visions and policy, such as patient-centred care, are easily agreed on. Similarly, care workers are motivated by empathy for patients and practice care by building relationships with patients over time (Habran and Battard, 2019). In the middle, we can find highly motivated, idealistic middle managers employed to operationalise the visions. As I have learned, they are left dealing with the tensions between idealistic visions and relational care practices, and they are vulnerable if they question either. Therefore, I argue that we should not underestimate the power of visions to hijack development projects, separating them from relational practices of care.

A contribution of this paper is that it furthers the understanding of organised ignorance as a socially constructed and practiced phenomenon (Bakken and Wiik, 2017; High et al., 2012; Roberts, 2012). The findings illustrate how non-human actors can mobilise and enrol organisational actors, contributing to producing and maintaining ignorance performatively. This brings attention to the material dimension of the production of ignorance and challenges the human agency perspective often associated with active forms of ignorance.

Another contribution is to add perspectives to the understanding of the organisation and practice of patient-centred care (Habran and Battard, 2019; Liberati et al., 2015). The empirical findings bring attention to what happens when strategies and policies that are meant to accomplish patient-centred care produce the opposite, namely, practices of ignoring the patients. Hence, I argue that the performative dimension of patient involvement discourses and practices needs closer attention and reflection in patient-centred care practices. On that note, since discourses of patient-centred care are increasingly matched with innovation strategies, such as service design, this study also contributes to a growing debate in service design dealing with the struggle of being reduced to project-specific activities. It suggests that the path towards long-lasting change for service design also requires reflective practice of the hidden norms, rules and beliefs that guide actors in service design (Vink et al., 2021).

In the context of user involvement, co-production, and service design in health care, recognising the missing user voice is important in terms of

bringing focus to the potential marginalisation of patients in healthcare services. Agreeing that the focus on user involvement in the design and practice of care should be celebrated, I wish to argue that it should not be taken for granted as a solution to the problem of ignorance. It is important to stress that rather than arguing that there is no problem of patients' missing voices, the intention is to bring focus to how a defined knowledge problem of missing voices can amplify already troubling asymmetries by creating impossible ideals (Fotaki and Hyde, 2014). The label 'the missing user voice' can organise care work and end up being more about keeping up appearances and respecting conventions and ideals (Douglas, 1966) than including the patient voices. Furthermore, it seems that the patient's voice is always unknown – something always to be sought in everyday care work. This may be why it needs to be continuously on the agenda, not as a missing user voice problem of knowledge but as a missing user voice condition of ignorance that needs to be embraced as open, ongoing reflection in relational care work.

references

Andersen, N.Å. and J.G. Pors (2017) 'On the history of the form of administrative decisions: How decisions begin to desire uncertainty', *Management & Organizational History*, 12(2): 119-141.

Bakken, T. and E.L. Wiik (2017) 'Ignorance and organization studies', *Organization Studies*, 39: 1109-1120.

Barad, K. (2003) 'Posthumanist performativity: Toward an understanding of how matter comes to matter', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 28(3): 801-833.

Bason, C. (2010) *Leading public sector innovation*. Bristol and Chicago: Policy Press.

Butler, J. (1993) *Bodies that matter: On the discursive limits of 'sex'*. New York and London: Routledge.

Butler, J. (1999) *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. New York: Routledge.

Callon, M. and B. Latour (1981) 'Unscrewing the big Leviathan: How actors macro-structure reality and how sociologists help them to do so', in K. Knorr-Cetina and A.V. Cicourel (eds.) *Advances in social theory and methodology: Toward an integration of micro- and macro-sociologies*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Crawford, M.J., D. Rutter, C. Manley, T. Weaver, K. Bhui, N. Fulop and P. Tyrer (2002) 'Systematic review of involving patients in the planning & development of health care', *British Medical Journal*, 325: 1263-1265.

Crawford, M., D. Rutter and S. Thelwall (2003) *User involvement in change management: A review of the literature*. London: NCCSDO.

Czarniawska, B. (2007) *Shadowing and other techniques for doing fieldwork in modern societies*. Malmö and Copenhagen: Liber Copenhagen Business School Press Universitetsforlaget.

Czarniawska, B. and B. Joerges (1995) 'Winds of organizational change: How ideas translate into objects and actions', in S.B. Bacharach, P. Gagliardi and B. Mundell (eds.) *Studies of organization in the European tradition*. Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.

Czarniawska, B. and T. Hernes (eds.) (2005) *Actor-network theory and organizing*. Malmö and Cophenhagen: Liber & Copenhagen Business School Press.

Dent, M. and M. Pahor (2015) 'Patient involvement in Europe – A comparative framework', *Journal of Health Organization and Management*, 29(5): 546-555.

Douglas, M. (1966) *Purity and danger – an analysis of concepts of pollution and taboo*. London: Routledge.

Dubbin, L. A., Chang, J. S. and Shim, J. K. (2013) 'Cultural health capital and the interactional dynamics of patient-centered care', *Social Science & Medicine*, 93: 113–120.

El Enany, N., G. Currie and A. Lockett (2013) 'A paradox in healthcare service development: Professionalization of service users', *Social Science and Medicine*, 80: 24-30.

Emerson, R.M., R.I. Fretz and L.L. Shaw (1995) *Writing ethnographic fieldnotes*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Fleming, M.D., J.K. Shim, I.H. Yen, A. Thompson-Lastad, S. Rubin, M. Van Natta and N.J. Burke (2017) 'Patient engagement at the margins: Health care providers' assessments of engagement and the structural determinants of health in the safety-net', *Social Science & Medicine*, 183: 11-18.

Flyvbjerg, B. (2006) 'Five misunderstandings about case-study research', *Qualitative Inquiry*, 12(2): 219-245.

Forskningsrådet (2016) Evaluering av samhandlingsreformen: Sluttrapport fra styringsgruppen for forskningsbasert følgeevaluering av samhandlingsreformen (EVASAM). [https://www.forskningsradet.no/prognett-evasam/Forside/1253972204829]

Fotaki, M. and P. Hyde (2014) 'Organizational blind spots: Splitting, blame and idealization in the National Health Service', *Human Relations 68(3)*: 1-22.

Foucault, M. (1977) *Discipline and punish.* New York: Pantheon.

Garsten, C. and A. Nyqvist (2013) 'Entries, engaging organisational worlds', in C. Garsten and A. Nyqvist (eds.) *Organisational anthropology*. London: Pluto Press.

Gillespie, R., D. Florin and S. Gillam (2004) 'How is patient-centered care understood by the clinical, managerial and lay stakeholders responsible for promoting this agenda?', *Health Expectations*, 7(2): 142-148.

Glaser, B. G. and A. Strauss (1967) *Discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Mill Valley, CA: Sociology Press.

Greener, I. (2007) 'Choice or voice? Introduction to the themed section', *Social Policy & Society* 7:2, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Greenhalgh, T., C. Humphrey and F. Woodard (2011) 'User involvement – a story of our time', in Greenhalgh, T., C. Humphrey and F. Woodard (eds.) *User involvement in health care.* Chichester West Sussex: Wiley Blackwell, BMJ Books.

Gross, M. (2010) *Ignorance and surprise: Science, society, and ecological design*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Guillemin, M. and L. Gillam (2004) 'Ethics, reflexivity, and "ethically important moments" in research', *Qualitative Inquiry*, 10(2): 261-280.

Habran, Y. and A. Battard (2019) 'Caring for or caring with? Production of different caring relationships and the construction of time', *Social Science & Medicine*, 233: 78-86.

Harris, J. (2005) 'The ordering of things: Organization in Bruno Latour', *The Sociological Review*, 53(1): 163-177.

Helse- og Omsorgsdepartementet (2015) Omsorg 2020 Regjeringens plan for omsorgsfeltet 2015-2020. [https://www.regjeringen.no/no/aktuelt/omsorg-2020-regjeringens-plan-for-omsorgsfeltet/id2410609/]

Helse- og Omsorgsdepartementet (2014) Pasientens helsetjeneste. [https://www.regjeringen.no/no/aktuelt/pasientens-helsetjeneste/id748854/]

Hernes, T. (2005) 'The organization as a nexus of institutional macro actors: The story of a lopsided recruitment case', in B. Czarniawska and T. Hernes (eds.) *Actor network theory and organizing*. Liber & Copenhagen Business School Press.

High, C., A.H. Kelly and J. Mair (eds.) (2012) *The anthropology of ignorance: An ethnographic approach*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Hyde, P. and H.T.O. Davies (2004) 'Service design, culture and performance: Collusion and co-production in health care', *Human Relations*, 57(11): 1407-1426.

Jensen, T., J. Sandström and S. Helin (2009) 'Corporate codes of ethics and the bending of moral space', *Organization*, 16(4): 529-545.

Junginger, S. and S. Bailey (2017) 'Designing vs. designers: How organizational design narratives shift the focus from designers to designing', in D. Sangiorgi and A. Prendiville (eds.) *Designing for service*. London, Oxford, New York, New Dehli and Sydney: Bloomsbury.

Kirkegaard, S. and D. Andersen (2018) 'Co-production in community mental health services: Blurred boundaries or a game of pretend?', *Sociology of Health & Illness*, 40(5): 828-842.

Knudsen, M. (2011) 'Forms of inattentiveness: The production of blindness in the development of a technology for the observation of quality in health services', *Organization Studies*, 32: 963-989.

Latour, B. (2005) *Reassembling the social: An introduction to actor-network theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Latour, B. (1999) *Pandora's hope: An essay on the reality of science studies*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Latour, B. (1994) 'On technical mediation: Philosophy, sociology, genealogy', *Common Knowledge*, 3(2): 29-64.

Latour, B. (1986) 'The powers of association', in J. Law (ed.) *Power, action, and belief: A new sociology of knowledge?* London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Liberati, E., M. Gorli, L. Moja, L. Galuppo, S. Ripamonti and G. Scaratti (2015) 'Exploring the practice of patient centered care: The role of ethnography and reflexivity', *Social Science & Medicine*, 133: 45-52.

Martin, G.P. (2008) '"Ordinary people only": Knowledge, representativeness, & the publics of public participation in health care', *Sociology of Health & Illness*, 30(1): 35-54.

McGoey, L. (2012) 'The logic of strategic ignorance', *British Journal of Sociology* 63(3): 553-575.

McGoey, L. (2007) 'On the will to ignorance in bureaucracy', *Economy and Society* 36: 212–35.

Mead, N. and P. Bower (2000) 'Patient-centeredness: A conceptual framework and review of the empirical literature', *Social Science & Medicine*, 51: 1087-1110.

Meld. St. 11 (2015-2016) Nasjonal helse- og sykehus plan 2016-2019. [https://www.regjeringen.no/no/dokumenter/meld.-st.-11-20152016/id2462047/]

Meld. St. 26 (2014-2016) *Fremtidens primærhelsetjeneste – nærhet og helhet,* [https://www.regjeringen.no/no/dokumenter/meld.-st.-26-2014-2015/id2409890/]

Meld. St. 27 (2015-2016) Digital agenda for Norge. [https://www.regjeringen.no/no/dokumenter/meld.-st.-27-20152016/id2483795/?ch=1]

Meld. St. 34 (2015-2016) Verdier i Pasientens Helsetjeneste – Melding om prioritering. [https://www.regjeringen.no/no/dokumenter/meld.-st.-34-20152016/id2502758/]

Meld. St. 47 (2008-2009) Samhandlingsreformen. [https://www.regjeringen.no/contentassets/d4f0e16ad32e4bbd8d8ab5c21445a5dc/no/pdfs/stm200820090047000dddpdfs.pdf]

Mol, A. (2008) *The logic of care: Health and the problem of patient choice*. London & New York: Routledge.

Nonaka, I. (1994) 'A dynamic theory of organizational knowledge creation', *Organization Science*, *5*: 14–37.

Otto, B., J.G. Pors and R. Johnsen (2019) 'Hidden in full view: The organization of public secrecy in Miéville's *The City and the City*', *Culture and Organization*, 25(2): 91-103.

Roberts, J. (2012) 'Organizational ignorance: Towards a managerial perspective on the unknown', *Management Learning*, 44: 215-236.

Sanders, E.B.N. and P.J. Stappers (2008) 'Co-creation and the new landscapes of design', *Co-design*, 4(1): 5-18.

Sangiorgi, D. and A. Prendiville (2017) 'Introduction', in D. Sangiorgi and A. Prendiville (eds.) *Designing for service*. London, Oxford, New York, New Delhi and Sydney: Bloomsbury.

Schaefer, S. (2018) 'Wilful managerial ignorance and symbolic work: A socio-phenomenological study of managing creativity', *Organization Studies*, 40(9):1387-1407.

Smithson, M. (1989) *Ignorance and uncertainty: Emerging paradigms*. New York: Springer Verlag.

Stickdorn, M. and J. Schneider (2014) *This is service design thinking*. Amsterdam: BIS Publishers.

Tanenbaum, S. (2015) 'What is patient-centered care? A typology of models and missions', *Health Care Analysis*, 23: 272-287.

Tsoukas, H. (2017) 'Don't simplify, complexify: From disjunctive to conjunctive theorizing in organization and management studies', *Journal of Management Studies*, 54(2): 132-153.

Vink, J., K. Koskela-Huotari, B. Tronvoll, B. Edvardsson, K. Wetter-Edman (2021) 'Service ecosystem design: Propositions, process model, and future research agenda', *Journal of Service Research*, 24(2): 168-186.

World Health Report (2008) *Primary health care – Now more than ever*. World Health Organization. [https://www.who.int/whr/2008/en/]

Wolfinger, N. (2002) 'On writing fieldnotes: Collection strategies', *Qualitative Research*, 2(1): 85-95.

the author

Betina Riis Asplin is a PhD candidate at BI Norwegian Business School and C3 Centre for Connected Care, Oslo University Hospital. She first started researching the representation of patients in the organisation of patient-centred care for her PhD thesis, which she is in the process of finalizing. She is currently preparing further academic contributions to both organisation and management studies and health sociology.
Email: betina.r.asplin@bi.no

ephemera
theory & politics in organization

© the author(s) 2023
ISSN 1473-2866 (Online)
www.ephemerajournal.org
volume 23(1)

A shared zone of ignorance: Considering practices of seeing and unseeing in and around nursing stations in two psychiatric wards

Holger Højlund and Thorben Simonsen

abstract

The notion of ignorance has become a central topic in social, political, and organizational research, with scholars thus beginning to explore the distribution and strategic uses of not-knowing (Gross and McGoey, 2015). Claiming that ignorance involves making decisions on what should be seen or unseen (Otto et al., 2019), they are calling for insights into the intermediary states produced between knowledge and non-knowledge in practice. Answering this call, the present article empirically details how practices of seeing and unseeing take place within and across the transparent architecture of a newly built psychiatric hospital in Denmark. Drawing on participant observations and interviews with nursing staff, we examine the role that spatial and material circumstances play in the situated production of ignorance. As such, we consider how the mutual visibility afforded by the transparent design of a nursing station in an inpatient setting produces what we suggest is 'a shared zone of ignorance'. Inspired by the work of German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk, this article extends current understandings of how ignorance is 'tethered to the spatial' (Frickel and Kinchy, 2015: 175).

Introduction

> Yes, well, here we have this Dovecote [the nursing station] where there are glass partitions all the way around, which lets us see the patients. We can't always hear them when the door is closed, but we can see what's going on just outside. They can also see us. I don't think that this is always an advantage. Sometimes we have really sick patients where we experience that they – almost daily, in every shift –are staring in at us, which can be disturbing and uncomfortable. Sometimes I also think that patients may feel the same way, because sometimes we, too, when sitting at our computers and such, peer out: what's actually going on? (Nurse, interview, 2017)

Many contemporary designs feature glass partitions as a means of opening up spaces and enabling new orders of visibility (Pile, 2005; Pors et al., 2019). Using the case of a newly built psychiatric hospital, in this article we explore the transparency and mutual visibility such developments afford – more specifically, how the material circumstances of an inpatient setting animate the production of what we suggest is *a shared zone of ignorance*.

Architects generally see the transparent architecture and flexible spatial organization of hospital settings as giving staff and patients a sense of safety, security, and accountability (see Connellan et al., 2015; McGrath and Reavey, 2019; Simonsen and Duff, 2020) Countering these expectations, however, we show how this focus on transparency and flexibility co-produces acts of ignorance in ways that render ignorance an important part of hospital wards' daily socio-dynamics.

Focusing on how transparent settings shape the relations between nursing staff and patients, we investigate the implications of these dynamics, asking how nursing staff working in and around nursing stations conduct practices of seeing and unseeing. Starting with this research question, we scrutinize how nursing staff experience, react to, and manage the mutual visibility intrinsic to transparent design. Precisely because nursing stations are so central to staff-patient interactions (e.g., Andes and Shattell, 2006; Jovanović et al., 2019; Riggs et al., 2013), we seek to establish how the sense of constant co-presence engendered by glass-walled and hence transparent nursing stations shapes hospital ward socio-dynamics such that a shared zone of ignorance is produced. By thus delving into how co-present staff and patients interact, how they see and unsee each other in this setting, we

contribute to the literature on spatial design and hospitalization and on the way professional practices are shaped by a given architectural design (Connellan et al., 2013; Curtis et al., 2007; Jovanović et al., 2019).

Historically designed as alternative spaces for managing those deemed deviant or mentally troubled (Topp et al., 2007: 1), psychiatric hospitals have at times literally removed psychiatric patients from the public eye, separating them from society and othering them from rationality (Foucault, 1961). This transposition has given rise to a collective ignorance of their very existence, as witnessed in the Victorian era asylums of early modernity, where spatial modulations and geographical exclusions were used to connect ignorance to place (for an analysis of early modernity, see Frickel and Kinchy, 2015).

However, the architecture of psychiatric institutions has changed dramatically over the last 50 years (Nord and Högström, 2017). Today, psychiatric facilities emphasize the importance of openness, transparency, and visibility (McGrath and Reavey, 2019), thus spatially, materially, and symbolically challenging the very possibility of ignorance. Nothing is to be hidden, neither psychiatric practices nor the hospitalized patients. The clinical gaze described by Foucault as constitutive of modern medical practices (Foucault, 1973a; 1973b) seems to have expanded to render staff and patients in contemporary facilities mutually visible. This expansion has served to institutionalize the expansion of a panoptic mechanism whereby everybody sees everybody. Such full visibility creates conditions under which nursing staff and patients put self-imposed restrictions on their self-appearance and mutual observations.

In the following, we first discuss approaches to ignorance, then outline our data production methods. Next, we introduce the hospital site and analyze the empirical data. The article ends with a discussion and conclusion on our findings concerning transparency and ignorance.

Approaches to ignorance

Scholars studying ignorance consider knowledge and non-knowledge in relation to a diversity of topics, from racism, gender, and economy, to

management, media, and philosophy, to mention just a few (Gross and McGoey, 2015). For scholars of management practices, selection structures in evidence-based management (Knudsen, 2017), self-inflicted ignorance in accounting and performance management (Essén et al. 2021), and multiplied ignorance in communication (Knudsen and Kishik, 2022) have been important matters of concern. These scholars see knowledge as a managerial problem of objectivation and measurement – only information which is measurable appears as visible knowledge (Butler et al., 2020), while other information appears as noise (Kahneman et al. 2021). Despite the importance of these insights, management is primarily investigated as communication or through texts, with much less attention directed towards the importance of material circumstances for management and how the management of knowledge and non-knowledge is accomplished in and through everyday practices.

Although we share an interest with these scholars in studying management practices, rather than focusing on communication, we direct our attention towards the importance of the physical setting for the interactional management of knowledge and non-knowledge in practice. We further explore how this, in turn, produces a shared zone of ignorance. Also, while others have previously studied ignorance in healthcare (e.g. Essén et. al., 2021), we contribute with novel insights about the psychiatric setting, where the interactional management of knowledge and non-knowledge is an important aspect of how nursing staff and patients handle their constant co-presence.

Hospital ward spaces are functionally differentiated into sub-areas, and these areas constitute shared spaces in which nurses and patients must manage different kinds of knowledge and ignorance. With the words of German philosopher and sociologist Peter Sloterdijk, managing such knowledge and ignorance can be termed ‘practices of immunization’. Practices of immunization are not strange or unfamiliar in other settings, but rather quite normal. Sloterdijk (2016) has done numerous studies and describes how a shared separateness, co-isolation, and a need to be immunized from the outside world suffuse in different spheres of everyday life, from intimate enclosures to more distanced venues. In this respect,

hospital settings and practices of immunization conducted in these spaces are particular expressions of more general features of living in modernity.

Before detailing Sloterdijk's approach to ignorance, we will first present other approaches to the topic. When it comes to ignorance, some studies focus on the atmospheric and sensory conditions required for sociality in organizations (Kanyeredzi et al., 2019), including conditions that stimulate the senses of smell (Riach and Warren, 2015), hearing (Brown et al., 2020), and sight (Otto et al., 2019). In hospitals, for example, acts of care are related to using the senses. Management of sense stimuli shapes how staff practice care when, for example, deciding what to acknowledge and to ignore.

Other scholars have studied organizational sociality related to 'the interface between inner and outer environments' (Bakken and Wiik, 2018: 1109) and to the 'geographies of ignorance' (Frickel and Kinchy, 2015), using these perspectives to investigate the spatial properties of ignorance, how ignorance is localized, and how domains of imperceptibility (*ibid.*: 180) can be mapped across space and place.

Going back to Sloterdijk, he has compellingly worked with the notion of spheres as sites for ignorance. The notion concerns how participants in different socialities form fragile compromises in order to separate between an inside and outside of their interactional encounters. In other words, spheres demand attention, protection, and generative work from the people inhabiting them. From this perspective, a psychiatric hospital can be seen as a sphere of very controlled sociality, a place intended to help uphold a fragile co-sociality. The psychiatric ward is a place fundamentally functioning as a protective membrane that immunizes against not only dangerous outside shocks but also inside disturbances. The spatial and material circumstances mediate and shape the manner in which staff and patients interact. The architecture of the ward premises how they see and unsee each other, how shared zones of ignorance are produced. One can talk about the psychiatric hospital producing spheres of shared separateness in which 'dwelling becomes an ignoring machine or an integrous defence mechanism' (Sloterdijk, 2016: 504). There is a fragile co-isolation related to hospital atmospheres (e.g., Brown et al., 2020; Kanyeredzi et al., 2019).

Patients situated in a hospital participate in a micro-sociality where sensory management (Sutton and Nicholson, 2011) takes place. Thus, patients find themselves in a situation of co-isolation where they must live in close proximity with fellow patients, only to be separated by shared walls that obstruct their visibility and lines of sight unless constructed of transparent material like glass. In institutionalized settings such as hospitals, co-isolation is a fundamental premise of co-habitation – a distinct form of being as togetherness.

> Being as togetherness implies a four-place relationship because it describes the existence of somebody with somebody and something in something. (Sloterdijk, 2017: 159)

Patients and staff manage seeing and unseeing as part of this being as togetherness. A ward is a space at once separated and shared in which staff and patients manage ignorance. Here, we should note that, in our approach, ignorance concerns not unethical acts of disregard for others, but the production of shared circumstances of selective attentiveness. A fragile state of being, togetherness entails constant efforts to immunize the sociality of being together against situations that endanger it. Acts of seeing and unseeing are part of this work.

Method

Before introducing the hospital setting and our empirical findings, we would like to explain how we gathered the empirical data, which is based on ethnographic material collected by Thorben Simonsen between 2016 and 2017 in two inpatient wards at a newly built psychiatric hospital in Denmark (Simonsen, 2020). Although some of this material has been reported on elsewhere (Simonsen and Duff, 2021, 2020; Simonsen and Højlund, 2018), our conceptual approach differs because it is animated by our empirical interest in uncovering the situated production of ignorance. We have narrowed our focus to nursing stations, a space other scholars have shown as fundamental to mental health facility design (Connellan et al., 2013) and psychiatric practice (Andes and Shattell, 2006; Jovanović et al., 2019; Riggs et al., 2013; Shattell et al., 2008). This sharper focus enabled us to confine our investigation to interactions and reactions in and around the stations.

Our initial observation that the life of a ward primarily occurs at nursing stations also drove our choice. To explore the relationships between the material properties of the nursing stations, their location, and proximity to other ward spaces as well as examine the mediating role stations play in staff-patient interaction, we have mainly drawn on data obtained from participant observations of work taking place in and around two nursing stations. By conducting observations in this way, the second author, who did the empirical observations, was able to interact and engage in informal conversations with both staff and patients. This movement between staff and patient spaces thus gave insight into the various lines of sight afforded by the stations' transparent design.

To support the observations, seventeen semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted with staff to obtain accounts of how they found working at the nursing stations and experienced their placement, transparency, and importance in relation to the surrounding ward spaces. The interviews with healthcare staff, including auxiliary nurses, care workers, and physicians, were most relevant to our study, but the architect, the project director, and hospital management were also interviewed. Three interviews were conducted with head nurses, one with a head physician, five with nurses, three with auxiliary nurses, and one with a care assistant. To identify the various seeing and unseeing practices, we centered our analysis on the daily work procedures and routines as well as the everyday challenges of juggling patient care and administrative work. The empirical material gained from the staff interviews helped us account for nursing staff's (re)actions to the transparent spatial and material circumstances. On closer analysis we also examined issues such as patient encounters and the distinctions made between important and unimportant inquiries. Our interest lay in everyday stories about how the nursing staff acted inside and outside the nursing stations, as such stories, descriptions, and accounts of everyday life in the wards – combined with participant observations – enabled us to consider the situated production of ignorance and, by extension, to conceptualize the organizational space as a 'zone of ignorance' within which the circumstances for work and care fundamentally differ from other care contexts. We are now ready to enter the hospital site.

The hospital site

In autumn 2015, about 650 employees from five psychiatric facilities in the Zealand region of Denmark were relocated to a brand-new psychiatric hospital in the city of Slagelse. The hospital was a high-status project with 194 beds, an emergency reception, outpatient treatment functions, and facilities for research and education. Transparency pervaded the hospital building, with the widespread use of glass partitions blurring the boundaries between outside and inside. Large window sections created porous passages and lines of sight never seen in Danish psychiatric facilities. The interiors were designed as open, furnished spaces with clean surfaces, and the outdoor areas included small gardens and benches.

Within the hospital site, each inpatient ward was a microcosmos designed for treatment and psychiatric work, with recovery being a key design rationale. Karlsson Architects and Vilhelm Lauritzen Architects, who won the architectural competition, stated a principal aim of the design as being 'to create unity between culture, structure, behavior and bricks. [Because i]t is our belief that the value of the physical framework is expressed through the activities that a building supports' (2010: 43).

Importantly, the architecture served to enable treatment that would help patients walk around the hospital building and thus gradually learn to cope with visibility and transparency, in both a practical and a wider social sense. With a hierarchy of spaces, the design is meant to offer patients varied places in which to recover.

Inside the hospital

The hospital has six wards, with nursing staff organized in teams to share responsibility for each one. Every ward has a centrally located nursing station where the teams meet to coordinate and perform tasks as well as have collegial exchanges. Formed as a glass cube, the individual stations project a sense of openness and availability and are strategically located and designed to give patients a sense of safety because they are in visual contact with and physical proximity to staff at all times. Being nested within the common spaces, the stations foster a constant sense of co-presence between

staff and patients. The glass walls also maximize surveillance over most of the given ward space, providing visibility not only to the adjacent communal space, but also into the ward's inner courtyard and far end.

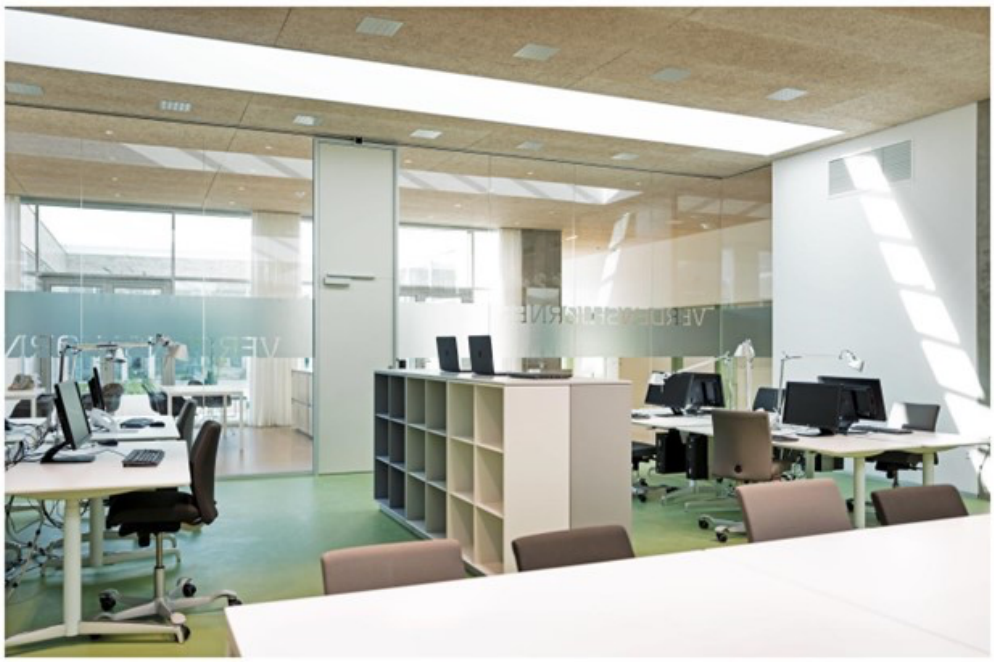


Figure 1. Nursing station – © Karlsson Architects/VLA. Photo: Jens Linde

As the picture illustrates, visibility is completely pervasive at the nursing station, as its design is totally transparent but for a ribbon of slightly frosted window film inscribed with poems by a Danish writer. The thin line of poetic impenetrability represents an exception in the otherwise shared circumstance of total transparency. The design is premised on visibility as being fundamental to practices occurring both inside and outside a nursing station. Staff are able to quickly intervene in episodes such as undesirable, disruptive, or violent behavior, but the visibility also animates staff to interact with patients. Patients can see all work situations occurring within the stations, and staff are thus exposed to patients' gaze. The nursing staff interviewed report that the transparent circumstances make concentrating on tasks difficult, whether they entail attention to administrative work, the safety of colleagues, or patient care. Brown et al. (2020: 1550) draw similar conclusions about the continual interruptions staff experience at nursing stations, a finding that the participant observations of our present study

support. In the following we take a closer look at the everyday life of the inpatient wards to see how nurses conduct practices of seeing and unseeing when situated in and around nursing stations.

Seeing is knowing

The nursing stations are at the very heart of the common area. They can only be accessed through three respective solid doors, but other than this single sign of impenetrability, the stations send signals of inclusiveness. The glass design creates a sense of openness. The transparency of the glass walls in an immunological sense provides to the wards a well-lit, visible environment conducive to a sense of safety and security for patients and staff alike. Nursing staff mention the feeling of having an overview.

> Yes, yes, yes, I almost always place myself on this side [facing the common area], because then I can see out. During a nightshift I always sit so I can look out. I don't like to sit with [my back turned], so I don't have an overview. In that sense you can have an overview without being out there [in the common area], you might say. (Nurse, interviews 2017)

Because staff observe their surroundings while doing administrative work tasks, they are not fully engaged with the activities going on outside in the common area: the 'seeing' conducted by staff is restricted to what they from professional and practical considerations find necessary. Watching over the patients is integrated in their administrative engagements, so to speak. As such, the nursing staff have to manage their administrative work with face-to-face interaction and patient engagement – a well-known dilemma among others in psychiatric practice, such as the balance between care and control (Mullen, 1993; Curtis et al., 2013; Tucker et al., 2018).

From a patient perspective, seeing is not knowing, as only with a distanced gaze through glass walls can a patient sense what is happening inside a nursing station. Still, the glass walls allow patients to feel visible and thus safe, which is a general rationale applied in psychiatry (Brown and Reavey, 2016: 287). From a design perspective, the glass walls of the nursing station function as a security design intimately incorporated into the building.

Conversely, the nursing stations serve as a safety measure that allows staff to withdraw from patients. The stations afford a direct line of sight in almost

every direction, providing an overview key to the staff's clinical work, as staff observe patients as a means of knowing how they are either progressing or regressing. In this respect seeing has both a therapeutical aim and a preventive rationale. Indeed, not only can staff do the fundamental clinical work of documenting patient behavior but they can also swiftly intervene if irregular, disorderly, or unwanted behavior is observed. Nursing staff thus exercise a kind of social-prophylactic gaze, as their clinical gaze can be said to be anticipatory. Seeing is related both to knowing the current status of individual patients and the ward's social order and to forecasting and maintaining an overview that keeps staff ahead of events while also retaining a distance and, thus, a sense of security. 'You want to be able to see what you're going out to', as one nurse put it. (Field note 30. 01. 2017)

The glass walls enable an expanded two-way panopticism with no invisible tower guards, just nurses and patients on the same level. The transparent circumstances forestall any hidden social interaction among patients, who cannot enter each other's rooms, so all activities become visible, accessible, and available to be made someone's business. Patients essentially cannot create spaces out of sight, away from staff interference. Indeed, in a transparent inpatient setting any action, any private conversation, can become someone else's business.

When all parties feel monitored

The interviews and observations have shown that not only patients, but also the nursing staff feel monitored. As two nurses reflect:

> So they can sit and look at us all the time, and I can sit and keep an eye on them, and we have some patients that sometimes ask "why are you always laughing at me from inside the office?" for example, right? And just last week we had two patients that were severely psychotic who placed themselves in front [of the nursing station] and looked directly at us, and that was actually, I mean, that made it pretty hard to work when you constantly feel like you're under surveillance. No matter where you are in the building, right, someone is keeping an eye on you [...] I mean, it's actually uncomfortable to be watched the entire day. (Nurse, interviews, 2017)

In this excerpt, the nurses do not reflect on their own surveillance practices, but articulate how patients through their observations intrude on the

nurses' personal and professional spaces. The nurses find themselves unable to ignore the eyes of the patients, or, more precisely, the fact that they might watch them, which makes the nurses feel under constant surveillance. As such, the mere possibility of being watched is what is hard to ignore.

Conspiracies about conspiracies

Among nursing staff, there is a constant awareness of conspiracy-making among patients. They know that conspiracies are related to distrust and therefore are not suitable for the atmosphere in the ward. A nurse explains how patients produce stories about nurses' talking about patients during meetings. Inside the nursing station, the nursing staff is visible, but not audible, thereby leaving patients to interpret what is going on and thus produce what might be considered conspiracies or misinterpretations about the situation. Several versions of the misinterpretation theme emerged in the interviews with the nursing staff, thus indicating that these reflections are turned into their own conspiracies, with staff conspiring about what patients might be conspiring about.

Circumstances of full visibility but auditory insulation, create room for stories to exist – a semi-transparent sphere overloaded with contingency. Contrary to the architectural intentions, the nursing stations animate story-telling practices among inhabitants on each side of the glass walls. While the physical boundaries between the nursing stations and the common areas are visually accessible, the glass walls are soundproof, thus rendering what is discussed inside the nursing stations to speculation. 'What are they talking about – what are they saying about us?', one patient rhetorically proposed during observations, while another patient confronted staff more directly, asking, 'Why are you always laughing at me from inside the office?' The observations and interviews show that staff take issue with allegations and false impressions coming from patients' seeing but not hearing. Staff repeatedly come to assert and legitimize their actions inside the nursing stations, because the uncomfortable feeling of being observed make them conspire about conspiracies.

Impression management

The mutual visibility afforded by the hospital design make nursing staff consider how they conduct themselves while inside the nursing stations, because their conduct is confronted by not only patients, but also their own professional standards. Such impression management can be explained as an effort to immunize themselves against exposure to patients' gaze. One nurse offers reflections about the importance of body language and gesturing:

> All those gestures you make … they [the patients] can easily follow [them]; sometimes I think about our hands because … but we do that when we speak, right, we do all kinds of things … you need to consider what you're doing, differently than you're used to. Before, you would think, "well, the office is our private sphere where we …" … I mean, this won't go any further, but it just isn't that closed anymore, is it? Because now there are windows all the way around. So, you need to think twice about what kind of gestures you make. (Field note 03. 08. 2017)

Staff is obviously put on display, with the patients cast as an audience and the nursing stations constituted as a stage. The glass design animates efforts among nursing staff to immunize against outside disturbances through impression management. As a practice developed to take control over what is supposed to be seen and thus known and supposed to remain unseen and thus ignored, impression management serves to manage the nursing stations' transparent space. Each staff member hopes to gain control over the surrounding space and manage critical complaints from patients' about professional conduct by reconsidering appearances when inside the nursing station. Staff are often confronted with patient accusations that their conduct is lazy and unprofessional. As one nurse explains:

> I regularly experience, maybe once or twice a week, patients saying the same sentence over and over: "You just sit on your asses in the nursing station." Occasionally it might be true because we don't come out [of the nursing station] enough, but sometimes when we're obnoxiously busy and need to use quite some time on paperwork, well, then it gives the incorrect impression that we're just sitting at the computer all the time. (Nurse, interview, 2017)

Although, as the above staff member says, such an accusation perhaps represents an inadequate understanding of the psychiatric hospital's daily activities, the absence of visibly identifiable and understandable activities is

not tantamount to laziness. Administrative work inside the nursing stations often consists of seeking information from or adding it to computers – a form of clerical work that patients tend to interpret as expressing laziness, even though staff are also tasked with being available as a safety back-up for colleagues if a patient behaves unexpectedly. Availability is important, and the mere visual presence of staff is considered a safety measure. Put more provocatively, staff experience that patients are ignorant about nursing work and that many less easily interpreted tasks animate rumors about laziness. For this reason, nursing staff feel an urge to appear busy and, thereby, to conduct impression management or simply to hide in plain sight.

Hiding in plain sight

The constant visual exposure animates staff to develop ways of hiding in plain sight and engage in practices of tactful inattention and of unseeing patients. Unseeing patients is a kind of preventive practice made possible when nursing staff place themselves at their work stations. This practice was observed on multiple occasions during fieldwork. Here, one nurse offers her account of such practices:

> Sure, you can hide by pretending to be doing something important. It's not like you make an active decision about hiding. I just think, the more workstations, the easier it is to sit down at a workstation and look like you're working, where in reality it might be more important to be doing something else, right? (Nurse, interview, 2017)

As the nurse reports, pretending to be doing something important signals unavailability to patients. Performing such an act might be considered an overt strategy not only to immunize oneself against interruption, but also to obtain momentary relief from the demanding social interaction with patients. On such occasions, the nursing station simultaneously offers the needed refuge and necessitates the performance of busyness, that is, of doing the particular work of ignoring patients while being well aware of their presence. Hiding in plain sight requires effort; one must unsee patients when seen, avoid eye contact in order to stay focused on other tasks or, indeed, establish a space of momentary relief. As one nurse reports, 'Everyone needs room to catch their breath, a place to find relief, right?' Avoiding visual encounters with patients is a way to avoid requests for

further contact and communication. This practice of unseeing takes place as a particular form of impression management, a protective performance occasioned by the inspection from the patient's gaze.

Negotiating availability

Data from interviews and observations support the finding that negotiating availability is an ongoing task for nursing staff working under circumstances of transparency. Patients consider the individual staff member available simply if present, as this nurse reflects:

> The big difference here, is that everything is completely transparent, which means that patients can actually see us all the time, which also means that they think that we are available all the time, which also means that we never really get any peace or can consider ourselves unobserved. (Nurse, interview, 2017)

This issue spurred nursing staff to compel patients to have specific reasons for making their inquiries, thus animating them to negotiate the legitimacy of each encounter. These negotiations obviously occur in the doorway between the nursing station and the adjacent patient environment, with patients seeking visual contact or vocally requesting an audience with staff. Encounters between staff and patients predominantly take place in this space, making it one of the wards' busiest sites and an important point of convergence with 'let's just say 90% of all contact taking place in that doorway [...] from short conversations to longer conversations', as one nursing staff member puts it (Nurse, interview, 2017).

Patients seeking, requesting, demanding, wanting, or needing something happens frequently, and nursing staff often express their irritation with such inquiries, particularly blaming the glass walls for giving patients a 'false sense of [staff] availability', as one nurse explains. Staff generally see patient requests as a point of irritation or distraction, and often deny such requests on the formal grounds that the given patient is not their direct responsibility on that day. However, staff also find being available to patients important, which often gives rise to issues regarding what might be called 'door management'.

Although security regulations for a psychiatric hospital stipulate that doors to nursing stations be kept closed, the central doors to the stations are usually kept open except during meetings, conferences, or other activities requiring privacy. Patients display frustration when the doors are closed, some knocking on them anyway, while other patients understand that staff is unavailable. As one patient notes, 'When they close the door, it's sort of like it's a forbidden area' (Field note, 04.08. 2017).

Reaching agreement on availability is an ongoing effort among patients and staff, especially due to the transparent circumstances. The doors are the material manifestation of this struggle about agreement. A nurse explains:

> Ah, one of the reasons that our office door is always open is because we actually want patients to feel that we're available, right, so a closed door does not invite to anything. An open door [on the other hand] does that in a completely different way, so, in that way, we want to be exposed because we're here to take care of patients, but that isn't the same as [saying] that we don't sometimes need to be able to talk behind closed doors. (Nurse, interview, 2017)

Negotiating availability is a daily task when a glass and open-space design signals openness. Staff are faced with the task of managing and communicating when they are available to patients. Each and every negotiation affirms an 'us' and 'them' between staff and patients. This hierarchal reproduction counters the intentions of the transparent design, when it comes to both the nursing stations and the ward in general. Under conditions of full visibility, closed doors tangibly enforce a boundary between an inside and an outside. Whereas a brick wall is mute, glass doors speak, to rephrase a formulation from Simmel (1994: 7).

Discussion

The findings presented in the previous sections demonstrate daily life in and around the nursing stations in psychiatric wards. The following table lists six practices of seeing and unseeing in a shared zone of ignorance.

Practices of seeing and unseeing	A shared zone of ignorance
Seeing is knowing	The nursing staff react to the known. Observations are made to conduct control and intervene if necessary
When all parties feel monitored	The nursing staff and patients feel surveilled by each other
Conspiracies about conspiracies	Here, the unknown takes precedence over the known. Rumors are produced on both sides of the glass wall.
Impression management	Staff react to the feeling of being observed, and as a consequence engage in impression management
Hiding in plain sight	The nursing staff feel called to act as if they are busy – in order to protect themselves from criticism, they perform a kind of disengaged professionalism
Negotiating availability	Staff and patients have a shared responsibility for the social life of the ward, here the doors play a symbolic function in negotiating availability of staff

Table 1: Practices of seeing and unseeing

We assume that staff and patients alike have a basic right to ignore the 'outside', also when this outside is inside the institutionalized setting of a hospital. This basic right is confronted by the transparent architecture of the hospital, and practices of seeing and unseeing go against the intentionality of the building. As practices of immunization, however, the seeing and unseeing is important to inhabitants of the hospital. In the hospital studied, the nursing stations are designed to promote staff-patient encounters, to combat us-and-them hierarchies between staff and patients, and to encourage openness. The stations are designed to support staff practices and help demystify the work of everyday psychiatric care. However, our findings point to some of the challenges related to managing the porous boundaries between staff and patient spaces under circumstances of full visibility. Nursing stations are usually designed with high degrees of visibility (Joseph

and Rashid, 2007), but our findings show that daily life in psychiatric wards involves the situated production of ignorance. For example, patients react like ignorant persons when they observe staff but cannot hear them inside the nursing stations, which leaves the patients feeling in the dark about the actual content of the conversations inside. The glass walls both reflect and refract patients' ignorance, thus making it clear that not everything is transparent and leaving patients to speculate about what is going on behind the nursing station's closed doors.

Psychiatric hospitals are designed to be immune systems that support the recovery of vulnerable human beings. Recent hospital designs are fundamentally premised on transparency. Our findings suggest that some degree of invisibility and, hence, ignorance are crucial in wards. Through interviews and observations, we have learned about the dynamic relations between nursing staff and patients in the daily practices of seeing and unseeing. The hospital studied is built from principles of so-called healing architecture. As a particular immune or life-support system whose transparency constitutes and 'explicates' (Sloterdijk, 2017; 2016) the hospital's fundamental raison d'être (Simonsen and Højlund, 2018), such setting, thus, calls for particular forms of boundary management (for boundary management in other institutionalized settings, see, e.g., Borch 2014).

Nursing stations and patient spaces constitute an inside and outside to each other. As separate but fragile worlds, or bubbles, as Sloterdijk would say, the nursing stations and patient spaces are shared spaces of co-habitation, but also fenced through glass walls that simultaneously separate and demarcate life forms and tie them together. Infrastructures of visibilities enable a simultaneous sense of safety and are therefore 'explicated' in the designs of psychiatric hospitals. Ignorance management, however, is as a necessary part of professional behavior in hospital settings and should be focused upon in further research.

Our findings furthermore indicate that in the busy hours of current hospital life, ignorance is related to staff rejecting patients' interruptions, which staff must understandably do to get administrative tasks done. However, every hospital has a certain, distinct monotony for patients, an atmosphere

saturated with a sense of boredom, because so little is going on. Interruptions become distractions from this ennui. Transparency further seems to amplify a peculiar feeling among patients whereby they feel observed, yet ignored. In our study, this feeling was most prevalent among patients who were near to the nursing stations: they initially regarded themselves as seen and afterwards ignored, which could sometimes make ignorance seem like an act of rejection.

In psychiatric hospitals, observing is done with the eyes, but observing also entails other senses. In our study, nurses talk about being sensitive to the ward's atmosphere in order to make professional judgements, prognoses, or calculations regarding future situations. The nurses speak about listening in an anticipatory manner – a preventive listening of sorts – that entails being alert to sounds of little significance in themselves, but that indicate that a problem is brewing. In this instance, one of Brown et al.'s (2020) key findings support our own, namely that nursing staff manage ward atmosphere by utilizing multiple senses and entering into negotiations with patients in order to 'take the ward's temperature'. Stations can be understood as a kind of immunity system in the inpatient wards, as they must function to immunize themselves against conflicts among patients plus immunize staff's administrative work against patient disturbances.

We invite further micro-investigations to be done on immunizations. Staff momentarily create a space of relief from patient interaction and/or maintain a position of distance despite the obvious proximity. The fragility of inhabiting such a space amplifies the need for work that manages the tensions between care and containment, for which reason our study adds empirical insight to existing research (e.g., Curtis et al., 2013; Tucker et al., 2018) identifying such challenges in contemporary psychiatric settings.

Our findings have demonstrated how staff and patients deal with a shared spatial problem of inhabiting transparent spaces in which affects and temperaments are easily transmitted. Builders and architects should take closer account of reactions to the transparent designs used in institutionalized settings: the sometimes subtle, yet paramount 'conduct of the eyes', the delicate practice of impression management, the loud accusations of laziness. For psychiatric hospitals built on principles of

transparency, ignorance might be considered an important, even necessary aspect of professional practice. In our findings the nursing staff prominently utilize their capacities for both ignorance and attentiveness in their practice. Ignorance and attentiveness are not dichotomous, but rather managed in combination, with both being drawn on in the everyday work of the nursing staff. A staff member might have to ignore a request, deny an appeal, or postpone a possible encounter in order to be available for another work task. Our data elucidates how distinctions between presence and absence are unsettled and how nursing stations' transparent architecture thus creates atmospheres of unfulfilled expectations.

As Berger claims (1972: 9) the reciprocal nature of vision is undeniably fundamental, but the importance of sound in relation to immunization should not be overlooked (Sloterdijk, 2016). In our case, the fact that the transparent circumstances allow visual contact makes this contact the main sensorial and shared affect, whereas sounds and smells remain (somewhat) contained behind the glass walls. Our findings add insight into how surveillance practices can also be reversed in psychiatric settings (Salzmann-Erikson and Eriksson, 2011; Simonsen and Duff, 2021), but we have also explored and contributed to the importance of the visual in the experience and management of atmospheres, especially the visual aspect of such management (e.g., Kanyeredzi et al., 2019; Tucker et al., 2018). Other senses can be studied further. Listening practices, for example, seem especially relevant, their being critical to how staff orient themselves to a hospital setting, as Brown and colleagues have also shown. In this light, one might consider conceptualizing ignorance in terms not only of 'looking away', that is, of redirecting one's focus of attention, but also of 'shutting one's ears' and enacting a particular form of sonic agency (Brown et al., 2020).

Conclusion and further research

The term 'a shared zone of ignorance' captures the key point of this article. Transparent architecture leaves both patients and staff with an immense interpretative work to be done. A situation of double contingency, with the glass walls rendering many formerly invisible aspects of the staff's work visible to patients, are solved by daily practices of ignorance: the patients

can observe the staff, and the staff, in turn, observe patients observing them. Often the information gained through observation is ignored, but nevertheless has implications for behavior. As our data clearly shows, being visible to the gaze of patients animates staff to engage in a variety of unseeing and hiding practices. From the present study we hope to inspire further research into the materialities of contemporary hospital buildings. The use of glass walls provided a specific answer to the somewhat rhetorical question posed by Bakken and Wiik (2018: 1111): how can ignorance be observed? Actual practices of seeing and unseeing are animated for example by glass walls. Ignorance is indeed tethered to the physical spaces of hospital settings. As such, ignorance and space are entangled (Frickel and Kinchy, 2015), and further empirical research can be done into the work of managing circumstances of shared separateness and co-presence in institutionalized settings such as hospitals.

Critically embracing Sloterdijk's notion of shared separateness, we suggest further critical investigations into hospital milieus where patients spend some or much of their lives in an institutionalized dwelling. In such a setting, patients intersect in shared spaces but must also live individual lives, simultaneously differentiated and kept apart but nevertheless alongside each other because those everyday lives are enclosed in institutionalized spaces. Facilities designed with glass and therefore with high levels of transparency expose patients to a sociality that is not only part of their treatment, but also central to how they appear as individuals. In hospital settings, like any other settings, for that matter, practices of seeing and unseeing may function as important means of immunization. As we have shown, however, under circumstances of pervasive transparency and mutual visibility, such practices also produce a shared zone of ignorance, at once productive and problematic and, therefore, to be taken into consideration in the development of future designs.

references

Andes, M. and M.M. Shattell (2006) 'An exploration of the meanings of space and place in acute psychiatric care', *Issues in Mental Health Nursing,* 27: 699–707.

Bakken, T. and E.L. Wiik (2018) 'Ignorance and organization studies', *Organization Studies,* 39: 1109–1120.

Berger, J. (1972) *Ways of seeing*. London, England: British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin Books.

Borch, C. (2014) 'The politics of atmospheres: Architecture, power and the senses', pp. 60–89 in C. Borch (Ed.) *Architectural atmospheres: On the experience and politics of architecture*. Birkhäuser.

Brown, S. D., A. Kanyeredzi, L. Mcgrath, P. Reavey and I. M. Tucker (2020) 'Organizing the sensory: Ear-work, panauralism and sonic agency on a forensic psychiatric unit', *Human Relations,* 73: 1537–1562.

Brown, S.D. and P. Reavey (2016) 'Institutional forgetting/forgetting institutions: Space and memory in secure forensic psychiatric care', E. Weik (ed.) *Institutions inc.* London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Butler, N., H. Delaney, E. Hesselbo and S. Spoelstra (2020) 'Beyond measure', *ephemera*, 20: 1–16.

Connellan, K., M. Gaardboe, D. W. Riggs, C. Due, A. Reinschmidt, and L. Mustillo (2013) 'Stressed spaces: Mental health and architecture', *Health Environments Research and Design Journal*, 6: 127–168.

Connellan, K., D.W. Riggs and C. Due (2015) 'Light lies: How glass speaks', *Communication Design Quarterly Review*, 3: 15–24.

Curtis, S., W.M Gesler, V. Wood, I.H. Spencer, J. M Mason, H. Close and J. Reilly (2013) 'Compassionate containment? Balancing technical safety and therapy in the design of psychiatric wards', *Social Science and Medicine*, 97: 201–209.

Curtis, S.E., W.M Gesler, K. Fabian, S. Francis and S. Priebe (2007) 'Therapeutic landscapes in hospital design: A qualitative assessment by staff and service users of the design of a new mental health inpatient unit', *Environment and Planning C: Government and Policy*, 25: 591–610.

Essén, A., M. Knudsen, and M. Alvesson (2021) 'Explaining ignoring: Working with information that nobody uses', *Organization Studies,* 1-23.

Foucault, M. (1961) *Madness & Civilization: A history of insanity in the age of reason*, Bo. ed. New York: Vintage.

Foucault, M. (1973a/2008) *Psychiatric power: Lectures at the collége de France 1973-74*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Foucault, M. (1973b) *The Birth of the clinic: An archeology of medical perception*, Bo. ed. New York: Vintage.

Frickel, S. and A. Kinchy (2015) 'Lost in space: Geographies of ignorance in science and technology studies', pp. 174-182 in M. Gross and L. McGoey (eds.) *The Routledge international handbook of ignorance studies*. Routledge.

Gross, M. and L. McGoey (eds.) (2015). *Routledge international handbook of ignorance studies*. Routledge.

Joseph, A. and M. Rashid (2007) 'The architecture of safety: Hospital design', *Current Opinion in Critical Care*, 13: 714–719.

Jovanović, N., J. Campbell and S. Priebe (2019) 'How to design psychiatric facilities to foster positive social interaction: A systematic review', *European Psychiatry*, 60: 49–62.

Kahneman, D., O. Sibony and C.R. Sunstein (2021) *Noise: A flaw in human judgement*. Hachette Book Group, USA.

Kanyeredzi, A., S.D. Brown, L. McGrath, P. Reavey and I.M. Tucker (2019) 'The atmosphere of the ward: Attunements and attachments of everyday life for patients on a medium-secure forensic psychiatric unit', *The Sociological Review*, 67: 444–466.

Karlsson Arkitekter/Vilhelm Lauritzen AS, 2010. Konkurrenceforslag.

Knudsen, M. (2017) 'From evidence-based management to management of non-knowledge', *Emergence: Complexity and Organization*, 19(2): 1-8.

Knudsen, M. and S. Kishik (2022) 'Multiplying ignorance, deferring action: Dynamics in the communication of knowledge and non-knowledge'. *Social Epistemology*, 16(3): 344-359.

McGrath, L. and P. Reavey (eds.) (2019) *The handbook of mental health and space: Community and clinical applications*. Routledge.

Mullen, P.E. (1993) 'Care and containment in forensic psychiatry', *Criminal behavior and mental health*, 3(4): 212–225.

Nord, C. and E. Högström (2017) 'Introduction', in Nord, C. and E. Högström (eds.), *Caring architectures: Institutions and relational practices.* Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Otto, B., J.G. Pors and R. Johnsen (2019) 'Hidden in full view: The organization of public secrecy in Miéville's The City and the City', *Culture and Organization*, 25: 91–103.

Pile, S. (2005) *Real cities: Modernity, space and the phantasmagorias of city life*. London: Sage.

Pors, J.G., L. Olaison and B. Otto (2019) 'Ghostly matters in organizing', *ephemera*, 19: 1-29.

Riach, K. and S. Warren (2015) 'Smell organization: Bodies and corporeal porosity in office work', *Human Relations*, 68: 789–809.

Riggs, D.W., C. Due and K. Connellan (2013) 'Duty stations and the regulation of space in mental health wards: A South Australian case study' *The Australian Community Psychologist,* 25: 78–93.

Salzmann-Erikson, M. and H. Eriksson (2012) 'Panoptic power and mental health nursing-space and surveillance in relation to staff, patients, and neutral places', *Issues in Mental Health Nursing*, 33: 500–504.

Salzmann-Erikson, M. and H. Eriksson (2011) 'Latent or manifest observers: Two dichotomous approaches of surveillance in mental health nursing', *Nursing Research and Practice*. https://doi.org/10.1155/2011/254041.

Shattell, M.M., M. Andes and S.P, Thomas (2008) 'How patients and nurses experience the acute care psychiatric environment', *Nursing Inquiry*, 15: 242–250.

Simmel, G. (1994) 'Bridge and door', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 11: 5–10.

Simonsen, T. (2020) 'The spatial organization of psychiatric practice - A situated inquiry into "healing architecture"', PhD Thesis. *Copenhagen Business School*. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvpj7b7z.9.

Simonsen, T. and C. Duff (2021) 'Mutual visibility and interaction: staff reactions to the "healing architecture" of psychiatric inpatient wards in Denmark', *BioSocieties*, 16: 249–269.

Simonsen, T. and C. Duff (2020) 'Healing architecture and psychiatric practice: (re)ordering work and space in an in-patient ward in Denmark', *Sociology of Health and Illness*, 42: 379–392.

Simonsen, T. and H. Højlund (2018) 'Rummets grammatik - Helende arkitektur i psykiatrien', *Politik*, 21(2): 22–42.

Sloterdijk, P. (2017) *The aesthetic imperative*. New York: Polity.

Sloterdijk, P. (2016) *Foams: Spheres volume III: Plural sphereology*. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e).

Sutton, D. and E. Nicholson (2011) 'Sensory modulation in acute mental health wards: A qualitative study of staff and service user perspectives', report, *The National Centre of Mental Health Research*, Auckland.

Topp, L., J.E. Moran and J. Andrews (eds.) (2007) '*Madness, architecture and the built environment: Psychiatric space in historical context*'. London: Routledge.

Tucker, I.M., S.D. Brown, A. Kanyeredzi, L. McGrath and P. Reavey (2018) 'Living "in between" outside and inside: The forensic psychiatric unit as an impermanent assemblage', *Health and Place*, 55: 1–8.

the authors

Holger Højlund, PhD, Associate Professor, VIA University College, Aarhus, Denmark. His research covers areas such as welfare technologies, health partnerships and care professionals.
Email: hmeh@via.dk

Thorben Simonsen, PhD, Researcher, The Danish Center for Social Science Research. His research interests converge around different problems relating to space and place, organization, digitalization, and health/care.
Email: thsi@vive.dk

ephemera
theory & politics in organization

© the author(s) 2023
ISSN 1473-2866 (Online)
www.ephemerajournal.org
volume 23(1)

Economization: The (re-)organization of knowledge and ignorance according to 'the market'*

Theresa Steffestun and Walter Otto Ötsch

abstract

How societies can answer crises depends - among other things - on their organization of knowledge and ignorance. In the case of societies in which processes of economization are present this organization is significantly shaped by the concept of 'the market' and corresponding economic theories. The paper analyses the epistemic organization of knowledge and ignorance in processes of economization that are based on the concept of 'the market' as it is interpreted by Friedrich A. Hayek. Furthermore, it provides a conceptual framework of four characteristics intended to differentiate economic theories regarding their suitability as foundations for economization. The analysis indicates that economization is an act of epistemic imperialism, subsuming the diversity of reality under one singular concept – 'the market' – that knows no boundaries, while complementarily disqualifying knowledge of those boundaries as illegitimate. The study concludes with an outlook on the implications of that knowledge lost to economization and suggests a first step to re-organize knowledge and ignorance in economized contexts.

* This paper is a substantially revised and translated version of the Introduction in Ötsch and Steffestun (2020). The authors wish to thank the two anonymous referees and the editors for their suggestions.

Introduction

The organization of knowledge and ignorance of societies shapes their perception of crises and how they deal with them. Of particular importance is knowledge that becomes *nonknowledge* by being declared illegitimate knowledge. This body of knowledge is not, or only to a limited extent, available to societal discourses for understanding and shaping their lifeworld. What is considered legitimate and illegitimate knowledge in a society depends to a large extent on the constitution of this society, its norms, institutions, and habits. In this paper we analyze the significance of processes of economization for the re-definition of legitimacy of knowledge in societies on a conceptual level. By *economization* we mean discursive and institutional processes that design areas of life and activity previously defined as non-economic, such as education or care for senior citizen, according to a decidedly economic logic.

In this paper, economization will be considered in terms of its structuring effect on the epistemic-normative topography of knowledge and ignorance. We focus on the epistemic facet of economization and build on the premise that economization – among other aspects – can be understood in terms of processes of *epistemic imperialism*. These shift the boundaries between legitimate and illegitimate knowledge and thereby organize the landscape of knowledge and ignorance in societies. Their imperialistic character derives from the land-grabbing aspect of these shifts, which expands the realm of one particular version of 'the economic' to formerly non-economic territory. The notion of 'the market' serves as a crucial benchmark of legitimacy of knowledge and as an engine in these processes.

The paper traces these epistemic-normative shifts regarding the role of the concept of 'the market' as exemplified by Friedrich A. Hayek and that of Economics as a lead-discipline for economization. It offers a conceptual framework of four characteristics qualifying economic theories as authoritative sources of knowledge in economization and hence contributes to a differentiated account on the role of the discipline. The analysis identifies self-reflexive knowledge of the assumptions, contexts, and impact of that organization as central element shifted to the realm of ignorance. Furthermore, the paper briefly illustrates the knowledge lost and ignorance

created in economization by the examples of the Financial Crisis of 2007/8 and environmental governance. The conclusion gives a tentative outlook on how the organization of knowledge and ignorance inherent in processes of economization could be transformed. The following section introduces the central concepts of knowledge and ignorance and discusses why they matter for societies in crisis.

Crises as challenges in dealing with knowledge and ignorance in democratic societies

Largely unexpected crises, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, reveal a society's ignorance that is at least in this case astonishing in retrospect. This concerns both medical knowledge, such as epidemiology, and social science knowledge, including economics. About other crises, however, such as the climate crisis, an extensive body of knowledge has been produced by science and disseminated into public discourse. Despite of that this knowledge has led to verbal approval but little (or not enough) factual action, at least in the realm of politics. The climate crisis and the Covid-19 pandemic reveal society's struggle over which knowledge is the appropriate one in each case to identify, understand, and deal with specific phenomena as crises. For in both cases, not only knowledge, but also ignorance is produced (cf. for the interdisciplinary field of ignorance studies or *agnotology*: Proctor and Schiebinger, 2008; Gross and McGoey, 2015; High et al., 2012; Hertwig and Engel, 2016; Sullivan and Tuana, 2007; Wehling, 2009; Moore and Tumin, 1949).

This specific form of ignorance can lead to silence about the respective phenomena, denying their existence, or mitigating their urgency. For what counts as knowledge and what not in a society defines the horizon of its possibility of perception, judgment, and scope for action with reference to reality. In this way, individual and societal action can be prevented or inhibited, since its rational, emotional, and motivational basis is eroded by such an intentionally produced ignorance, here understood as a particular form of 'strategic ignorance' (McGoey, 2012). Ignorance of this kind covers not a *not-yet-known,* based, for example, on insufficient research, but a *not-to-be-known*, a deliberate normative intervention in public discourse to shift

a piece of knowledge to the realm of ignorance. It is hence a form of 'deliberate ignorance' (Hertwig and Engel, 2016), a deliberate decision made in and for a collective not to know something. The discourse on climate change stands exemplary for this form of knowledge and ignorance production (Oreskes and Conway, 2008; Björnberg et al., 2017), but it has also been demonstrated for the case of cancer research and the tobacco industry (Proctor, 1996). The type of ignorance we are addressing here consists of knowledge that has been implicitly or explicitly declared illegitimate by social actors with discursive power. Being categorized as illegitimate, this body of knowledge becomes unsayable, something that must not be used to interpret and shape reality. In order to differentiate this type of ignorance, which is of particular interest for us, we call this type of illegitimate knowledge *nonknowledge* and summarize the other forms of ignorance under the term *ignorance* (Gross, 2007). The '*non'* in *nonknowledge* therefore indicates the normative rather than the descriptive dimension of the negation, thereby extending Simmel's concept of *nonknowledge* (Gross, 2012). *Nonknowledge* is knowledge that one can become or already is ignorant of, because it is deemed illegitimate knowledge.

Ignorance, and *nonknowledge* in particular, are structured by their complementarity to the concept of knowledge (Gross, 2012: 3). Neither concept has absolute validity. Each society develops a specific understanding of what is recognized as knowledge and *nonknowledge*:

> Ignorance is not a completely amorphous, timeless, and ahistoric negative concept, but has been and is interpreted and 'constructed' historically as well as culturally in specific ways. How this happens is in turn closely linked to what is understood and recognized as knowledge in each case and where the limits of knowledge and the knowable are assumed to be. (Wehling, 2009: 96, our translation)

The negotiation of what knowledge a society considers appropriate and relevant has a direct impact on other basic social categories. Thus, it also divides its members into the knowledgeable and the ignorant. With these distinctions comes either authority or devaluation. In the cultural history of Europe there are plenty of examples of these struggles over the power to determine what the legitimate knowledge for the interpretation of reality is. Galileo Galilei's dispute with the Inquisition can be understood as such: Are

clerics, who argued that Copernican astronomy contradicted the Holy Scripture responsible for the interpretation of reality? Or, natural scientists, who - in the transition from the 16th to the 17th century - developed a concept of natural laws that appears to us today as a self-evident interpretation of reality (Ötsch, 2016a)? This dispute is just one example and exposes the linkage of the epistemic with the social and political dimensions of organizing the landscape of knowledge and ignorance. Today, too, we are confronted with such disputes. The current debate on how to deal with the Covid-19 pandemic for example is also a dispute about how to deal with knowledge and ignorance and its political consequences. Violent attacks on epidemiologists or populist science denial movements, such as the '*Querdenker'* in Germany, illustrate the challenges that dealing with knowledge, ignorance, and the criteria of legitimacy of knowledge poses to democratic societies. We now look at economization as a particular form of the re-arrangement of the epistemic horizon of a society, but also its social and institutional organization.

Economization as epistemic and institutional (re-)organization of knowledge and ignorance

The starting point of our considerations are processes of economization, which have been present in the U.S. and in many European countries in different areas of life, such as health care (Niephaus, 2018), academic education (Bok, 2003; Spring, 2015; Höhne, 2015), politics (Schaal et al., 2014), art, domestic, and leisure activities (Naulin and Jourdain, 2020), the commodification of animals (Clark and Wilson, 2021) or nature (Loske, 2021) and climate change (Skovgaard, 2021). The common feature of these diverse processes is the adoption of specific economic elements and entrepreneurial practices in spheres of life that used to be organized according to other logics and ethics (Caliskan and Callon, 2009; Graf, 2019). By that, market mechanisms and managerial techniques are introduced in the affected areas. Goods and practices that were once located outside the sphere of the economy are thus transformed into 'products' that can be traded on a 'market' by the means of prices (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2006).

The transformation of universities and education in Europe starting in the 1960s and culminating in the Bologna-Reforms in 1999 marks an illustrative example of economization (Niemann, 2009; Höhne, 2015). To a large extent the traditional institutional design of universities and academic education in Europe until the late 20th century can be described as following the ideal of Wilhelm von Humboldt that it should enable the self-education of autonomous personalities (Maaschelein and Simons, 2012). In economization processes this inert goal of the university is substituted by its submission under the goal of economic growth which by the 1960s is becoming to be regarded as a desirable overarching goal in society to which all its parts must contribute. In this train of thought education attains a central role, since economic growth is understood as a technological process which is dependent on innovation and hence on investments in education. This epistemic re-interpretation of education was developed as Human Capital Theory mainly in the 1960s by economists such as Theodore Schultz, Gary Becker, and Robert Solow. They performed the for this transformation so crucial epistemic turn of understanding education not as an end in itself but as an investment in one's own employability and hence one's own access to economic wealth. By transferring the 'source domain' (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980) of the interpretation of the meaning of education from the realm of personality development to the realm of economic production, these economists opened a whole new spectrum of possible epistemic and institutional measures deducible from this new set of assumptions (Graupe, 2021).

This epistemic shift thus determines what counts as legitimate knowledge, what becomes *nonknowledge*, and where the fields of ignorance beyond that lie. History demonstrates the power of this epistemic shift for the institutional setting of education. This new economized concept of education was taken up by politicians and businessmen in the 1970s onward, who hoped it would provide a solution to low economic growth in Europe and the U.S. at the time (Holden and Biddle, 2017). An important intermediary between science and policy, who played a crucial role in materializing the epistemic re-interpretation of education into a broad institutional re-design was the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (Spring, 2015: 147). A hallmark of this institutional re-

design of education was its alignment according to output measures regarding funding, student numbers or publications and their competitive comparison in form of rankings.

Interestingly it is a World Bank paper that defines the role of standardization in the process of re-designing institutions very clearly: ‘An orientation toward outcome means that priorities in education are determined through economic analysis, standard setting, and measurement of the attainment of standards’ (World Bank, 1995: 94). However, this renders educational goals that can hardly be measured by quantifiable standards such as the Humboldtian ideal of education also institutionally obsolete. Not only is its discursive power as source domain for the interpretation of education fading. It can also not be depicted in institutions re-designed according to a totally different source domain. In both cases the former source domain of the Humboldtian educational ideal becomes increasingly irrelevant or to put it in terms of interest here, it enters the realm of institutional ignorance.

This process of epistemic re-interpretation of education as part of national economic production and of the university as a profit-oriented business and its subsequent institutional re-design demonstrates our understanding of economization. Central to it is the act of the epistemic re-interpretation of the field to be transformed by the change of the source domain fundamental to it. This type of discursive ‘land-grabbing’ enables one to perceive *any* phenomenon as ‘a market’ or ‘a business’ and to re-design it accordingly no matter how epistemically appropriate this perception is. Economization in this sense manifests as *epistemic imperialism*, which ultimately can penetrate all areas of society epistemically and institutionally (Harrison, 2015; Mazur, 2020). The historical process of economization in educational institutions also demonstrates the crucial role of economists as the key figures of the epistemic re-interpretation. Their role as epistemic game-changers is central to our understanding of economization and the topic of interest in this paper: the (re-) organization of knowledge and ignorance in society.

Economization and the role of Economics

We regard Economics as the lead-science in processes of economization, monopolizing the authority to interpret reality according to the newly introduced source domain: the economy. In this sense, Economics is the main authoritative source of legitimate knowledge and basic normative narratives for the conceptualization and implementation of economization processes. But not all economic theories are suited to justify and promote economization. In the following, we introduce four characteristics, which serve to differentiate economic theories in their suitability as sources of legitimacy for economization. These characteristics furthermore illustrate the conceptual underpinnings of the reorganization of knowledge affected by economization as proposed in this paper. It would go beyond the scope of this paper to analyze single economic theories regarding these four characteristics. It is not its intention to argue whether a theory does in fact qualify as authoritative for economization or not, but rather to provide a conceptual framework for this analysis.[1]

(1) 'The market' foundation: Economic theories that rely on the concept of 'the market' as ontological foundation qualify as authoritative for economization.

Economization has also been described as *marketization* (Chaudhuri and Belk, 2020). This conceptual nuance is introduced because of the rising prominence of the concept of 'the market' in economic theories and public discourse as an interpretation of the economy (Djelic, 2006). Hence, the source domain of economization – the economy – has been further specified as being 'the market'. We interpret the concept of 'the market' as a deep-seated semantic structure of understanding the economy, which is located 'below' the level of single paradigms and thus can be found in a diverse set of economic theories. The concept 'the market' was developed a good hundred years ago in the Austrian School, in Ordoliberalism and later in the

[1] If pursued, however, such an analysis would in our view show that while for example feminist, institutionalist or some Keynesian approaches do not bear these characteristics, there are others that can be regarded as authoritative in epistemically and/or institutionally driving economization, such as the aforementioned Human Capital Theory, variants of Public Choice approaches of the Virginia School, the Chicago School and representatives of the Austrian School, and of German Ordoliberalism.

Chicago School and in some neoclassical theories.[2] It first became widely used in Economics after World War II and in politics from the 1980s onward and was popularized with the phrase 'globalization' from the 1990s onward. 'The market' stands for a homogeneous totality that is said to function automatically according to its own rules and 'laws'. In the economic theories mentioned above it is usually described with the help of machine-metaphors (Ötsch, 2019). Although there is a plethora of different (quite contradictory) meanings of the term 'the market', e.g., realistic, descriptive, normative, or utopian (Ötsch, 2019: 39ff.), 'the market' (in an ontological understanding) stands not only for certain constellations in the economy (such as the artificial case of 'perfect competition') but is also used as a synonym for the economy as a whole.

(2) The loss of society: Economic theories that do not have a concept of society as a field distinct of that of the economy, or 'the market' respectively, qualify as authoritative for economization.

This characteristic is closely connected to 'the market' as ontological foundation of economic theory. In contrast to economic approaches such as the Keynesian, where society is a distinct field of life that includes the economy, in economic theories based on the concept of 'the market' it is the other way around. 'The market' is understood as an all-encompassing 'order', as most explicitly formulated in Ordoliberalism and in Austrian approaches like Ludwig von Mises' *market society* (Mises, 1998) or in Friedrich A. Hayek's concept of *spontaneous* or *extended order* (1992). Other examples can be found in Friedman's 'order of the market' (Brandes, 2015) or in microeconomics textbooks, where the approach of Arrow and Debreu is infused with the concept of 'the market'. 'Order' in these theories encompasses a totality that cannot be distinguished in terms of economy and society. 'Order' includes both, it is both economy and society.

---

[2] The term 'neoclassical theories' is usually defined in terms of method; they follow a formal approach that is filled in by a microeconomic model of rational choice. But not all neoclassical theories have a notion of 'the market' in the way mentioned here. Examples are the approaches of Paul Krugman or Joseph Sitglitz, who can be understood on the one hand as neoclassical economists and on the other hand as critics of the concept of 'the market'. In the following, the term 'neoclassical' is used only for those subgroups in which 'the market' is also used discursively.

It is precisely this change of terms that makes the concept of 'order' a driver of economization: economization can be performed in many fields of society, because there is no concept of society as distinct field with its own rules and values that could set boundaries to the epistemic and institutional extension of 'the market' to formerly non-market fields. Hence, there is nothing *conceptually* resisting the epistemic imperialism so central to economization. To use Margaret Thatcher's famous words: 'There is no such thing as society' in economic theories which use 'the market' as their source domain. Regarded through the lens of these economic theories everything seems to be 'a market' and economization seems to be nothing else than consequentially understanding and designing the world. Thereby society and social phenomena are moved to the realm of *nonknowledge*. At this point, an *aporia* inherent in economization and its supporting economic theories already becomes clear: an object is transformed of which the transformative agent is ignorant.

(3) Economy and economists unbound: Economic theories that conceptualize the economy as a field without any boundaries and envision a methodological position of the scientist outside any contexts qualify as authoritative for economization.

The totality of an 'order' in the aforementioned sense also implicates a priority of the economy over the concerns of society and politics. Therefore, these economic theories place economic over social arguments and give economists an imagined methodological position outside of society, politics, or any other worldly boundaries, as if it could be a 'view from nowhere' (Nagel, 1989). Decontextualizing the research object (the economy) and the theorist (the economist) from any social, ecological, and physical contexts leads to a dissolution of the boundaries of the research object and the scientist's scope of explanation. These consequences of this methodological standpoint are commonly known as *methodological imperialism* (Becker, 1976; Fine and Milonakis, 2009). This standpoint shared by economic theories authoritative in economization, aims to explain *all* human behavior with 'the economic approach' (Becker, 1976). Becker applies a specific logic from economic theory to areas of phenomena that were not previously considered its object, such as crime, divorce, or death. He thus formulates the program for the epistemic aspect of economization: the economizing

gaze that perceives *all* areas of life according to 'the economic approach'. Hence, methodological imperialism tends to substantiate and drive the epistemic imperialism of economization.

(4) Performative attitude: Economic theories that perceive it as their task to intervene in the world based on their knowledge and legitimize this with the superiority of that knowledge qualify as authoritative for economization.

Economization is epistemic imperialism materializing in processes of institutional re-design. It is not merely a conceptual, abstract phenomenon. Economic theories authoritative for economization exhibit a performative attitude (MacKenzie, 2006; MacKenzie et al., 2007; Callon, 2006). In their empirical study, Fourcade et al. attest economists, who refer to the uniformity and universality of 'the economic approach' an attitude of 'superiority' combined with a 'disposition to intervene in the world' (Fourcade et al., 2015: 107). The sense of superiority in Economics and economists is hence not only exhibited methodologically as explained above, but also reflected materially in the high degree of integration of economists as experts and consultants in public and private institutions, as well as in their high pay compared to scholars of other disciplines.

These four categories specify not only which economic theories qualify as authoritative for economization but also the concept itself. We understand economization, in a wide sense, as the epistemic and institutional re-organization of knowledge in such a way that economic production serves as the new and only source domain for legitimately interpreting and performing reality. Concepts and practices that served as source domains before are moved into the realm of ignorance or become illegitimate knowledge (*nonknowledge*). Regarding economic theories and historic processes, such as the economization of academic education, we argue, that economization can be more specifically understood as the epistemic and institutional re-organization of knowledge along the concept of 'the market' as its only source domain. Epistemic imperialism in this case manifests in a way that once acts of economization are performed in a particular field, everything in it appears as 'a market'. Former source domains become illegitimate knowledge and their former interpreters turn to illegitimate sources of knowledge; in the case of academic education this would be a

humanistic image of man and philosophers and pedagogues. We argue, that due to the use of a specific concept of 'the market', social phenomena as such shift into the realm of ignorance and sources of knowledge formerly regarded authoritative, such as social science, turn illegitimate. Finally, economization in this specific sense, is not only characterized by an imperialistic concept as its source domain, but also an imperialistic *habitus* as its mode of agency. At the core of the performative aspect of economization, lies the *habitus* of regarding the knowledge about its source domain as superior, as being universally applicable in a positive and normative sense. Both, 'the market' and 'the economist' in this case *do not know* boundaries which could positively or normatively limit the application of their knowledge. From a conceptual standpoint, economists, who drive economization, hence, are ignorant towards other source domains for interpreting reality and means to reflect any positive or normative boundaries to their thoughts and actions.

This specific view of economization and its effect on the (re-)organization of knowledge and ignorance depends on the understanding of its dominant source domain 'the market'. We argue that it is a certain version of this concept that has seen various interpretations throughout the history of economic thought. Therefore, in the following, we explain the concept of 'the market' as it has been carved out by Friedrich A. Hayek in more detail. This prominent Austrian economist is himself a prime example of an economist conceptually and performatively authoritative for economization. His version of the concept of 'the market' is particularly interesting because it is closely intertwined with his thoughts on knowledge and ignorance.

Organizing ignorance: The normative role of 'the market' exemplified by Hayek

Hayek is one of the most influential figures in 20th century Economics and public discourse (Ötsch, 2016b). He helped re-found the Chicago School of Economics in the middle of the 1940s, which gave Milton Friedman a job (Van Horn and Mirowski, 2009). He also founded the Mont Pèlerin Society (MPS) in 1947, which can be regarded as the central node of the networks that established 'the market' as a central figure of thought in Mainstream Economics and public discourse (Mirowski, 2013: 43ff.). Pivotal to this transformation of discourse were and still are to this day numerous think

tanks that were founded around this society (Ötsch et al., 2017; Walpen, 2004). Today, this network amounts to about 500 think tanks, with the Atlas Network, which was founded by Anthony Fisher, a devout follower of Hayek, being its center as the heir of the MPS.[3] Hayek at times in person, at times by the means of his publications was also a valued political advisor, who most prominently influenced the Reagan, Thatcher, and Pinochet administrations (Plehwe and Walpen, 1999).

Hayek has developed his own theory of 'the market' which directly addresses the issue of knowledge, because he sees 'the market' as a knowledge-processing entity. It is important to note that Hayek uses information and knowledge synonymously. He makes no distinction between technical information – a quantitative relation – and human knowledge, which entails a capacity for understanding – a qualitative and social relation (Brodbeck, 2001: 57). His idea of 'competition as a discovery procedure' is well known. The starting point are individuals with heterogeneous and disparate knowledge, which forms the basis of each person's action. This knowledge has to be used efficiently. This is accomplished by 'the market', which 'discovers' the fragmented knowledge and transforms it into prices. Market prices are 'signals telling people what they ought to do' (Hayek, 1983: 240). The price system is 'a mechanism for communicating information', like 'a kind of machinery for registering chance, or a system of telecommunications' (Hayek, 1945: 526f.). Therefore 'the market' is re-interpretated by Hayek as 'efficient' in terms of information (Ötsch, 2019). This meaning was new to the then dominant variants of Neoclassical Economics and since has replaced their interpretation of 'the market' (Mirowski and Nik-Khah, 2017). This accounts in particular for the concept of 'allocative efficiency' contained in neoclassical theories in the tradition of Arrow and Debreu. Allocative efficiency means that the given output variables of the standard neoclassical model (the preferences of households, the techniques of firms, and the given stocks of resources) are transformed into optimal final variables by the market price mechanism. According to Hayek, however, 'the market' does not process such given data, but rather subjective information. Meanwhile, Hayek's interpretation can also be found

[3] Detailed information on market-based networks can be found at http://thinktanknetworkresearch.net.

in widely used textbooks (Mankiw and Taylor, 2014: 550) that speak of 'informational efficiency' because stock market prices reflect 'all available information about the value of the asset' (similarly in Varian, 2014: 622f.).

Hayek contrasts the knowledge production of 'the market' with that of man. He has developed a theory of the functioning of the human brain for this purpose which was published in 1952 as *Sensory Order* (Hayek, 1952a). In this theory the human mind is conceived as a predominantly unconscious system.

mind	rules	ideas, theories
C conscious reflection possible	conscious changeable rules	provisional personal beliefs
B unconscious responses	rules - of tradition - of order	constitutive ideas, e.g. for extended order
A unconscious responses	physiological processes	

Figure 1. The Hayekian model of layers of consciousness. Own figure (Ötsch, 2020: 88).

There are three types of rules in man, which can be imagined as layers superimposed on each other (Fig. 1) (Hayek, 1998, vol.3: 159f.; cf. Slobodian, 2018: 339f.): the lowest layer A deals with purely physiological reactions, such as the automatic functioning of the senses (Hayek, 1952a: 23ff.). The second level B contains social rules that are lived on, e.g., out of tradition, and that also constitute 'culture' as a whole (Hayek, 1998, vol.1: 153ff.). According to Hayek, this level also contains those rules which constitute the 'spontaneous' or 'extended order' as social reality. It has solidified in such a way that it is experienced like an external nature. Its unconscious moment also manifests itself in unconscious reactions. According to Hayek, people react to rules of this kind unconsciously. Thereby behavioral patterns

emerge, which Hayek places in analogy to those patterns that form with iron filings on a paper when they are under the influence of a magnetic field (Hayek, 1998, vol.1: 39ff.). As the third and last level C, there exists a 'thin' layer of rules that people can consciously and with full intention adopt or change for their own purposes.

With this approach, Hayek defines economic behavior to a large extent as an unconscious reaction to a given system of rules. According to him, people react to the signals of 'the market' without really being aware of their reaction. The third column in figure 1 symbolizes the domain of the social and economic sciences. Hayek sees the latter as a special case of the former. Their insights are divided by Hayek in two ways: into 'constitutive ideas' and secondly into 'provisional theories' or 'popular constructions' that develop on the basis of the 'constitutive ideas' (Hayek, 1952b: 36ff.). The former also explain the rules that constitute the 'extended order'. The second group, according to Hayek, consists of subordinate ideas that the 'popular mind' (*ibid*.: 37) formulates about social systems. These include, according to Hayek, concepts such as 'society', 'economic system', 'capitalism', or 'imperialism'. According to Hayek, these 'pseudo-entities' (*ibid*.: 38) must not be taken for 'facts' for epistemological reasons, because they are purely 'subjective' in nature. According to Hayek, the unconsciously acting person is an ignorant person. She is situated in an order in which she acts automatically and unconsciously according to rules of which she herself is largely unaware. 'Each is therefore ignorant of most of the facts on which the working of society rests' (Hayek, 1998, vol.1: 14): 'This is the constitutional limitation of man's knowledge and interests, the fact that he *cannot know* more than a tiny part of the whole of society' (Hayek, 1958: 14, italics in the original).

Hayek confronts this idea of man with his concept of 'the market'. Hayek now takes a decisive conceptual step: he personifies 'the market', attributes anthropomorphous characteristics to it and conceives the knowledge which is distributed by 'the market' as a separate entity associated uniquely to 'the market'. In this interpretation, Hayek can finally discuss the performance of 'the market' in terms of consciousness: 'the market' functions as 'a supra-conscious mechanism which operates upon the contents of consciousness, but which cannot itself be conscious' (Hayek, 1967: 61). 'The market' thus

lies outside the consciousness of people, in a twofold sense: simultaneously ‘above’ and ‘below’ their thresholds of consciousness. Hayek hence sketches a diametrical picture: on the one side is the ignorant, predominantly unconscious market participant; on the other is the superconscious market, ignorance being associated with fragmented and superficial knowledge, being knowledgeable with the knowledge of rules, the capacity to conceive totality and to coordinate knowledge accordingly. For Hayek, the problem of human ignorance finds its solution in ‘the market’. Its rules ‘are a device for coping with our constitutional ignorance’ (Hayek, 1998, vol.2: 8), which Hayek perceives as a virtue rather than a vice (Hayek, 1990: 71). Market participants can and must rely on ‘the market’ as knowledgeable authority for it ‘knows’ in a literal sense much better than any of them what is good for them and for society. It ‘thinks’ something that man cannot think at all (Mirowski and Nik-Khah, 2017: 70).

Hayek's market concept unfolds the totality of ‘the market’ in a final consequence that takes epistemic imperialism to the extreme. If ‘the market’ includes the economy and society and is positioned ‘above’ politics, then the knowledge of society is devalued, and politics is supposed to follow ‘the market’ (see also characteristic 2 as mentioned above). According to a perspective based on this concept of ‘the market’, society should not and must not place its knowledge above the knowledge of ‘the market’. Hayek goes one step further. In the light of ‘the market’ and its knowledge, all other knowledge must be dismissed as secondary. This is especially true of scientific knowledge. It has to be limited to ‘the market’ in its reflection on the economic system. Any critical reflection on the market system and its functional defects is condemned by Hayek as an ‘abuse of reason’ (Hayek, 1952b). Other narratives, such as alternative social designs or economies, such as the post-growth economy or care economy, which do not rely on ‘the market’ in this form as a basis, are delegitimized and become *nonknowledge*. Furthermore, Hayek (1992: 60ff.) speaks critically of ‘the declarations of faith of modern science and philosophy of science’ and sweepingly condemns such reflexive sciences as ‘a recipe for producing the presumptive rationalism that I call scientism and constructivism’ (*ibid.*). He specifically rejects sociology, ‘and even worse [...] the so-called “sociology of knowledge”’ (*ibid.*) and delegitimizes these approaches of self-examination

in science, a characteristic observable in economic theories contributive to economization as mentioned above.

Concludingly, it can be asserted that the concept of 'the market' as exemplified by Hayek has vast implications for the epistemic and institutional organization of knowledge and ignorance in society. Understood as a supra-conscious knowledgeable authority, 'the market' serves as *ultima ratio* when judging the legitimacy of knowledge and expertise. Since 'the market' in this interpretation *knows no* boundaries, it is prone to be the foundation of epistemically and institutionally imperialistic practices such as economization. As it produces a vast range of new knowledge, for example as of how to re-design a university as if it would be a business, it simultaneously generates a complementary new range of ignorance and *nonknowledge* concerning the fields subject to economization.

The knowledge lost in economization

What knowledge is lost then? In short, in processes of economization all non-economic, more specifically all non-market knowledge is in danger to be lost to the dominion of ignorance and illegitimacy. While a detailed account of the diversity of that knowledge and an inquiry into how these bodies of knowledge are perhaps preserved despite the effects of economization would be most fruitful but overextend the scope of this paper, we would like to concentrate on a systematic aspect.

In our perspective, the classification of self-reflexive knowledge about the assumptions, the contexts, and the performativity of knowledge and those who (re)produce it as *nonknowledge* in economization and the economic theories that underpin it, is most significant. This is because all possible ethical, epistemic, ecological, socio-political boundaries to economization and its intellectual and institutional means to understand them are thus subject to ignorance and considered illegitimate. It illustrates the above-mentioned quality of knowledge and ignorance that they are complementary to each other: the *boundlessness* of 'the market' and the knowledge (production) associated with it is complemented by the ignorance of its (possible) epistemic, ethical, or real-world *boundaries*.

That it is this kind of knowledge that is lost or in danger of being lost in processes of economization, is what we regard as highly relevant for societies in crisis. They are dependent on an adequate understanding of the existence, causes, and remedies for overcoming crises. When crises signal a failure in the existing epistemic and institutional organization of knowledge, it is imperative to be able to reflect on the existing order and perhaps design a new one. But without this knowledge, societies in the contexts of economization are in danger to perceive phenomena not as the crises that they are.

One example of this is the reaction of most economists to the financial crisis in 2007/2008. This series of events *could* not be interpreted by them as a systemic crisis of capitalism due to the disciplinary organization of knowledge and the implications of 'strategic ignorance' employed by economists and financial analysts (Davies and McGoey, 2012). Without access to knowledge on the socio-political contexts of financial markets, on the psychology of financial agents' behavior, on the history of financial crises and their impact on other sectors and finally on the performativity of their own models and interventions in public discourse (MacKenzie, 2006), many economists were ignorant to many central aspects of these events. That led German-speaking economists for instance to address the crisis in the media mainly as an 'earthquake' or a 'tsunami', in other words, as a natural event external to 'the market' that cannot be explained by economic theory (Hirte, 2013).

The current critical state of the ecological boundaries to economic production represents yet another example of the ignorance implicated by processes of economization. The root cause for this is, as explained above, the fact that 'the market' as a core concept of economization is an 'order' without inherent limits, encompassing everything formerly distinct, such as nature or society. Conceptually it is impossible to perceive or value nature for itself as something substantially different to economic production (Fourcade, 2011; Polotzek and Spangenberg, 2019). This has implications for the understanding of the climate crisis and environmental governance for example. In contexts structured by economization, both can only be understood along the topography of legitimate, 'market-based' knowledge. Today, many of the instruments and policies to mitigate the climate crisis

employed by industrialized countries for example, can be qualified as economized in this sense (Newell, 2008; Nagorny, 2014; Skovgaard, 2021).

'Non-market' approaches to understand, explain and solve the climate crisis, such as ecological and feminist economics or degrowth economies, are either actively or passively silenced, because in contexts of economization they represent illegitimate knowledge, or *nonknowledge* (Thomas, 2017). Active silencing does in some cases lead to climate skepticism with recourse to economic theories based on 'the market'. Institutions such as the MPS and Atlas, attack the legitimacy of research(ers) not conforming with 'the market' narrative by producing misleading 'scientific' evidence and often interestingly at the same time taking an anti-scientific stance (Harkinson, 2009; Oreskes and Conway, 2008; Björnberg et al., 2017). This form of silencing is a particularly stark example of 'epistemic violence' (Brunner, 2020, our translation), because of the inequality of power in the discursive struggle over the legitimacy of knowledge. Finally, the ecological boundaries of economic production are also omitted in economic education. In the major economic textbooks ecological issues are still neglected or discussed only in the market paradigm. Mankiw and Taylor (2014: 451ff.) directly rebuke the environmentalists for disregarding their ten principles of economics, which delineate the contours of a market-based order. Another example is to be found in Varian, (2014: 451ff.) in the discussion of the optimal production of emissions.

Conclusion

This paper argues that economization can be understood as the epistemic and institutional (re-)organization of knowledge along the concept of 'the market' as exemplified by Hayek. Knowledge and knowledge production, for example in Economics, that is based on this concept is considered legitimate. All 'non-market' knowledge becomes *nonknowledge* and its producers are deemed illegitimate sources of knowledge. Equally, all self-reflexive knowledge about the epistemic, ethical, and real-world boundaries of 'the market' and 'market' knowledge is shifted to the dominion of ignorance. The (proclaimed) boundless knowledge of a boundless entity and its complementary ignorance of its boundaries are the two core pillars of the

organization of knowledge and ignorance in economization. They are the key drivers for its epistemically and institutionally imperialistic performativity. Regarding societies, who are structured by processes of economization and whose organization of knowledge and ignorance is disrupted by crises, one implication of this organization is a potential difficulty to think outside the box of 'market' knowledge. They deprive themselves of the ability of developing new narratives, forms of knowledge, and practices that can help perceive crises as such, reflect on its own responsibilities, and ultimately overcome these crises.

But how can the organization of knowledge and ignorance in economized environments be transformed, e.g. to meet such a crisis? We suggest the *re-contextualization* of economic knowledge (production) as a first measure to epistemically and institutionally re-organize it: 1) introduce self-reflexive knowledge that contextualizes the existing knowledge (production) philosophically, ethically, empirically, and historically in a way that confronts it with its boundaries; 2) allow the economist and the Economics student to consciously contextualize themselves, their knowledge production and their impact in their lifeworld; 3) allow for (educational) institutions with different source domains, may that be 'the market', a pedagogical ideal or society's desire to cope with current crises. These three first steps do not shift the existing paradigm into the realm of ignorance but contextualize and diversify it by using the knowledge it deemed as *nonknowledge*.

references

Becker, G. (1976) *The economic approach to human behavior*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Björnberg, E., M. Karlsson, M. Gilek, and S. Hansson (2017) 'Climate and environmental science denial: A review of the scientific literature in 1990-2015', *Journal of Cleaner Production,* 167: 229-241.

Bok, D. (2003) *Universities in the market place: The commercialization of higher education*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Boltanski, L. and E. Chiapello (2006) *The new spirit of capitalism*. London: Verso.

Brandes, S. (2015) '"Free to choose": Die Popularisierung des Neoliberalismus in Milton Friedmans Fernsehserie (1980/90)', *Studies in Contemporary History*, 12(3): 526–533.

Brodbeck, K.-H. (2001) 'Die fragwürdigen Grundlagen des Neoliberalismus: Wirtschaftsordnung und Markt in Hayeks Theorie der Regelselektion', *Zeitschrift für Politik,* 48(1): 49-71.

Brunner, C. (2020) *Epistemische Gewalt: Wissen und Herrschaft in der kolonialen Moderne.* Bielefeld: transcript Verlag.

Caliskan, K. and M. Callon (2009) 'Economization, part 1: Shifting attention from the economy towards processes of economization', *Economy and Society*, 38(3): 369-398.

Callon, M. (2006) 'What does it mean to say that economics is performative?', *CSI Working Papers Series,* 005: 1-58.

Chaudhuri, H.R. and R.W. Belk (2020) *Marketization: Theory and evidence from emerging economies*. Singapore: Springer.

Clark, B. and T. D. Wilson (2021) *The capitalist commodification of animals.* Bingeley: Emerald.

Davies, W. and L. McGoey (2012) 'Rationalities of ignorance: On financial crisis and the ambivalence of neo-liberal epistemology', *Economy and Society*, 41(1): 64-83.

Djelic, M. (2006) 'Marketization: From intellectual agenda to global policy-making', in M. Djelic and K. Sahlin-Andersson (eds.) *Transnational governance: Institutional dynamics of regulation.* New York: Cambridge University Press.

Fine, B. and D. Milonakis (2009) *From economics imperialism to freakonomics: The shifting boundaries between economics and other social sciences*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Fourcade, M. (2011) 'Cents and sensibility: Economic valuation and the nature of "nature"', *American Journal of Sociology*, 116(6): 1721-77.

Fourcade, M., E. Ollion and Y. Algan (2015) 'The superiority of economists', *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 29(1): 89-114.

Graf, R. (ed.) (2019) *Ökonomisierung: Debatten und Praktiken der Zeitgeschichte*. Göttingen: Wallstein.

Graupe, S. (2021) 'Die Entleerung der Bildung: Ökonomisierung als radikales Reframing', in T. Hauser and P. Merz (eds.) *Vom Bürger zum Konsumenten. Wie die Ökonomisierung unser Leben verändert*. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer Verlag.

Gross, M. (2007) 'The unknown in process: Dynamic connections of ignorance, non-knowledge and related concepts', *Current Sociology,* 55(5): 742-759.

Gross, M (2012) '"Objective culture" and the development of nonknowledge: Georg Simmel and the reverse side of knowing', *Cultural Sociology,* 6(4): 422-437.

Gross, M. and L. McGoey (eds.) (2015) *Routledge international handbook of ignorance studies*. Basingstoke (UK): Taylor & Francis.

Harkinson, J. (2009) 'Climate change deniers without borders', *Mother Jones*, 22. December.

Harrison, P. (2015) *The territories of science and religion*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Hayek, F.A. (1945) 'The use of knowledge in society', *American Economic Review*, 35(4): 519-530.

Hayek, F.A. (1952a) *The sensory order: An inquiry into the foundations of theoretical psychology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Hayek, F.A. (1952b) *The counter-revolution of science: Studies on the abuse of reason*. Glencoe Illinois: The Free Press.

Hayek, F.A. (1958) *Individualism and economic order,* 3rd edition. New York & London: The University of Chicago Press.

Hayek, F.A. (1967) *Studies in philosophy, politics and economics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Hayek, F.A. (1983) Interviews, completed under the auspicies of the Oral History Program, University of California, Los Angeles, The Regents of the University of California. [http://www.archive.org/download/nobelprizewinnin00haye/nobelprizewinnin00haye.pdf].

Hayek, F.A. (1990) *New studies in philosophy, politics, economics and the history of ideas*. London: Routledge.

Hayek, F.A. (1992) *The fatal conceit: The errors of socialism*. London: Routledge.

Hayek, F.A. (1998) *Law, legislation and liberty.* London: Routledge.

Hertwig, R. and C. Engel (2016) 'Homo Ignorans: Deliberately choosing not to know', *Perspectives on Psychological Science,* 11(2): 359-372.

High, C., A. Kelly and J. Mair (2012) *The anthropology of ignorance: An ethnographic approach.* New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

Hirte, K. (2013) *ÖkonomInnen in der Finanzkrise: Diskurse, Netzwerke, Initiative.* Marburg: Metropolis.

Höhne, T. (2015) *Ökonomisierung und Bildung: Zu den Formen ökonomischer Rationalisierung im Feld der Bildung*. Wiesbaden: Springer VS.

Holden, L. and J.E. Biddle (2017) 'The introduction of human capital theory into education policy in the United States', *History of Political Economy,* 49(4): 537-74.

Lakoff, G. and M. Johnson (1980) *Metaphors we live by*. Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press.

Loske, R. (2021) 'Die Ökonomisierung der Natur und ihrer Leistungen', in T. Hauser and P. Merz (eds.) *Vom Bürger zum Konsumenten: Wie die Ökonomisierung unser Leben verändert*. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer Verlag.

Maaschelein, J. and M. Simons (2012) *Globale Immunität oder eine kleine Kartographie des europäischen Bildungsraums*, 2nd edition. Zürich: Diaphanes.

MacKenzie, D. (2006) *An engine not a camera: How financial models shape markets*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

MacKenzie, D., F. Muniesa and L. Siu (eds.) (2007) *Do economists make markets? On the performativity of economics*. Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press.

Mankiw, N.G. and M. Taylor (2014) *Economics*, 3rd edition. Stanford, CT: Cengage Learning.

Mazur, L. (2020) 'The epistemic imperialism of science: Reinvigorating early critiques of scientism', *Frontiers in Psychology,* 11:609823.

McGoey, L. (2012) 'The logic of strategic ignorance', *The British Journal of Sociology,* 63(3): 553-576.

Mirowski, P. (2013) *Never let a serious crisis go to waste: How neoliberalism survived the financial meltdown*. London and New York: Verso.

Mirowski, P. and E. Nik-Khah (2017) *The knowledge we have lost in information: The history of information in modern Economics*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Mises, L. v. (1998) *Human action: A treatise on economics. The scholar's edition.* Auburn, Alabama: Ludwig von Mises Institute.

Moore, W. and M. Tumin (1949) 'Some social functions of ignorance', *American Sociological Review,* 14: 787-95.

Nagel, T. (1989) *The view from nowhere*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Nagorny, N. (2014) *Das Produkt Klima: Zur Performativität ökonomischer Ansätze in der Klimapolitik.* Forum Humangeographie 10. Frankfurt a.M.: Goethe Universität.

Naulin, S. and A. Jourdain (2020) *The social meaning of extra money: Capitalism and the commodification of domestic and leisure activities.* Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

Newell, P. (2008) 'The marketization of global environmental governance: manifestations and implications', in J. Park, K. Conca and M. Finger (eds) *The crisis of global environmental governance: Towards a new political economy of sustainability*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Niemann, D. (2009) Changing patterns in German education policy making: The impact of international organizations. *TranState Working Papers* 99. University of Bremen.

Niephaus, Y. (2018) *Ökonomisierung: Diagnose und Analyse auf der Grundlage feldtheoretischer Überlegungen.* Wiesbaden: Springer VS.

Oreskes, N. and E. Conway (2008) 'Challenging knowledge: How climate science became a victim of the Cold War', in R. Proctor and L. Schiebinger (eds.) *Agnotology: The making and unmaking of ignorance.* Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Ötsch, W. (2016a) 'Geld und Raum: Anmerkungen zum Homogenisierungsprogramm der beginnenden Neuzeit', in K.-H. Brodbeck and S. Graupe (eds.) *Geld! Welches Geld? Geld als Denkform.* Marburg: Metropolis.

Ötsch, W. (2016b) 'Die Politische Ökonomie "des" Marktes: Eine Zusammenfassung zur Wirkungsgeschichte von Friedrich A. Hayek', in J. Kapeller, St. Pühringer, K. Hirte, and W.O. Ötsch (eds.) *Ökonomie! Welche Ökonomie? Stand und Status der Wirtschaftswissenschaften.* Marburg: Metropolis.

Ötsch, W. (2019) *Mythos Markt. Mythos Neoklassik: Das Elend des Marktfundamentalismus.* Marburg: Metropolis.

Ötsch, W. (2020) 'Wissen, Selbstwissen und Nichtwissen der marktfundamentalen Ökonomie: Hayeks Marktbegriff und die ökonomisierte Gesellschaft', in W. Ötsch and T. Steffestun (eds.) *Wissen und Nichtwissen der ökonomisierten Gesellschaft: Aufgaben einer neuen Politischen Ökonomie.* Marburg: Metropolis.

Ötsch, W., S. Pühringer and K. Hirte (2017) *Netzwerke des Marktes: Ordoliberalismus als Politische Ökonomie.* Wiesbaden: Springer VS.

Ötsch, W. and T. Steffestun (eds.) (2020) *Wissen und Nichtwissen der ökonomisierten Gesellschaft: Aufgaben einer neuen Politischen Ökonomie.* Marburg: Metropolis.

Plehwe, D. and B. Walpen (1999) 'Wissenschaftliche und wissenschaftspolitische Produktionsweisen im Neoliberalismus: Beiträge der Mont Pèlerin Society und marktradikaler ThinkTanks zur Hegemoniegewinnung und –erhaltung', *Prokla,* 115(2): 1-34.

Polotzek, L. and J. Spangenberg (2019) 'Die blinden Flecken der neoklassischen Klimaökonomik', *Makronom*, 8. November.

Proctor, R. (1996) *Cancer wars: How politics shapes what we know and don't know about cancer.* New York: Basic Books.

Proctor, R. and L. Schiebinger (eds.) (2008) *Agnotology: The making and unmaking of ignorance.* Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Schaal, G., M. Lemke and C. Ritzi (eds.) (2014) *Die Ökonomisierung der Politik in Deutschland: Eine vergleichende Politikfeldanalyse.* Wiesbaden: Springer Fachmedien.

Skovgaard, J. (2021) *The economisation of climate change: How the G20, the OECD and the IMF address fossil fuel subsidies and climate finance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Slobodian, Q. (2018) *Globalists: The end of empire and the birth of neoliberalism*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Spring, J. (2015) *Economization of education: Human capital, global corporations, skills-based schooling*. New York: Routledge.

Sullivan, S. and N. Tuana (eds.) (2007) *Race and epistemologies of ignorance*. Albany: SUNY Press.

Thomas, J.A. (2017) 'Confronting climate change: The uneasy alliance of scientists and nonscientists in a neoliberal world', *Environmental History*, 0: 1-11.

Van Horn, R. and P. Mirowski (2009) 'The rise of the Chicago School of Economics and the birth of neoliberalism', in P. Mirowski and D. Plehwe (eds.) *The road from Mont Pèlerin: The making of the neoliberal thought collective*. Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press.

Varian, H. (2014) *Intermediate microeconomics: A modern approach*, 9th edition. New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company.

Walpen, B. (2004) *Die offenen Feinde und ihre Gesellschaft: Eine hegemonietheoretische Studie zur Mont Pèlerin Society*. Hamburg: VSA.

Wehling, P. (2009) 'Nichtwissen: Bestimmungen, Abgrenzungen, Bewertungen', *Erwägen -Wissen - Ethik,* 20(1): 95-106.

World Bank (1995) Priorities and strategies for education. A World Bank review, Washington [http://www-wds.worldbank.org/servlet/WDS_IBank_Servletpcont=details&eid=000009265_3961219101219].

the authors

Theresa Steffestun is Research Assistant at Cusanus University for Social Transformation, Koblenz and PhD student at the Walras-Pareto Center, Lausanne.
Email: theresa.steffestun@cusanus-hochschule.de.

Walter Otto Ötsch is Professor for Economics and Cultural history at Cusanus University for Social Transformation, Koblenz.
Email: walter.oetsch@cusanus-hochschule.de.

ephemera
theory & politics in organization

© the author(s) 2023
ISSN 1473-2866 (Online)
www.ephemerajournal.org
volume 23(1)

The organization of ignorance: An ethnographic study of the production of subjects and objects in an artificial intelligence project

Line Kirkegaard, Anders Raastrup Kristensen and Tomas Skov Lauridsen

abstract

This article is a study of the role of organization of ignorance in an artificial intelligence project in a municipality in Denmark. It raises the issue of how to understand the process through which a seemingly ordinary project involving the development of an algorithm for decision support turns into a fantastical, creative reimagining of subjects and objects through the organization of ignorance. Unlike many ignorance studies, we do not examine ignorance and knowledge through the lens of intentionality or strategic interest. We instead adopt a distinct Deleuzian perspective on ignorance based on the idea of the ´will to ignorance´ as productive force that forms subjects and objects of ignorance. By observing the project management team over time, the article shows how it transforms a mundane task into an imaginative quest through the will to ignorance. The findings contribute not only empirically to the understanding of ignorance in organizations but also show the utility of adopting a non-intentional perspective in this kind of study.

Introduction

This article explores organization of ignorance in a public administration artificial intelligence (AI) project by examining the initial stage of the

project in the employment administration of a Danish municipality (Government of Denmark, 2019). The use of AI in public administration – especially for decision support – is a new phenomenon. Although practical experience, and therefore empirical knowledge is sparce, the field is awash with optimism about the contributions AI can make to management, innovation and efficiency in the field (see Sun & Medaglia (2019) for a review of the debate).

The article is an ethnographic study of the organization of ignorance in relation to algorithms and how subjects and objects of ignorance are created in this context, both of which are examined in that various studies have pointed out that ignorance not only involves ignorant subjects but also relates to objects of ignorance (Bucher, 2018; Burrell, 2016; Christin, 2020; Lange, 2016; Lange et al., 2019). Algorithms are paradigmatic objects of ignorance in that they are based on mysterious knowledge that creates black boxes, where nobody knows how they turn input into output (MacKenzie, 2005; Pasquale, 2015). Thus, organization of ignorance emerges in an organization that constructs knowledge about algorithms, for which there is no knowledge due to their very nature (Lange et al., 2019: 603). Since researchers (Pencheva et al., 2020; Sun & Medaglia, 2019) call for additional empirical data, we study the organization of ignorance in terms of algorithms as objects of ignorance as well as the subjects of ignorance associated with their development. Existing studies of organizational ignorance and algorithms (e.g. Lange, 2016; Lange et al., 2019) generally focus on the organizational setting in which algorithms are established as objects and where practices of organizational ignorance and knowledge are solidified, but we focus on examining the formation of structures of ignorance and knowledge in public administration, a hitherto unexplored area.

Our contribution is analytical insight into an uncharted empirical area involving organizational ignorance. Drawing on Deleuze's (1993; 2005; 2006) philosophical ideas, our analytical perspective on the organization of ignorance goes beyond the conceptualisation of organizational ignorance as performed strategically by individuals.

This perspective allows us to show empirically that managers construct a social organization of ignorance during workshops for the AI project that can only be actualised if they change their perspective on what the subjects of casework and employed people are capable of and willing to do, but also what the object of the AI project comprises. When confronted with reality, rather than admitting that they created an impossible world that can never be realised, they establish a fantasy world removed from the realities of technology, organization and law. The managers construe and change the notions of subjects and objects to refrain from obliterating their fabricated world, where the unemployed are expected to willingly share private social media data with the employment office, and non-Danish speakers are expected to adeptly use an app available in Danish only. The object changes from originally being conceived as algorithms and machine learning to become an app-based solution for caseworkers and the unemployed. From an analytical perspective, the illusion can only continue to exist if the managers persist in constructing the subjects and objects in the same way they did initially. Our point is not that the subjects are ignorant or do not have knowledge about objects of ignorance, i.e. in the form of algorithms, but that the subjects and objects of ignorance can only be actualised in their interrelationship, constituted by and in a social organization of ignorance. During workshops members of the project produce a social organization of ignorance in which the subjects of caseworkers, the unemployed and the object of the app-based solution must conform to a certain way of being for this organization to be actualized.

The remainder of the article is divided up as follows. First, we present the AI project in a Danish municipality that is under study. Second, after reviewing the literature on organizational ignorance, we introduce our Deleuzian approach to organizational ignorance and its analytical implications. Next, we describe the empirical methods used to collect and systemise our data. After that, we conduct an analysis of how the will to ignorance produces subjects and objects of ignorance. Finally, we discuss the creation of the social organization of ignorance.

The production of organization of ignorance

The literature on organizational ignorance has made a strong case for the necessity of not only managing knowledge but also managing ignorance (Zack, 1999; Roberts, 2013). In a recent article Bakken and Wiik emphasised that: 'We study "knowledge management" but rarely "ignorance management", although surely we manage our ignorance just as much as we manage our knowledge' (2018: 1110). From a knowledge management perspective, the unknown, in the form of uncertainty, complexity, ambiguity and equivocality should be alleviated (Zack, 1999). However, other authors argue that organizational ignorance should be studied on its own and not simple in negative opposition to knowledge as a lack of knowledge (Roberts, 2013: 216; Harvey et al., 2001; Mair et al., 2012; McGoey, 2007, 2012a; Roberts & Armitage, 2008; Schwarzkopf, 2019; Vitebsky, 1993). Instead, ignorance is seen as a positive product of knowledge (Bojesen, 2019; Franke, 2015; McGoey, 2007; 2012b; 2019; Schwarzkopf, 2019; Teasdale & Dey, 2019). This subjective perspective on organizational ignorance argues that intentional will can involve purposely being willing to ignore knowledge (Bakken & Wiik, 2017; McGoey, 2007; Schaefer, 2019). Subjects such as individual people and organizations can have an interest in decoupling, denying and being inattentive of knowledge (Essen et al., 2021).

Organizational ignorance studies often refer to Nietzsche's concept of will to ignorance (e.g. Bakken & Wiik, 2018; Davies & McGoey, 2012; McGoey, 2007; Schaefer, 2019), arguing that will to ignorance is not in opposition to knowledge but a refinement of knowledge (McGoey, 2007; Davies & McGoey, 2012) because it goes beyond the passive mode of not knowing to show that active mode of unknowing exists, i.e. an active refusal to know (Teasdale & Dey, 2019: 329; Bojesen, 2019). Hence, the difference between being active and passive is intentionality; we are active if we purposefully want to be ignorant (Teasdale & Dey, 2019: 329). Subjects such as individual people and organizations can consciously decide to be ignorant. The object of ignorance is a structure of non-knowledge that does not exist outside the subject's consciousness. This intentional form of ignorance has been coined strategic ignorance (McGoey, 2007) and wilful managerial ignorance (Schaefer, 2019). Various studies focus on the strategic or political aspect of ignorance to show that when individuals create ignorance they do so intentionally (Davies

& McGoey, 2012; Knudsen, 2011; McGoey, 2007; Proctor & Schiebinger, 2008). In this sense we are knowledgeable about being ignorant, or as McGoey bluntly states: 'Ignorance *is* knowledge' (2012a: 4). Hence, this take on ignorance resembles Socrates' understanding of wisdom as being knowledgeable about what one does not know (Chia & Holt, 2007; Davies & McGoey, 2012: 79; McGoey, 2012a: 3).

A growing number of studies focus on how algorithmic objects form structures of ignorance (Bucher, 2018; Burrell, 2016; Christin, 2020; Lange, 2016; Lange et al., 2019), pointing out that ignorance not only involves ignorant subjects but also relates to objects of ignorance. Lange et al. write that: 'ignorance is a defining feature of algorithmic practices, a challenge all practitioners are constantly reckoning with' (2019: 603). Algorithms are based on mysterious knowledge that creates black boxes, where we do not know how to transform our input into an output (MacKenzie, 2005; Pasquale, 2015). Algorithms produce black boxes for users and makers of algorithms who do not know exactly what the underlying process is for producing a specific decision or recommendation (Bucher, 2018; Burrell, 2016; Christin, 2020; Lange, 2016; Lange et al., 2019). It is argued that the opaque nature of algorithms forms structures of social organization of ignorance because algorithms are a common object of desire (Lange, 2016; Lange et al., 2019). The organization of ignorance as structures emerges based on how the members of the organization construct knowledge about algorithms that they do not possess knowledge about because of the nature of algorithms, where 'ignorance is a defining feature of algorithmic practice' (Lange et al., 2019: 603). Lange et al. (2019: 604) suggest studying the organization of ignorance from the theoretical perspective of actor network theory, and especially Serres (1982), to shift focus from the static structural being of ignorance to the dynamic relationship between ignorant subjects (e.g. employees and managers) and the structural objects they ignore (e.g. algorithms). From this perspective algorithms are quasi-objects that join the social organization together because everyone engaging with them, but as quasi-subjects of ignorance, they cannot grasp or control them. Hence, Lange et. (2019: 605) argue that the social organization resembles the dance between subjects and objects.

Deleuze and the will to ignorance

Answering the call to study the practice and social organization surrounding algorithms as objects of ignorance, we draw on Deleuze (1993; 2005; 2006). His philosophical ideas have been utilised to a great extent within organization studies (Kristensen et al., 2014; Linstead & Thanem, 2007) but have only played a minor role in the study of organizational ignorance to date, with the notable exception of McGoey (2007: 221), who briefly discusses Deleuze's philosophy in relation to Foucault.

The Deleuzian conceptualisation of organizational ignorance differs from the intentional understanding of organizational ignorance that aims to describe how subjects become ignorant (e.g., Davies & McGoey, 2012; Essén et al., 2022; McGoey, 2007; 2012a; 2012b; Schaefer, 2019) and the understanding of ignorance as structures of not knowing (e.g., Bucher, 2018; Burrell, 2016; Christin, 2020; Lange, 2016; Lange et al., 2019; MacKenzie, 2005; McGoey, 2012a; Pasquale, 2015). These perspectives focus on why subjects are ignorant and the creation of structural objects of not knowing but, based on a Deleuzian perspective, we suggest that the organization of ignorance can be understood as a pre-subjective will to ignorance that produces subject and objects.

Our proposal draws on Deleuze's understanding of Nietzsche's *The will to power* and his critique of intentionality (Deleuze, 2005; 2006; see also Robinson, 2010: 126). Deleuze writes:

> Will to power does not mean that the will wants power. Will to power does not imply any anthropomorphism in its origin, signification or essence. Will to power must be interpreted in a completely different way: power is the one that wills in the will. Power is the genetic and differential element in the will. This is why the will is essentially creative. This is also why power is never measured against representation: it is never represented, it is not even interpreted or evaluated, it is 'the one that' interprets, 'the one that' evaluates, 'the one that' wills. (2005: 85)

For Deleuze, will to power does not mean that someone wants power; it should not be interpreted as a theoretical concept about human agency or drivers (Hatab, 2019: 329). We draw on Deleuze's understanding of will to power to make sense of the organization of ignorance in which the subject is

not ignorant, and the structural objects do not create ignorance. Rather than suggesting that subjects and objects are ignorant, we suggest that there is a pre-subjective force of ignorance that creates subjects and objects as knowledgeable and wilful.

This understanding of organizational ignorance as pre-subjective will to ignorance has two important theoretical and methodological implications for our analysis. First, when we make sense of the organization of ignorance, we should pay attention to how the subjects are produced by will to ignorance, and how the organization of ignorance is constituted in and expressed by the subjects and objects. The will to ignorance exists not only inside the subjects and objects that it produces; it is always part of the ways of being a subject, or expressed by subjects (Katsafanas, 2012: 9). The subjects of ignorance are not being ignorant; they are the product of the organization of ignorance. Our analysis will show how managers change their interpretation during workshops of what knowledge caseworkers and the unemployed should possess and be willing to do. This implies that we will not describe what causes organizational ignorance as a matter of individual intentionality (organizational, group or person) in the form of, e.g. decoupling, denial, inattentiveness (Essén et al., 2022), wilful avoidance of discomforting information (Schaefer, 2019) or purposeful tactics (McGoey, 2007). Moreover, we will not discuss that the black boxes of algorithms are negative 'structures of not knowing' that can be of strategic value because they obscure valuable knowledge (Lange et al., 2019: 604). In this sense we do not wish to describe the depth of ignorance and how it is produced by something else besides ignorance, for instance intentionality in the form of decoupling, denial or inattentiveness, or structures of not knowing. Instead, our aim is to describe the surface of ignorance (subjects and objects) and how it is produced by the organization of ignorance that only exists inside its subjects and objects. The organization of ignorance forms a world that can be actualised in the subjects of caseworkers and the unemployed.

As there is no shared identity between the knower and the ignoramus when the subjective will is not produced by the subject itself, the methodological implication is that we cannot simply ask the mangers to explain their acts of ignorance. To explain how organizational ignorance is produced, we will

show how the will to ignorance produces subjects and objects that make it necessary for them to have a certain will or knowledge to make it possible to actualise the organization of ignorance.

For example, if unemployed people are not motivated and do not freely want to share private social media data with the local public employment office, the app-based solution cannot work and the imaginary world that managers produced at workshops will not be actualised. To show how social organization of ignorance is created we will describe how the AI project's team members discursively talk about the expectations concerning what the caseworkers and unemployed people should be willing and able.

Second, the will to power implies that 'facts is precisely what there is not, only interpretations' (Nietzsche, 1968: 267). When we talk about organization of ignorance it should be understood as the managers various interpretations of the AI project in workshops. According to Hatab (2019: 343), Nietzsche's point is that 'there is simply no single, absolute or unconditional truth'. However, this does not simply imply that anything goes, or that the managers can say whatever they would like to about the AI project, the caseworkers or unemployed. Instead, the will to ignorance limits what can meaningfully be said about the objects and subjects. This limitation does occur in relation to what is true or false, but in relation to what can be expressed sensibly in relation to the subjects and objects they create.

One methodological implication is that we will do more than describe organizational ignorance as simply ignorance of truth in our analysis. There is no true knowledge behind ignorance. The subjects and objects of ignorance are not related to the (mis)representation of knowledge, but to the possible interpretations that can be ascribed to it. Hence, our analysis will describe the valuation upon which project members condition their reasoning in establishing a common point of view on the AI project. Which interpretation of the project do project participants believed to be more valuable than others? Our aim is not to secure knowledge by demarcating and pointing out ignorance, as we cannot do so by arguing what is true and false. Rather than studying knowledge we will focus on meaning and the valuation that can be located in the managers' expression of meaning.

Whereas knowledge is in opposition to ignorance and can be limited by ignorance, will to ignorance inherent in expressions of meaning is not. The more ignorant the managers become the more meaning they produce.

We analysis the surplus of meaning the managers express in the workshops and how these interpretations can be regarded as an organization of ignorance. As such, in accordance with Deleuze, the goal is to understand will to ignorance as the force in us that makes us *want to be* ignorant. This means that we are interested in the interpretative forces of ignorance that make us value something and consider other people's expression as meaningful. Hence, it is important to understand how ignorance is conditional and how it is constituted in subjects and objects (Deleuze, 2005: 1). Project members ask, for example: What kind of "knowledge" can machine learning create? To answer this question about the object, they ignore several possible constraints, like what is technologically possible to do with algorithms, the budget and legal issues. However, it is important to know how this is an expression of will to ignorance in and by the managers and how these expressions change the condition of the subjects and objects in the AI project.

Methods

Our research began in early 2020 when the AI project commenced, which means we have followed the project from its beginning and have had ongoing access to all material that the external consultants produced as part of their own data collection during the initial phase. This article is based on empirical data collected during the entire initial phase of the project (January - December 2020). For the initial phase of the project, the municipality had established a team comprising six managers from the municipal administration who were designated strategic decisionmakers, four of whom were high-level managers and two low-level who managed caseworkers directly. The workshops make up the main empirical foundation of our study. Guided by an external consulting firm, the project manager organized the initial phase, which comprised six workshops lasting two and a half hours each. In addition to the team, two external consultants and the project manager attended the workshops. Due to COVID-19 lockdowns, all

six workshops were held online, which we attended, but unlike other participants our cameras were not turned on.

Our primary research method is thus observational studies (Angrosino and Rosenberg, 2011). Since we were interested in documenting and interpreting the statements and actions of the workshop participants as curious observers without direct interference in their discussions, our approach was more classical observation rather than participant observation (Adler & Adler, 1994; Angrosino and Rosenberg, 2011). The pandemic gave us the opportunity to embrace a non-participatory observational technique to a remarkable degree. The online nature of the meetings allowed us to remove ourselves completely from involvement in the workshop and to collect data by seeing and listening without being seen and heard, though participants were informed that they were being observed by us. In an attempt to further minimise potential bias or behavioural influences that might result from engaging with the workshop team, our cameras and microphones were turned off and we did not record the workshops as per our agreement with the participants.

Since nothing was being recorded our note-taking techniques were crucial. It is typically recommended that notes be taken as observations are carried out, that they are detailed and that they separate descriptions from researcher assessments (Emerson et al., 1995). Inspired by Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008: 148) we operated with two distinct types of notes: descriptive and analytical. In the descriptive notes, we tried to record what took place and what was said with as much detail as possible, preferably using direct quotes. We noted the reactions of the participants, such as laughter and facial expressions. These notes on reactions were useful in our interpretations, for example when managers laughed at critical depictions of jobseekers and employees. In the analytical notes, we jotted down reflections in the moment and any incongruences in the descriptive notes, for example, noting when managers displayed awareness of the limitations due to administrative law and then ignored them in the next sentence. Two observers were at most workshops and independently observed and took notes. After each workshop, we compared notes and complied them into one set of observation notes. Quotes in the following from workshop notes have been translated from Danish by the authors. Written material such as project

descriptions, consultant reports, power point presentations and so forth in Danish have also been translated from Danish to English by the authors. The name of the municipality and the identity of the participants have been anonymized and given generic names in quotes where it is needed for readability. Likewise, material from the project when quoted is from internal documents and reports of the municipalities and the consultants – to preserve anonymity these are referenced in broad terms.

Analysis

The project we examine stems from Denmark's national AI policy, adopted in 2019 (Government of Denmark, 2019), which included signature projects designed to explicitly use experimentation to determine the benefits and challenges associated with public sector use of AI. The central government set the objectives of the projects, which primarily focused on creating knowledge through experimentation, rather than algorithms specifically developed to improve quality or capacity (Government of Denmark, 2019). The specific project we examine is entitled 'Artificial intelligence for targeted employment efforts', the goal of which was to develop a machine-learning algorithm to support caseworkers in making individualised decisions about employment efforts. The term employment efforts covers the activities and interventions that local authorities initiate to increase the chance that the unemployed find employment, for example by mandating participation in courses or by arranging internships. The municipality is legally obligated to tailor interventions to the individual jobseeker receiving unemployment benefits.

The aim of the following analysis, which is divided into three sections, is to show how the managers in the workshops establish a common understanding of the AI project and decide upon its content. First, we show how the managers shift the original purpose of the project. Second, we demonstrate how they reconceptualise the problem by blaming subjects – the caseworkers and the unemployed. Third, we show how the managers create a new object – AI – by shifting the purpose and blaming the employees. Finally, the concluding discussion reveals how these new understandings of subjects and objects are imaginary and not realisable.

Shifting the purpose

While observing the workshops, we soon realised that the lack of knowledge on algorithms in the project group left their purpose and content open to interpretation. Originally, the objective of the AI project was to develop a machine learning algorithm that could present data or predictions to caseworkers to support their decisions about employment-enhancing activities. Although the initial stage was designed to explore which needs caseworkers had that an algorithm could address, organizational ignorance guided the process toward a different goal: the creation of a comprehensive multi-modular app for the unemployed rather than caseworkers.

According to the project description, the goal was to develop a machine-learning algorithm to support and guide caseworkers in making individualised decisions about employment efforts:

> Phase 1 of "Targeted employment efforts through artificial intelligence" is a collaborative effort between the employment and social administration of the municipal government, the consultancy and the IT company. Together we will describe what an artificial intelligence algorithm must be able to do and how the practices of the case-workers and residents need to be developed to create effective and individualised solutions that aid individuals in finding the right job or education more quickly. (Internal municipal project report, October 2020)

At the first workshop, however, the external consultant alters the purpose of the project:

> The goal today is strategic framing and not solutions. We need to focus on which problems we or the AI must solve. AI is a means, but what should it solve? (Observation notes 2020)

By reframing the purpose from means to ends, he shifts it from gaining experience with AI by developing and testing a machine learning algorithm to problems currently unknown to the management team. Before the workshop, the AI project's purpose was relatively clearly decided upon but, by stating that AI is a means and not the purpose, the consultant turns the AI project into an undetermined entity with the potential to become anything. At this point, it is now up in the air what the AI project is because the consultant altered the intentional relationship between the content of

the AI project, a machine learning algorithm, and the aim of gaining AI experience.

The consultant then shows a PowerPoint presentation stating the project's problem

> Problem: It takes longer than necessary for today's employment efforts to help unemployed people get a job or education! (Power point presentation at workshop 2020)

The consultant simply is arguably ignorant of the original purpose of the AI project, but there is more than meets the eye. The consultant may appear to be simply restating the original purpose, but the real issue is the fundamental shift occurring in the purpose and objectives of the project. Recall that the original purpose was to experiment with machine learning based on a recognition of the underlying ignorance about the ability of machine learning algorithms to solve problems in the public sector. The tool is the basis for the question but the consultant begins by defining a much larger issue: How do we solve unnecessary unemployment? which is basically the current employment policy's mission statement. This starting point entails a much more expansive diagnosis and scope that go beyond a single-purpose algorithm; it now encompasses everything the organization does. As a result, the managers move towards a much more visionary and transformative project: the creation of an object to solve this fundamental problem for their organization, which the managers begin to refer to as the AI.

Blaming the subjects

Having established the problem to be solved, the discussion turns to the issue of unemployment, which the managers embrace, unanimously agreeing that the organization lacks knowledge in this regard. A manager describes the issue by asking: When, how and why do unemployed people find employment? The managers declare that they are ignorant and unable to answer these questions, even on a descriptive level. A manager named Alice explains:

> Every month an unemployment number is published but are we static, higher or lower? When we need to find an explanation of these statistics, we don't

> know why, for example there are so many unemployed graduates one month and then not the next. We simply don't know. It's fine that it takes some people a long time to find a job, if there's a reason for it. But we don't know that reason when we write our monthly process descriptions. (Observation notes 2020 notes)

To explain why the organization has not yet succeeded in solving the problem, the consultant presents a five-part causal hypothesis addressing solely caseworkers, who:

1. Find it difficult to identify factors that prevent people from getting a job because they vary from person to person.

2. Find it challenging to identify particularly relevant opportunities for individual people because gaining an overview of what will help each person is difficult.

3. Do not have the opportunity to apply a knowledge/evidence-based approach, which means they do not possess objective knowledge on what demonstrably helps people best.

4. Cannot propose initiatives they are unfamiliar with because their advice is based on their own experience.

5. Do not engage in knowledge sharing, preventing successful practices from being shared with their peers. (Power Point presentation at workshop 2020)

In the framework of the first workshop the external consultant thus shapes its initial phase by directing his causal hypotheses towards the inadequacies caseworkers experience. This displaces the focus from the problem to its causes or, more precisely, to what he claims are the causes in the organization. He moves the problem from managers claiming ignorance and powerlessness in terms of the social organization to what they control, reclaiming both knowledge and power. This requires the managers to ignore their earlier claims of ignorance about the causes of unemployment and to accept the consultant's assessment, which pushes the project in a new direction, where the caseworkers' current knowledge and motives are problematic and must change.

Empowered, the managers describe the numerous faults and inadequacies that challenge the ability of their staff to help people get a job. For example,

they do not work in a sufficiently evidence-or data-based manner. While discussing the reasons preventing a reduction in unemployment, a manager named Eva also focuses on the staff:

> It would be nice if the staff would not just do what they do, without understanding why they do it. It would be nice if they didn't do what they do, just because it's the usual way to do it.
>
> Jack: Is it because the caseworkers thinking rigidly and are unable to think creatively? Or is it because they lack the opportunity? Maybe people do not prepare for meetings because they feel that don't get any advice from the employment office. (Observation notes 2020)

Based on interviews with staff, the consultant presents an illustration of what happens when jobseekers engage with the local public employment office. He explains that staff always employ the same initiatives and interventions. Several statements by managers indicate that a lack of creativity among staff is a challenge.

> Mia: We're trained to believe that the issue is only that people lack a job. That shapes us. But we don't have much space to be creative. We don't have the freedom to be creative [...] You have to be very professional. That's a precondition for being creative. You must have knowledge about what works. If you feel confident professionally, then you can be creative.
>
> Alice: If I had to have creative employees that thrive by being creative, then I would have to recruit different employees. Some people thrive within set parameters because then they are not the ones who are responsible. So, we have to be conscious about the staff we hire. They weren't hired to be creative. It's not certain that the people we have today can meet this goal. (Observation notes 2020)

Based on the managers assessment, one of the causes of ongoing unnecessary unemployment lies within the employees and their lack of creativity, professionalism and knowledge.

Employment office staff, however, are not solely responsible for the lack of employment; jobseekers also play a large role. The managers, who describe them as irresponsible and fundamentally inactive, state that they do not sufficiently prepare for meetings and are generally unable to find employment. By way of illustration, the consultant recounts an employee's story about an unemployed individual with a bachelor's degree in sports

management who wanted to work as a manager for a professional bicycling team, which is why he did not apply for anything else, which caused laughter among the workshop participants. While the managers laugh, the consultant emphasises the importance of caseworkers keeping their focus on the individual's true needs. He explains that the people might think that they need additional education or new skills. But perhaps they need to learn to get up in the morning, learn to hold down a job or go to the gym. According to the consultant the moral of the story is that people do not know what stops them from getting a job or what their true needs are. Overall, the inability to succeed in finding employment is due to the failings of both the unemployed and employment office staff.

Thus, the problem is redefined again. It is not unemployment as such that is the challenge; it is the employment office staff and the unemployed. The problem is no longer a lack of knowledge but problematic subjects, redefining the purpose of the AI, which is now to compensate for the inadequacies of the subjects.

Creating the object

At the second-to-last workshop the consultant presents his recommendation on what the AI should encompass. What started as a project to test the use of predictive algorithms has now evolved into something else:

> We conceptualise the AI as an app that, 1) requests access to people's Facebook and social media; 2) contains a survey with 150 questions; and 3) provides suggestions for three job postings per day. (Observation notes 2020)

The consultant continues by describing his vision in more detail:

> We conceptualise it as a kind of job Tinder. The AI looks at a resume and makes standardised recommendations for users, for example they watch a video on resumes, or points out that their name is misspelled on their CV. We will also include gamification. It could also have questions like: What is the ideal salary you dream of having? How much leisure time do you dream of having? People will receive a few questions per day and a graph charting how active they have been. This allows us to make it attractive for them. (…) It's a tool people can use. They provide data for the AI, but they can't stop themselves from using it because it's such a good app. Like Google Maps. (…) And the AI will also keep an eye on whether people apply for enough jobs in accordance with the agreements [with the employment office]. The AI will

> also provide caseworkers with an overview over the individual's situation. (Observation notes 2020)

This presentation sparks a creative, animated discussion about the app's features that also creates a relationship between the object they discuss (the AI/app) and the subjects that relate to it (caseworkers and the unemployed). This relationship also leads them to indirectly articulate new subjects. A manager named George, for instance, mentions that many unemployed people are not motivated, prompting him to asks whether the AI can incorporate a coaching feature? The consultant reassures George that this is definitely a possibility. Additional discussion on how a coaching feature would work is not touched upon at all.

When discussing the topic of how the unemployed lack networks, the issue is raised of whether they are unable or unwilling to activate their network in their job search. On this basis, it is argued that the AI requires access to people's Facebook profiles to activate a network they are unable or unwilling to activate. Mia comes up with the idea that, in addition to the extraction of data, the AI could also include a network creation feature, similar to a mentor programme. The consultant, who is accommodating, reassures the managers that the AI can also include this feature and makes a comparison to Alcoholics Anonymous, where former alcoholics act as mentors in the programme. In the same vein, several managers express concern about the ability of illiterate users to use a text-based app. It is claimed that the AI can cope with this by using educational videos on searching for a job and writing a CV. Adding to the discussion, Eva suggests adding a text-to-speech feature. The organisational will to ignorance leads to acceptance and approval of the solutions without anyone raising the incongruency between illiteracy and developing the skills to produce a well-written CV composition – how exactly will a text-to-speech feature or an educational video on CVs solve this issue? Eva also suggests adding a location service to the app to track people's movements in daily life to alert them if they are in proximity of a company with a relevant job available. This idea is met with approval, the consultant again reassuringly saying it is possible. Alice requests a feature capable of screening the national and regional job market for spikes in demand, as was the case when more sanitary workers during the corona crisis. Reassuring as ever, the consultant explains that the data-based nature

of the AI means that this is already a feature, adding that the AI is also able to organise meetings and agendas based on people's profiles. The AI will include qualitative discussion frameworks that suggests topics for meetings between consultants and jobseekers. Finally, the consultant suggests that the AI should analyse people's personalities to make caseworkers aware of any personality-based barriers to employment, allowing interventions to be more suitably tailored.

At this point the sky is the limit in terms of what the AI can solve, not only can it compensate for staff and user inadequacies but also completely change their subjectivities. This impressing potential arises because the AI is more than just a machine learning algorithm. The consultant explains:

> Some of it will just be a system and some of it will be advanced AI. So, it's a system plus AI. The modules will constantly interact with the system, which means caseworkers only need to do two things: they need to add humanity and they need to see the possibilities. The primary function is no longer to ensure that people live up to their legal obligations. The control feature thus becomes superfluous. The AI takes care of that and notifies caseworkers. Consequently, caseworkers can handle difficult, personal and sensitive conversations. For example, suggesting that maybe someone needs to go to the gym – all the difficult stuff. (Observation notes 2020)

Shared organisational ignorance permits the AI to perform all these feats. When surveillance and disciplining are required, the AI steps in. When motivation is needed, it motivates. The AI is regarding people's personalities, needs, past, dreams and their location in space any time. Omniscient, the AI tracks the job market, education system, financial cycles and the intricacies of the law. Carrying out virtually all known employee tasks, the AI now handles what were formerly ostensibly the realm of the caseworkers, leaving them to perform vague, abstract functions, such as adding humanity and seeing the possibilities, whatever that may mean.

At the end of the initial phase, the AI app comprised five distinct modules for the unemployed.

1. *Employment match module*: sends a list of job matches to the unemployed, while an underlying machine learning system collects data to improve the quality of the matches.

2. *Barrier module*: focuses on data to identify specific employment barriers and provides analyses to allow caseworkers to better tailor the emphasis of meetings, as well as schedule meetings based on individual needs.

3. *Learning module*: provides relevant information and knowledge to aid unemployed people in their job search, e.g. video tutorials on writing a CVs and an interview chatbot.

4. *Duty module*: monitors, tracks and provides information about the eligibility requirements for unemployment benefits, e.g. applying for a certain number of jobs within a specific timeframe.

5. *Network module*: links the app to social media platforms, e.g. Facebook and LinkedIn, to enable personalised messaging about job-related activities among contacts to help motivate and provide information, just as social media data is used to train the AI to better customise information.

When the consultant presents the AI at the end of the initial phase, the managers are highly enthusiastic:

> Jack: Two of those, please, preferably tomorrow. And I'm wondering what caseworkers of the future function will do?
>
> Eva: If it's as amazing as it sounds, it will really be a branding opportunity for our employment office.
>
> Alice: It's a wonderful new world!
>
> George: How far should we go? As far as possible! (Observation notes 2020)

Thus, at the end of the process, the AI, now separated from mere machine learning algorithms to be tested for some practical purpose, has become an almost universal problem-solving machine for managers at the local public employment office. No wonder they embrace it so enthusiastically.

Concluding discussion: Creation of the organization of ignorance

The findings of the article are two-pronged. First, in accordance with Deleuze, we clarified and demonstrated the utility of a non-intentional perspective on ignorance in relation to algorithms. Second, we explored the process through which the AI project created possible new understandings of

the object of the project and the subjects who are expected to use the app-based solution.

In clarifying our perspective, we emphasise that it does not reject the other perspectives but makes it possible to analyse and describe a different form of organizational ignorance. Our analysis shows how managers discursively rearrange the conceptualisation of the subjects and object in an AI project. We have illustrated that organizational ignorance can be conceptualised non-intentionally by invoking Deleuze's philosophical ideas. From a Deleuzian perspective, will to ignorance is not intentional but rather produces subjects and objects of ignorance, an idea that expands on Lange et al.'s (2019) suggestion that organizational ignorance is a social production by explaining how this production takes form in subjects and objects. They describe organizational ignorance as the lively, interchanging relationship between the objects of algorithms and subjects of day traders. In their perspective organizational ignorance is understood as a relationship between a black box object of algorithms and non-knowing subjects, who engage in a dynamic dance where who subjects and objects can be discussed, not to mention who is in control. Lange et al. (2019: 607) argue that there are four types of relationships between subjects and objects, or what they call algorithmic personifications. However, rather than focusing on the actual relationship between subjects and objects, we proposed that it is possible to study organizational ignorance in relation to the pre-subjective organization that occurs, as well as how this is actualised in subjects and objects. Hence, our point is not to examine how the meaning of the will and knowledge of subjects and objects is expressed. As such, there is no direct bodily or conscious relationship between subjects and objects, only the one that exists because of the organization of ignorance. As argued, ignorance encompasses not only the refinement of knowledge, but also the production of subjectivity.

Unlike Lange et al.'s objects of ignorance or algorithmic personifications, our object of ignorance exists only within this organization of ignorance because, in our case, there are no subjects who have a direct relationship with the object; they are not embodied because neither subjects nor objects exist. By studying algorithms that do not yet exist, we examine the will to create them and thus the production of subjects and objects, which the

analytical findings reflect. The organisation of ignorance at the workshops created an AI solution capable of achieving what the local public employment office has never been able to do: reduce and perhaps even eliminate unnecessary unemployment. Data-driven and able to scan vast amounts of data, the AI can analyse the unemployed people's personalities and understand their needs. The process imagined a new subjective definition of the unemployed: compliant, motivated and skilled, not to mention able to read and write unhindered in Danish, in possession of a well-developed social network, active at the gym and proactive in their job search. Likewise, an empathetic, creative and data-driven caseworker is imagined who add that special human touch that eludes machines. Caseworkers, able to identify opportunities invisible to jobseekers and the AI, are experts at handling tough conversations and can motivate people to work out if they need to lose weight.

But how does this imagined AI relate to the potential and limitations of machine learning? The original purpose of the whole project was to investigate this, but the process led somewhere else. Rather than clarifying the core issue, the app represents a much larger endeavour beyond the scope of simply developing a single predictive algorithm (Kirkegaard et al., 2021). Although the app includes predictive algorithms, the project does not examine how they work. It presupposes that the issues the project was supposed to investigate were solved but also that the AI knows things about the world and can share its knowledge.

But what kind of knowledge can machine learning create? Inherently opaque, it dispenses with the need for human understanding to reach conclusions. As a result, machines do not create knowledge to act; they abolish the need for knowledge to act. In other words, machine learning algorithms do not know anything. Rather than creating knowledge, they require the embracing of ignorance. Furthermore, during the workshops, various concrete technical and logistical issues were not addressed, e.g., what developing machine learning algorithms requires. Algorithms can only be developed if relevant data exists because any machine learning-based model is limited by the availability of data. Does a dataset even exist that would allow algorithms to predict demand for labour before jobs are even posted? Developing this kind of model and making sure it is functional and

can be maintained in the long run requires the developer, or whoever will maintain it, to have the expertise and a commitment that goes beyond the one-off development of the model. These issues were put off at the workshops, the question of how and where machine learning algorithms can become an integral part of a more focused employment effort is ignored. Since these issues are ignored, the AI is a phantasm that cannot be actualised.

On the one hand, the project's development can be seen as simply resulting from a lack of knowledge among project members. However, on the other, this interpretation can only explain the reason why they did not develop a machine learning algorithm, which was the original objective. Our analysis does not explain why this happens, but rather attempts to show what happened and how this is a product of the organization of ignorance. The lack of knowledge about algorithms allows the workshop participants to imagine that all their dreams and fantasies can be fulfilled. Anything is possible. The participants were asked to dream big. In this sense ignorance represented not only a lack of knowledge but also the production of knowledge about the AI they dreamed of.

The workshop team created a fantastical, multi-modular app for unemployed people, but this is meaningless if the managers cannot transform the subjectivity of their staff and the unemployed. While discussing the AI the workshop team simultaneously created and formed new subjectivities about their staff and the unemployed, endowing them the ability and willingness to use the app, e.g. the latter sharing all personal data on Facebook with the employment office, and the former allowing their professional judgement to be based on data from the app.

As a result, both the object (the AI) and the subjects (caseworkers and unemployed people) are equipped with a willingness to engage, new knowledge and abilities. Like the AI, these caseworkers and employees are a figment of the imagination and stand in opposition to the picture of lazy, stupid and unrealistic jobseekers and uncreative, ignorant caseworkers who represent the basis for the conceptualisation of the AI. During the initial phase of the AI project, a particular organization of ignorance is formed in which the creation of staff and unemployed subjects are made possible in

relation to the creation of the AI object and vice versa. Outside this organization of ignorance, the AI object is de facto technically impossible, the subjects apparently equally so.

references

Adler, P.A. and P. Adler (1994) 'Observational techniques', in N.K. Denzin and Y.S. Lincoln (eds.) *Handbook of qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

Angrosino, M.l. and J. Rosenberg (2011) 'Observations on observation', in N.K. Denzin and Y.S. Lincoln (eds.) *Handbook on qualitative research*, Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

Bakken, T. and E.L. Wiik (2018) 'Ignorance and organization studies', *Organization Studies*, 39(8): 1109-1120.

Bojesen, E. (2019) 'Positive ignorance: Unknowing as a tool for education and educational research', *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 53(2): 394-406.

Bucher, T. (2018) *If ... then: Algorithmic power and politics*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Burrell, J. (2016) 'How the machine 'thinks': Understanding opacity in machine learning algorithms', *Big Data & Society*, 3(1): 1-12.

Chia, R. and R. Holt (2007) 'Wisdom as learned ignorance: Integrating east-west perspectives', in E. Kessler and J. Bailey (eds.) *Handbook of organizational and managerial wisdom*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

Christin, A. (2020) 'The ethnographer and the algorithm: Beyond the black box', *Theory and Society*, 49(5): 897-918.

Davies, W. and L. McGoey (2012) 'Rationalities of ignorance: On financial crisis and the ambivalence of neo-liberal epistemology', *Economy and Society,* 41(1): 64-83.

Deleuze, G. (1993) *The fold: Leibniz and the baroque*, Trans. T. Conley. London: The Athlone Press.

Deleuze, G. (2005) *Nietzsche and philosophy*. Trans. by H. Tomlinson. London: The Athlone Press.

Deleuze, G. (2006) *Foucault*. Trans. Sean Hand. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Emerson, R., R.I. Fretz and L.L. Shaw (1995) *Writing ethnographic fieldnotes*. University of Chicago Press.

Eriksson, P. and A. Kovalainen (2008) *Qualitative methods in business research*. SAGE Publications.

Essén, A., M. Knudsen and M. Alvesson (2022) 'Explaining ignoring – Working with information that nobody uses', *Organization Studies*, 43(5): 725-747.

Franke, W. (2015) 'Learned ignorance: The apophatic tradition of cultivating the virtue of unknowing', in M. Gross and L. McGoey (eds.) *Routledge international handbook of ignorance studies*. London: Taylor & Francis Group.

Government of Denmark (2019) *National strategi for kunstig intelligens*. Ministry of Finance and Ministry of Industry, Business and Financial Affairs.

Harvey, M.G., M.M. Novicevic, M.R. Buckley and G.R. Ferris (2001) 'A historic perspective on organizational ignorance', *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, 16(6): 449-468.

Hatab, L. J. (2019) 'The will to power', in T. Stern (ed.) *The new Cambridge companion to Nietzsche (Cambridge companions to philosophy)*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Katsafanas, P. (2012) 'Nietzsche on agency and self-ignorance', *Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, 43(1): 5-17.

Kirkegaard, L., T. Lauridsen and S. Simonsen (2021) 'Forvaltning og digital beslutningsstøtte: En diskussion af kunstig intelligens og algoritmisk profilering i det kommunale beskæftigelsesområde', *Social Kritik*, 163: 98-109.

Knudsen, M. (2011) 'Forms of inattentiveness: The production of blindness in the development of a technology for the observation of quality in health services', *Organization Studies*, 32(7): 963-989.

Kristensen, A.R., B.M. Sørensen and T. Lopdrup-Hjort (2014) 'Gilles Deleuze (1925–1995)', in J. Helin, T. Hernes, D. Hjorth and R. Holt (eds.) *The Oxford handbook of process philosophy and organization studies.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Lange, A.C. (2016) 'Organizational ignorance: An ethnographic study of high-frequency trading', *Economy and Society*, 45(2): 230-250.

Lange, A.C., M. Lenglet, and R. Seyfert (2019) 'On studying algorithms ethnographically: Making sense of objects of ignorance', *Organization*, 26(4): 598-617.

Linstead S. and T. Thanem (2007) 'Multiplicity, virtuality and organization: The contribution of Gilles Deleuze', *Organization Studies*, 28(10): 1483-1501.

MacKenzie, D. (2005) 'Opening the black boxes of global finance', *Review of International Political Economy*, 12(4), 555-576.

Mair, J., A.H. Kelly and C. High (2012) 'Introduction: Making ignorance an ethnographic object', in C. High, A.H. Kelly and J. Mair (eds.) *The anthropology of ignorance: An ethnographic approach*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

McGoey, L. (2007) 'On the will to ignorance in bureaucracy', *Economy and Society*, 36(2): 212-235.

McGoey, L. (2012a) 'The logic of strategic ignorance', *The British Journal of Sociology*, 63(3): 533-576.

McGoey, L. (2012b) 'Strategic unknowns: Towards a sociology of ignorance', *Economy and Society*, 41(1): 1-16.

McGoey, L. (2019) *The unknowers: How strategic ignorance rules the world (Economic controversies)*. London: Zed Books Ltd.

Nietzsche, F. (1968) *The will to power*, Trans. W. Kaufman and R.J. Hollingdale. New York: Vintage Books.

Pasquale, F. (2015) *The black box society: The secret algorithms that control money and information*. Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press.

Pencheva, I., M. Esteve and S.J. Mikhaylov (2020) 'Big data and AI: A transformational shift for government: so, what next for research?', *Public Policy and Administration*, *35*(1): 24-44.

Proctor, R. and L.L. Schiebinger (eds.) (2008) *Agnotology: The making and unmaking of ignorance.* Stanford CA: Stanford University Press.

Robinson, K. (2010) 'Back to life: Deleuze, Whitehead and process', *Deleuze Studies,* 4(1): 120-133.

Roberts, J. (2013) 'Organizational ignorance: Towards a managerial perspective on the unknown', *Management Learning*, 44(3): 215-236.

Roberts, J. and J. Armitage (2008) 'The ignorance economy', *Prometheus*, 26(4): 335-354.

Schaefer, S.M. (2019) 'Wilful managerial ignorance, symbolic work and decoupling: A socio-phenomenological study of managing creativity', *Organization Studies*, 40(9): 1387-1407.

Schwarzkopf, S. (2019) 'Sacred excess: Organizational ignorance in an age of toxic data', *Organization Studies*, 41(2): 197-217.

Serres, M. (1982) *The parasite*, Trans. L.R. Schehr. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Sun, T.Q. and R. Medaglia (2019) 'Mapping the challenges of artificial intelligence in the public sector: Evidence from public healthcare', *Government Information Quarterly*, 36(2): 368-383.

Teasdale, S. and P. Dey (2019) 'Neoliberal governing through social enterprise: Exploring the neglected roles of deviance and ignorance in public value creation', *Public Administration*, 97(2): 325-338.

Vitebsky, P. (1993) 'Is death the same everywhere? Contexts of knowing and doubting', in M. Hobart (ed.) *An anthropological critique of development: The growth of ignorance*. London: Routledge.

Zack, M.H. (1999) 'Managing organizational ignorance´, *Knowledge Directions*, 1, Summer: 36-49.

the authors

Line Kirkegaard, Ph.D. is head of administration at TUBA.
Email: lik@tuba.dk

Anders Raastrup Kristensen, Ph.D. is an associate professor at Copenhagen University and external lecturer at CBS.

Email: ark.mpp@cbs.dk

Tomas Skov Lauridsen, Ph.D. is an external lecturer at Roskilde University.
Email: tomas@ruc.dk

ephemera
theory & politics in organization

© the author(s) 2023
ISSN 1473-2866 (Online)
www.ephemerajournal.org
volume 23(1)

You can't report what you don't know: Methodological considerations of an ethnographer navigating organizational secrecy

Elise Lobbedez

Introduction

This note reflects on the methodological challenges I faced as an ethnographer navigating organizational secrecy, the conscious suppression of knowledge through practices related to keeping oneself or keeping others ignorant, during my dissertation fieldwork on the French yellow vest movement. In the course of this ethnographic study, I got involved with highly committed people willing to engage in radical actions and high risk activism (McAdam, 1986), ranging from civil disobedience and illicit occupations to collective action based on black bloc tactics (Dupuis-Déri, 2003; Juris, 2005). These activities usually required some degree of clandestinity and organizing practices kept under the radar; groups within the movement often worked hard at keeping certain things invisible and untraceable. As a consequence, the yellow vest organizational attempts frequently supposed concealment of knowledge from external actors and between activists' groups themselves, hence creating pockets of ignorance within the movement.

Throughout data collection, I held multiple positions as participant observer, being successively and sometimes even simultaneously in the shoes of those who ignore and are not aware of it (being ignorant), those who accept to ignore something for strategic purposes (being consciously ignorant), those who deliberately look away and ignore (avoiding knowledge), before ultimately joining the intimate circle(s) of those who know and suppress knowledge to others (producing secrecy). Doing fieldwork in the context of organizational secrecy and high risk activism urged me to consider the specific forms that ignorance could take other than mere lack of knowledge, and more specifically to reflect on how the ways people produced secrecies impacted the research process. As I discovered during this study, the quest for knowledge is rarely straightforward; accessing information networks requires constant trade-offs on the field and asks for the researcher to accept stepping into the unknown. In fact, I regularly had to weigh up the pros and cons of knowing versus not knowing to evaluate the potential consequences for my research trajectory, my position on the field, the production of the ethnographic account but also my own personal life.

In this essay, I therefore discuss the oscillation I experienced during my fieldwork between becoming a knowledgeable agent and accepting to remain in the dark. More specifically**,** I show that being an ethnographer in contexts of organizational secrecies often led to uncomfortable research positions which involved accepting uncertainty and acting in spite of the lack of knowledge, as well as evaluating whether to deliberately ignore and avoid knowledge. Through this note, I wish to contribute to the ongoing conversations in the field of ignorance studies by showing the different nuances between knowing and not-knowing and by addressing potential methodological implications of studying how actors work to keep things invisible.

Secrecy as an organizing principle for direct collective action

The yellow vest movement coalesced in November 2018 after the French government of Emmanuel Macron announced a taxation on individual fuel consumption. The mobilization quickly made the headlines in the media,

especially since the movement was pictured as unexpected and unpredictable, and because the protests surprised the audience due to the high level of violence. I initiated my dissertation fieldwork in January 2019, a couple of months after the beginning of the movement, and became interested in actors' efforts to organize, especially in context of violent confrontations. Part of this interest led me to observe the roles, information and processes actors worked hard to keep under the radar, especially from State institutions. Since they were facing multiple arrests and trials in the context of the mobilization, many yellow vests feared being under surveillance by the police and internal State intelligence agencies. Consequently, an overall atmosphere of distrust and suspicion reigned in particular with regard to any newcomers and strangers. Activists would for instance stop talking or pretend not to know certain information when they suspected individuals to be police informers.

From an organizational standpoint, I soon noticed that such fear shaped the movement's dynamics and collective action. With regard to high risk activism and some specific direct actions, secrecy became part of the organizing principles to protect actors from outsiders and from arrests as well as to surprise the police; activists also shared a common motto: 'You can't report to the police or leak information you don't know'. As a consequence, small groups of people self-organized collective gatherings called 'operations', for which members of the movement did not always know contextual information such as the specific target, the location, the precise date, or the number of participants. These operations were usually illegal and ranged from occupying major logistic platforms or opening tolls to let cars pass for free to illegally fly-posting on State buildings for shaming purposes. Because these actions relied on self-organization, the few organizers withholding strategic details typically changed from one operation to another. Their 'fall' did not necessarily imply to put at risk the sustaining of all future actions. Besides, this structuration helped avoiding leaks before the action and protected other activists in case of arrests since they did not know any substantial information.

During these episodes, the yellow vests hence navigated an in-between of knowledge and none-knowledge in that they agreed to come and organized

among themselves, but discovered the plan on D-day, as explained in the following interview excerpt:

> So there is an action with people I barely know (…) it's at night, you meet them on a parking lot a bit shady, so that there aren't too many cameras (…) you haven't had time to trust these people yet, you go, you get in the car (…), arrive on a round-about, and (…) it's chaos. (…) You are not clear about what will happen, what is the plan, stuff like 'Let's do this, this is the target, we do this from that time to that time, there are x number of groups' (…) You have no idea about this and people give you very little explanations. (…) Then the cops show up, and it doesn't really help to ease the situation. (Interview excerpt)

This quote shows that protesters also acted while not always being able to clearly evaluate the risks at stake and may find themselves in uncomfortable positions due to their lack of knowledge of the overall strategic details. Additionally, after a few months, I discovered the existence of other informal sub-groups based on shared tactics or projects, and willing to remain secret from the other members of the movement. This was particularly the case for groups inclined to engage in violent protest tactics and sabotages.

As a researcher interested in social movement organizing and what was happening 'behind the scene' (Katz, 1997: 400) of public discourses, these organizational practices resulting from secrecy appeared particularly central to grasp a more complete picture of the yellow vest mobilization. I therefore started to navigate these episodes of revelation and concealment and noticed the important variations in ways of remaining ignorant. Such enterprise however turned out to be challenging and raised multiple dilemmas in the course of the fieldwork, especially as I tried to situate myself with regard to pockets of ignorance. In the two next sections of this note, I will come back more in-depth on some of these dilemmas and show the difficulties of building knowledge while taking into account actors' secrecies.

Stepping into the unknown

I entered the yellow vest movement by going to public events mainly based on calls launched on Facebook pages, among which assemblies and week-

end street protests. As for many ethnographers studying intense political commitment (Thome, 1979; Mitchell, 1993; Deschner and Dorion, 2020), my presence was first often perceived as suspicious or threatening (was I a spy for the government?), especially as I took notes during meetings which contrasted with the overall movement oral culture. Over months of assemblies, meetings and collective protests, members of the movement yet started to know me more personally and I became trusted enough to be offered to join small groups of people organizing protests actions and to be invited to participate to operations such as the ones mentioned in the previous section. This new access, although valuable for research, raised many questionings as to whether I should seize these opportunities to gain additional knowledge in spite of the high uncertainty and lack of predictability of such events. I encountered in particular multiple dilemmas, some of which were probably shared by other field actors: How could I evaluate the risks for myself and for others while being ignorant of so many details? What was the probability of getting arrested? Could I still have access to the organizing groups if I didn't show? Will the actors continue trusting me if I kept refusing to go?

I initially declined multiple invitations to join when I felt I lacked what I considered as sufficient information although I knew it would restrain data collection. While I really wanted to access these events, the blurriness around these actions refrained me to go. After a few months, I ultimately went to a toll opening operation – opening tolls for free on the highway. I knew from the start that this type of actions was a well-established practice in the yellow vest movement but never had joined one before although several opportunities had already arisen. To get there, we gathered with about 30 yellow vests at 8 AM and drove about 40 minutes before reaching the second meeting point with other local groups. We then drove an additional 10 minutes, parked on the side of a regional road, and walked across the woods. By the time we arrived at the toll, the police had already heard about the action and was prepared to intervene.

Multiple factors influenced my decision and encouraged me to go. Firstly, while I did not know the specific location and duration, I was beforehand well acquainted with the people who I would get in the car with, was informed that the target would be a toll and knew that some actors were

already experienced with this type of direct action. Secondly, I had gained some tacit knowledge of protests and police confrontations, as it happened before in the fieldwork. As a result, the situation was also easier to anticipate and forecast. Lastly, I was familiar with my rights in case of a detention, told my family, friends and advisor about the action and was given by field actors the contact of a potential lawyer if needed as recommended as part of the good practices by other activists. Being invited to join such actions obviously showed that I became trustworthy for actors. I however realized that such trust needed to be mutual in order to be able to engage in participant observation of these events.

In that sense, my experience was similar to what Thomes called 'fieldwork as controlled adventure' (Thome, 1979: 78), as I wished to follow an academic career and did not want to jeopardize this option (although I regularly wondered if being arrested was part of the fieldwork experience since it was something relatively common for protesters). Yet, it would have been impossible to study the practices underlying organizational secrecy without taking some degree of risks and acting in spite of uncertainty. I hence had to deal with knowing that I did not know and deliberately accept it to access the field and continue collecting data. Managing this aspect of the fieldwork mostly involved acting based on gut feeling, intuitions and sometimes acceptance of missed opportunities to build knowledge. While I know I made my decisions trying to evaluate consequences at best at the time, I still wonder retrospectively if I should have gone to some of the main occasions I declined and accepted to step into the unknown earlier during the field. I sometimes even regret I didn't go regardless of my (often valid) concerns at the time.

The consequences of becoming knowledgeable

Over the course of the fieldwork, I became more and more knowledgeable of the illegal dimension of the movement, especially as I met online by coincidence (at least, to my knowledge) a member of an emergent sub-group organizing around violent or legally reprehensible repertoires of actions. For a couple of months, he contacted me through a fake Facebook profile, refused to reveal his identity, before I finally offered to meet face-to-face

over coffee. This first encounter allowed me to clearly state my position as a researcher but also to progressively gain access to the overall group. In fact, I even got invited to one of the organizing meeting by the end of this first encounter, but I turned it down. The meeting was indeed taking place at the personal house of the informant and difficult to access in case of emergency. Besides, I had heard depreciative rumors about this group before – lack of mutual trust, here again – and been warned by another yellow vest 'not to dig further'.

After this episode, I restated at multiple occasions that I would really appreciate being invited to join their organizing meetings as it would be highly valuable for my research but first that I would have liked to know some of the other members. It took about 6 months before I actually met with other people from this sub-group. I was sometimes told particular information but most of the time kept in the dark regarding others. For sensitive conversations, the key informant started to ask me to 'trade' personal information in exchange of details on their actions or on the way they operated. As I became able to make the connections between the different individuals of the group, a clear warning was then made to me about the potential consequences of becoming part of those who know, as the below excerpt highlights:

> If you really want to know everything, everything about what we do, etc., there will be no direct note, no recording, minimal traces, so that we don't get into deep shit … you say you can keep your info secret, but the government doesn't give a shit if you are a researcher or whatever … When they want something, they take it. For all these reasons, I have to tell you that if one day, you put us at risk, there will be repercussions (…) Your life will turn into a real nightmare (…) and if anything happens, you will have to live with the consequences. So, I want you to really know what you are getting into. (Excerpt from informal conversation on online chat)

The potential impact of one's study must been taken into account in any research process and 'consequences need to be thought out and guided during the research process rather than only after the report is written' (Lofland and Lofland, 1984: 155). The above story shows that this becomes even more true when navigating contexts of organizational secrecy. When actors deliberately engage in suppressing knowledge, a study may potentially reveal or make known some aspects that actors worked hard to

keep invisible. For ethnographies, researchers may accidentally provide hidden information or make a faux pas in informal everyday conversations, hence breaking organizational secrecy and putting at risks the research, actors, or even themselves.

For these reasons, at each step in this fieldwork process, I constantly weighted the potential value of information I would share and the ethical implications. What was I okay with knowing? Would I be considered as complicit for knowing or sharing specific information even though I had no idea what those information could even be? How could I protect myself and the actors? How did I have to act with other members of the movement who were kept in ignorance? What and how much did they know? As I put myself on the line, I regularly reflect on what type of information could be used against me. I for instance scrupulously avoided family topics or mentioning my life partner to keep them out of reach. This position supposed to regularly evaluate whether I chose to withhold knowledge (and kept others' ignorant) and to avoid knowledge or not, hence looking away to keep myself ignorant.

As a consequence, I faced multiple uncomfortable situations as I interacted with the other members of the movement who were kept in ignorance. I often had to refuse answering their questions, to avoid specific topics or to pretend to ignore some information, and consequently withholding knowledge myself. In such context, I often called on the 'values of research' which prohibited me from telling more, especially in order to respect anonymity and the trust given by the actors. From the anonymity standpoint, some actors kept telling me that I was 'dangerous' because I knew and documented everything. So in order to maintain trust, I offered one informant to try to hack my computer to see if he could access my documents and ergo make sure they were inaccessible for the government. I also provided fieldnotes excerpts to actors so that they could evaluate for themselves if my notes, which made visible things that were supposed to remain invisible, could actually harm them. Interestingly, I ended up sharing a lot with them on how I was concretely doing qualitative studies, the values behind my work, the way I led fieldwork research, and more generally on how I experienced my job as a PhD student.

In sum, I always felt like a tightrope walker: telling or not telling, knowing or not knowing, going or not going**.** The position was often uncomfortable and required relentless reflectivity, especially as building knowledge was an ongoing negotiation with those controlling ignorance. I often feared that I could lose access at any point in time. Today, I still wonder when writing or presenting my research what can be disclosed and what should remain concealed.

Concluding remarks

With this note, I provided an account of field challenges resulting from collecting ethnographic data in the context of organizational secrecy. In particular, I described multiple practices carried out by actors to keep others ignorant and showed how it affected my research journey. On the one hand, the continuation of data collection depended on accepting to step into the unknown and consciously acting in spite of unpredictability; on the other, becoming knowledgeable opened up potential risks which needed to be assessed and called for choosing whether to ignore and conceal information or not. Through this testimony, I hence join current academic conversations in the field of ignorance studies by outlining some of the multiple practices people perform to keep others or oneself ignorant and by showing the nuances between knowing and not knowing. Specifically, I showed for instance in this essay that one can deliberately choose to ignore (and avoid knowledge) or can be aware of his or her ignorance and accept not to know. From a practical standpoint, carrying out this ethnographic project led me to consider how actors' efforts to keep secrets actually structure fieldwork and to reflect on the specific methodological arrangements that secretive settings entail. Secretive or guarded fields of investigation usually ask for developing multiple research strategies to reach out to actors and to reduce the perception of the researcher as a threat (Monahan and Fisher, 2015). Besides, full immersion in a social group over a long period of time may suppose that the ethnographer conceals knowledge in order to maintain his or her position and to protect oneself as well as others. During my ethnography on the yellow vests, such considerations regularly arose as I faced the possibility of gaining further access to the backstage of high risk

collective action, and often resulted in deciding to deliberately know less to ensure safety and avoid risks.

From a more political and societal perspective, navigating pockets of ignorance emerging from organizational secrecy also raised various ethical uncertainties. While ethical guidelines tend to encourage for transparency when engaging in fieldwork, I came to realize that these directives may not always be applicable and may even shape the type of knowledge being accessed and produced by researchers (Mitchell, 1993). Furthermore, addressing sensitive settings, such as deeply private matters, behaviors considered as deviant or stigmatized, or any relationship involving forms of domination, coercion or resistance (Lee and Renzetti, 1990) demands for increased vigilance with regard to knowledge production and disclosure, as research on such topics may have notable political and ethical consequences. Historically, the implementation of practices to keep others ignorant often constituted an extremely valuable resource in resisting authoritarian regimes (Scott, 1990; Martí and Fernández, 2013). The emergence of secret societies in the XVIIIth century for instance helped in producing spaces for freedom and deliberation while being protected from the State or from the Church (Koselleck, 2015).

Aware that these practices were an eminent variable in the political struggle and concerned about my potential betrayal of activists I ended up caring for (Ortiz Casillas, 2020), I continue experiencing moral dilemmas and tensions today as to what type of information I can show in my research presentations and papers. Although happening in an *a priori* singular setting, I believe that the methodological considerations discussed in this note are likely to take place in other settings and are probably shared by other ethnographers. In fact, every organization has its own share of secrecy (Costas and Grey, 2014, 2016; Ringel, 2019) and hidden practices (Scott, 2013, 2015), and 'it is probably possible for any topic, depending on context, to be a sensitive one.'(Lee and Renzetti, 1990: 512) For this reason, I hope this note will help extending methodological conversations in the field of ignorance studies, especially as pockets of ignorance may impact the overall process of knowledge production, from data collection to publication.

references

Costas, J. and C. Grey (2014) 'Bringing secrecy into the open: Towards a theorization of the social processes of organizational secrecy', *Organization Studies*, 35(10): 1423–1447.

Costas, J. and C. Grey (2016) *Secrecy at work: The hidden architecture of organizational life*. Stanford, California: Stanford Business Books, an imprint of Stanford University Press.

Deschner, C.J. and L. Dorion (2020) 'A feminist and decolonial perspective on passing the test in activist ethnography', *Journal of Organizational Ethnography*, 9(2): 205–222.

Dupuis-Déri, F. (2003) 'Black Blocs : bas les masques', *Mouvements*, 25(1): 74–80.

Juris, J.S. (2005) 'Violence performed and imagined: Militant action, the black bloc and the mass media in Genoa', *Critique of Anthropology*, 25(4): 413–432.

Katz, J. (1997) 'Ethnography's warrants', *Sociological Methods & Research*, 25(4): 391–423.

Koselleck, R. (2015) *Critique and crisis: Enlightenment and the pathogenesis of modern society*. Reprint. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press (Studies in contemporary German social thought).

Lee, R.M. and C.M. Renzetti (1990) 'The problems of researching sensitive topics: An overview and introduction', *American Behavioral Scientist*, 33(5): 510–528.

Lofland, J. and L.H. Lofland (1984) *Analyzing social settings: A guide to qualitative observation and analysis*. Belmont : California: Wadsworth Publishing Company.

Martí, I. and P. Fernández (2013) 'The institutional work of oppression and resistance: Learning from the Holocaust', *Organization Studies*, 34(8): 1195–1223.

McAdam, D. (1986) 'Recruitment to high-risk activism: The case of freedom summer', *American Journal of Sociology*, 92(1): 64–90.

Mitchell, R. (1993) *Secrecy and fieldwork*. 2455 Teller Road, Thousand Oaks California 91320 United States of America: SAGE Publications, Inc.

Monahan, T. and J.A. Fisher (2015) 'Strategies for obtaining access to secretive or guarded organizations', *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 44(6): 709–736.

Ortiz Casillas, S. (2020) 'Caring as an organizing principle: Reflections on ethnography of and as care', *Journal of Management Studies*,

Ringel, L. (2019) 'Unpacking the transparency-secrecy nexus: Frontstage and backstage behaviour in a political party', *Organization Studies*, 40(5): 705–723.

Scott, J.C. (1990) *Domination and the arts of resistance: Hidden transcripts*. New Haven: Yale University Pr.

Scott, C.R. (2013) *Anonymous agencies, backstreet businesses, and covert collectives: Rethinking organizations in the 21st century*. Stanford, California: Stanford Business Books, an imprint of Stanford University Press.

Scott, C.R. (2015) 'Bringing hidden organizations out of the shadows: Introduction to the special issue', *Management Communication Quarterly*, 29(4): 503–511.

Thome, B. (1979) 'Political activist as participant observer: Conflicts of commitment in a study of the draft resistance movement of the 1960's', *Symbolic Interaction*, 2(1): 73–88.

the author

Elise Lobbedez is a PhD candidate at emlyon business school and at Paris, Sciences et Lettres Research University, Paris-Dauphine University. She is affiliated with the research centers Organizations, Critical and Ethnographic Perspectives (OCE) and Dauphine Recherches en Management-MOST (DRM-MOST). Her dissertation builds on an ethnography of the French yellow vest movement to analyze how actors collectively resist the multiple expressions of organized violence. More broadly, her research interests include social movement organizing and collective action in violent settings, hidden organizing and secrecy and the craft of qualitative research.
Email: lobbedez@em-lyon.com

ephemera
theory & politics in organization

© the author(s) 2023
ISSN 1473-2866 (Online)
www.ephemerajournal.org
volume 23(1)

Seeing blindness: A combined psychodynamic and interactional approach to the study of ignoring

Christian Dyrlund Wåhlin-Jacobsen and Elisabeth Naima Mikkelsen

abstract

This note addresses how ignoring may be investigated as an interactional phenomenon. Ignoring-related practices can be stated to produce absences in the data rather than presences. Thus, their scrutiny poses challenges for analysts. We argue that inspiration can be found in Billig's work, which leverages a relational understanding of unconscious processes combined with the close attention to interactional details associated with the conversation analytical approach. We conceptualize the practices of ignoring through the psychodynamic concept of blindness to demonstrate the combined approach in an exemplary analysis of data obtained from an emergency call center.

Introduction

How can we examine that which is ignored? In this note, we investigate interactions in work settings to address this methodological challenge. Many types of work revolve around interactions, either within or across organizational boundaries. It is therefore relevant to academically focus on the role of ignoring in interaction and to determine its local or distal effects; for example, how it can sustain secrecy or ignorance (Otto et al., 2019). Several scholars have noted that psychodynamic theory can further our

understanding of ignoring, evincing potential means of blinding ourselves to unpleasant or threatening information by relegating it to the unconscious (de Klerk, 2017; Fotaki and Hyde, 2015; Gabriel, 1995). The psychodynamic perspective is, however, typically associated with the interpretation of the effects of hidden-from-view mechanisms. Conversely, conversation analysis is one of the most elaborate approaches to the study of social interactions and is typified by its stringent focus on directly observable phenomena. We combine these approaches, especially drawing on Billig's discursive psychological perspective and his notion that interaction has both 'expressive' and 'repressive' functions (1997, 2006). The amalgamation of a socially-oriented understanding of the unconscious with close attention to interactional details can serve to highlight such functions. We analyze audio-recorded data obtained from an emergency call center to exemplify our approach and demonstrate how call-takers may selectively extract and respond to aspects of caller utterances, thereby 'doing blindness.'

How do unconscious processes contribute to ignoring through blindness?

Ignoring-related practices are often conceptualized as *blindness* in the psychodynamic literature, in particular the loss of moral sight, or the 'temporary inability of a decision-maker to see the ethical dimension of a decision at stake' (Palazzo et al., 2012: 325). The psychoanalytical belief that the unconscious management of unwanted and painful emotions activates various psychological defense mechanisms (Freud, 1936) that may supersede rationality (de Klerk, 2017) forms the core of this contribution. From a psychodynamic perspective, blindness is never complete; threatening information is at least subconsciously registered to the extent that its threatening potential is recognized.[1] However, successfully deployed defense mechanisms prevent the surfacing of this information in conscious awareness while thwarting the realization that defense mechanisms are operating. In other words, defense mechanisms can cover their tracks. A 'social unconscious' (Weinberg, 2007) connects people in organizations

[1] This understanding of blindness is distinct from other understandings found in the ignorance literature (e.g., Knudsen, 2011).

through shared painful emotions associated with the primary task (Menzies, 1960). Social defenses that are evident in organizational structures and processes defend against such adverse collective feelings. Therefore, psychodynamic inquiry is predominantly interested in elucidating the unconscious dynamics behind frequent irrational actions and in illuminating how defense mechanisms can shape customary collective ways of engaging in work.

In organizations, blindness results from the unconscious management of painful emotions and is activated through a dual process. First, unrealistic institutional objectives can fuel blindness by projecting unconscious social demands into workers; for example, the claim that health care workers can prevent death or that the police can contain violence. Numerous public organizations undertake such impossible tasks and consequently serve as 'receptacle[s] for containing social anxieties' (Hoggett, 2006: 177). Second, social defense mechanisms prevent workers from gaining awareness about the impossible demands that they confront, thereby enabling blindness (Fotaki and Hyde, 2015). Defense mechanisms often manifest in *emotion mitigation* enacted primarily through emotional disengagement; for instance, people may use seemingly logical explanations to rationalize controversial behaviors (de Klerk, 2017) or project unwanted personal emotions or aspects onto others to uphold a desired self-definition (Klein, 1946). Projections mitigate emotions because they can strip others of their human qualities (Petriglieri and Stein, 2012), making them unworthy of attention and effort.

Different understandings exist regarding the ontology of unconscious processes. While medically inspired approaches tend to focus on the unconscious as operating 'within' people, relational approaches attend to the social dynamics through which unconscious processes manifest and address the interactional processes through which they are labeled (Mitchell and Aron, 1999; Streeck, 2008). Unconscious processes are viewed within the relational perspective as necessarily social because they must be articulated in talk or action to matter; they must manifest in interactions and be recognized, instead of remaining a 'mental entity' (Billig, 2006).

Studying unconscious processes in interactions

The conceptualization of ignoring-related practices as blindness entails giving the unconscious a place in scientific enterprises (Petriglieri and Petriglieri, 2020). However, the empirical identification of unconscious processes is not straightforward because such processes are not directly observable. Moreover, analysts could be seduced into subscribing to a defensive framing of a situation if defense mechanisms effectively naturalize their own effects. We contend in this study that our understanding of unconscious processes can be advanced through methods designed for close analysis of interaction, that is, by attending to 'what can be seen or heard' rather than 'leaning on fantasies about what lies behind' (Streeck, 2008: 187). Numerous pathways may be employed to combine psychodynamic sensibilities with close analysis of interaction. Hence, we will briefly discuss some perspectives, their theoretical differences, and their methodological implications.

Conversation analytic studies of psychotherapy denote one such approach. Peräkylä (2005, 2008) demonstrated the ways in which therapists introduce interpretations of unconscious processes and how emotions are shown and responded to. Such studies follow classic conversation analytic conventions to address how each turn of talk displays and enacts an understanding of the previous utterance and the ongoing activity. This 'next-turn proof procedure' is pivotal for the construction and maintenance of intersubjectivity by interlocutors. Moreover, tracking the relationships between individual utterances allows analyses that are firmly and demonstrably grounded in the data. However, concepts such as the unconscious are simultaneously treated as purely discursive phenomena and emotionality is addressed primarily for its communicative functions (Paoletti, 2012). Therefore, a narrow conversation analytic approach would remain agnostic about the role of unconscious processes in interactions.

On the contrary, Billig (2006) partially subscribes to and partially redefines psychodynamic concepts. Theoretically, Billig's investigation is grounded in the discursive psychological approach and its Wittgensteinian understanding of language as a set of tools intended to perform social actions. Hence, psychological concepts do not merely represent mental

phenomena; instead, we should strive to understand how psychological phenomena are constituted in social situations and try to determine the situational relevance of using psychological concepts in interaction (Wåhlin-Jacobsen, 2020).

Billig's view of unconscious processes extends the idea that morality involves ongoing (but often implicit) negotiations between the parties to the situation. However, he advances this perspective beyond the immediate circumstances by contending that unconscious processes are rooted in socialization; as the parent teaches the child to behave politely, the child also learns what is deemed inappropriate. Morally improper images and impulses are not extinguished; rather, we learn to withhold them, explain them away, and to ignore them in the actions of others, though they may be observable in the form of taboos, slips of the tongue, or humor (Billig, 2006). The notion that language simultaneously encompasses expressive and repressive functions explains how we respond selectively to the actions of others or how we may use language to naturalize our actions (Billig, 1997, 2006).

According to Billig, one set of criteria by which we judge if unconscious processes are at play is whether people's actions seem morally accountable or not. For example, we may observe people make racist statements while denying being racist, or rationalizing behaviours which seem grounded in greed, spite or infatuation. Since such observations may shape the way we approach a situation without actually being made explicit, Billig advocates for transcending the traditional conversation analytic approach by also considering the potential hearings of previous utterances that do *not* surface in the responses of other parties. Further, since unconscious processes are necessarily socially attributed, the analyst's general competence as a cultural member can inform choices about where to focus attention for closer analysis by observing when actions seem unaccountable. Cognized from the psychodynamic orientation, such situations can be understood as traces of defense mechanisms that do not completely succeed in covering up their operations.

It is pertinent to consider the current principles of the psychodynamic analysis of organizing to further elucidate the last point. In this context, the

researcher must ask the question 'what could be happening here?', and then interpret the observed behavior (de Klerk, 2017). This interpretational process involves making inferences from notable absences in the data (Stein, 2004) and treats researcher subjectivity not as a limitation, but as a vital source of data (Petriglieri, 2020) in itself. Hence, this type of inquiry extracts certain cues, which must be plausible and meaningful.

We suggest examining the data for unusual connections, irrational or unreasonable practices, and contradictions (Gabriel, 1995; Vince, 2019). These outcomes can manifest as individual and social defenses against emotions, such as rationalizations, projections, and shared fantasies (Mikkelsen et al., 2020). For instance, irrational practices can represent key signals that allude to unconscious subtexts associated with identity threats and attendant anxiety (Vince, 2019). In this regard, the aim is to identify patterns of emotional behavior between people in a system and not to understand individual psychology. Instances of emotional expression—and lack thereof—should be considered markers of the transfer of intrapsychic ambivalence to transpersonal exchanges.

In addition, we recommend that analyses of unconscious dynamics can involve attending to *what* is said in the data and *how* it is said, including what is left unsaid (Padavic et al., 2020). For example, equivocation, deflections, incoherence, and hesitations can be interpreted as signals of unwanted emotions being managed to avoid feelings of distress. Such maneuvers warrant attention through how they may simultaneously lead to or maintain blindness to the potentially questionable moral status of certain actions. The section that follows demonstrates the application of our combined approach in an analysis of interactional data obtained from an emergency call center.

An empirical example: Blindness in emergency call center work

Emergency call centers are highly stressful work environments (Paoletti, 2012; Whalen and Zimmerman, 1998). Call-takers must manage disturbances from noise and a busy environment and approach every call knowing that even short delays can be catastrophic. Therefore, they must

consistently aim to quickly assess the issue on the caller's side and choose an appropriate response, often based on incomplete or ambiguous information from callers. Meanwhile, they may also occasionally be subjected to various forms of 'face attacks' and tackle criticism or cursing from shocked or angry callers (Svennevig, 2012).

Diverse studies have addressed conflicts in emergency call center interactions from a communicational perspective (Whalen et al., 1988; e.g., Svennevig, 2012). However, it seems relevant to consider ways in which blindness triggered by unconscious processes could also influence the development of such conflicts, thereby illustrating our methodological approach. Our example features data from a study by Whalen & Zimmerman (1988)[2], which examined a call to a Dallas, Texas emergency hotline about a woman with respiratory problems. The call ended with the caller (a stepson of the unconscious woman) hanging up without an ambulance being dispatched, and the woman died. The situation escalated into a public debate and ultimately, the nurse call-taker was fired. We argue that this call can be used to demonstrate how one can analyze the processes in which unconscious management of unwanted emotions keep information from being recognized in interaction.

Following the aforementioned approach, the following section focuses on a sequence marked by several interesting features, notable critiques by both parties, rejections, and apparent mutual non-hearings of each other's contributions. Before the excerpt cited below, the caller (C) requested an ambulance and was subsequently transferred to the nurse (N), who ascertained the caller's address. C had not explicitly criticized N up to this juncture, but Whalen and Zimmerman described his tone of voice as 'irritated' and 'exasperated' (1988: 337) as he was asked multiple times to provide the street name.

[2] In terms of the symbols used in the transcription, _ indicates emphasis, ? indicates rising 'question' intonation, : indicates prolonged sound, [ ] indicates overlapping speech, - indicates cut off sound, ( ) indicates transcript is uncertain due to unclear sound, (0.5) indicates a break of 0.5 seconds, (.) indicates short break, and = indicates latching (i.e. no pauses) between speakers.

Excerpt

45 N: And whatiz thuh prob lem there?

46 C: I don't kno:w, if I knew I wouldn't be needin'

47 [y-

48 N: [Si:r:, I- eh- would you answer my ques tions

49 please? whatiz thu[h problem?]

50 C: [She is hav]ing dif ficult in

51 breathing

(9 lines omitted, dialogue about the age of woman the call is about)

60 N: May I speak with her plea se?

61 C: No you ca:n't, she's (ch-) she's (.) see ms

62 like she's incoherent.

63 (0.5)

64 N: Why is she inco her ent?

65 C: How thuh he ll do I:: kno::w

66 (.)

67 N: Sir, do n't curse me

68 (.)

69 C: Well I don't care, you- ya- ya'stupid ass

70 (anit-) questions you're asking

71 (3.0)

72 C: Gi mme someone that knows what they're do in',

73 why don't you just send an am bulance out here?

74 (0.6)

75 N: Sir, we only come out on life threatening

76 eme:r[gencies, okay?]

77 C: [Well this is li]fe threatening

78 emergency=

79 N: =hold on sir, I'll let you speak with

80 my sup- uh officer

First, we note how N maintains her blindness to her part in the tense exchange. C's annoyed tone of voice before the quoted excerpt indicates his orientation toward receiving assistance as quickly as possible. However, the mere request for an ambulance is usually insufficient grounds for one to be dispatched (Whalen et al., 1988). Here, N's l. 45 turn solicits a form of account from C as to the reason for his request. The relatively direct form of the request implies that N considers it unproblematic (Curl and Drew, 2008). However, C claims not to know, and the last part of his answer ('if I knew…') treats N's question as inapposite. N responds by asking that C 'answer [her] questions' and reiterates her query verbatim. In doing so, she treats C's first response as a 'complainable' nonresponse, disregarding that her direct phrasing of the question could have contributed to his reaction. We could interpret from the psychodynamic perspective that N registers C's l. 46 turn as an attack on her performance of the call-taker role, which elicits unwanted emotions in her. Nevertheless, she appears to uphold her approach to defend against the evoked emotions. The conflict is seemingly resolved when C next produces a lay description of the situation, and N continues to collect additional details on the situation.

The previously noted adverse pattern is however repeated shortly thereafter when N requests to speak with the sick woman (l. 60). C rejects her request, arguing that she is incoherent, and N again solicits an account from C using direct phrasing: 'why is she incoherent?' (l. 64). As before, C claims inability to offer a response in a manner that implies that N's question is misplaced, and he again questions the legitimacy of her actions. Subsequently, N reprimands C for 'cursing' her. We interpret from the psychodynamic perspective that N unconsciously handles her unwanted emotions evoked by

the second attack by projecting into C that C is noncooperative and hostile. She envisages these characteristics in C through her defense mechanism of projective identification. This projection renders him accountable for the conflict and relieves N from the threat to her professional identity posed by his criticism and also probably by her increasingly hostile feelings toward him. Oriented towards the claimed inappropriateness of C's contributions, N does not see that C's actions could be provoked by the local stress of his situation or that aspects of her practice could be interpreted by C as an undue delay in responding to his demands for an ambulance, thereby agitating him.

The remainder of the excerpt illustrates how N disregards the urgency of C's perspective. We see in line 69-70 that N's admonition is rejected and further criticism of N's questions is added by C. When N does not take the conversational floor for another three seconds (which is relatively long, given the high pace of the conversation), C voices direct criticism of N's abilities before reiterating his request for the dispatch of an ambulance. N again avoids the direct address of C's criticism, offering a reason why she cannot dispatch an ambulance: it is only sent out for 'life-threatening emergencies.' Her offered rationale directly questions C's description of the issue as urgent. N's assessment that the situation is not life-threatening could be rooted in the defense mechanism of rationalization, whereby she makes her refusal to dispatch help less threatening to herself by normalizing it. The apparent irrationality of refusing help to an incoherent woman with respiratory problems indicates an unconscious subtext, probably N's management of her intense hostility toward C. This interpretation is supported by how N goes on to summon her supervisor on the line when C insists that the situation is life-threatening (l. 79–80). Notably, the supervisor reprimands C, threatening to end the call if he curses again. We interpret this response to C as N's need to defend herself against caller transgression.

In sum, N is subjected to both direct and indirect criticism from C about her handling of the call. However, N positions C as a noncooperative and hostile caller instead of attributing C's attitude to the stress of his situation and as his reaction to her own repeated questions. This projection functions to defend her against her unwanted emotions of hostility and reinforces her

refusal to help C owing to his criticism. Moreover, N's irrational assessment of the situation as not life-threatening also supports this interpretation. Thus, N's blindness concerns C's extreme desperation owing to the call screening process as well as the fact that transgressive and noncooperative callers may also have a relevant need for assistance. The ostensible irrationality of the situation can be intuitively sensed; however, it can more systematically be analyzed by attending to those parts of the interlocutors' utterances that are not taken up by the other party, such as the hearable understandings that are ignored.

Conclusion

Studying practices of ignoring, we should attend to work-related interactions, both because these constitute a principal aspect of work in numerous environments and because interactional data can offer access to phenomena unobservable or not easily recorded through other means such as interviews, documents, or observation notes. We have discussed how unconscious processes can promote ignoring through the 'doing of blindness', and we have described how such blindness may be investigated as an interactional phenomenon. In particular, ascriptions of unconscious processes by analysts can be grounded in the detailed study of interactional features, where they leave traces in the form of strange associations, irrational practices and contradictions. The analysis of such traces enables greater transparency. Consistent with Billig, we argue that this possibility is rooted in the simultaneously expressive and repressive functions of language. The latter role can leave traces that can be tracked by emphasizing the aspects of utterances not directly addressed in participants' responses, yielding an interactional 'dark matter' that is not directly visible but must be considered for a more comprehensive understanding of what is at play in a given exchange.[3] Certainly, this recourse also signifies that the proposed method is principally relevant to examine ignoring constituted by processes at some conscious or subconscious levels; issues completely unseen, on the

[3] We thank special issue editor Morten Knudsen for pointing our attention to this metaphor.

other hand, can be ignored without threat to one's moral status, thereby leaving no traces.

references

Billig, M. (1997) 'The dialogic unconscious: Psychoanalysis, discursive psychology and the nature of repression', *British Journal of Social Psychology,* 36(2): 139–159.

Billig, M. (2006) 'A psychoanalytic discursive Psychology: From consciousness to unconsciousness', *Discourse Studies,* 8(1): 17–24.

Brown, A.D. (1997) 'Narcissism, identity, and legitimacy', *Academy of Management Review,* 22(3): 643–686.

Curl, T.S. and P. Drew (2008) 'Contingency and action: A comparison of two forms of requesting', *Research on language and social interaction,* 41(2): 129–153.

de Klerk, J.J. (2017) 'Nobody is as blind as those who cannot bear to see: Psychoanalytic perspectives on the management of emotions and moral blindness', *Journal of Business Ethics,* 141(4): 745–761.

Fotaki, M. and P. Hyde (2015) 'Organizational blind spots: Splitting, blame and idealization in the National Health Service', *Human Relations,* 68(3): 441–462.

Freud, A. (1936) *The ego and the mechanisms of defence.* New York: International Universities Press.

Gabriel, Y. (1995) 'The unmanaged organization: Stories, fantasies and subjectivity', *Organization Studies,* 16(3): 477–501.

Gould, L., L.F. Stapley and M. Stein (2001) *The systems psychodynamics of organizations*. New York: Karnac.

Hoggett, P. (2006) 'Conflict, ambivalence, and the contested purpose of public organizations', *Human Relations,* 59(2): 175–194.

Klein, M. (1946) 'Notes on some schizoid mechanisms', in M. Klein (ed.) *Envy and gratitude and other works 1946–1963*. New York: The Free Press.

Knudsen, M. (2011) 'Forms of inattentiveness: The production of blindness in the development of a technology for the observation of quality in health services', *Organization Studies,* 32(7): 963–989.

Menzies, I.E.P. (1960) 'A case-study in the functioning of social systems as a defence against anxiety: A report on a study of the nursing service of a general hospital', *Human Relations,* 13(2): 95–121.

Mikkelsen, E.N., B. Gray and A. Petersen (2020) 'Unconscious processes of organizing: Intergroup conflict in mental health care', *Journal of Management Studies*, Vol. 57(7): 1355-1383.

Mitchell, S.A. and L. Aron (eds.) (1999) *Relational psychoanalysis*. Hillsdale, NJ: Analytic Press.

Otto, B., J.G. Pors and R. Johnsen (2019) 'Hidden in full view: The organization of public secrecy in Miéville's The City and the City', *Culture and Organization,* 25(2): 91–103.

Padavic I., R.J. Ely and E.M. Reid (2020) 'Explaining the persistence of gender inequality: The work–family narrative as a social defense against the 24/7 work culture', *Administrative Science Quarterly,* 65(1): 61–111.

Palazzo, G., F. Krings and U. Hoffrage (2012) 'Ethical blindness', *Journal of Business Ethics,* 109(3): 323–338.

Paoletti, I. (2012) 'Operators managing callers' sense of urgency in calls to the medical emergency number', *Pragmatics,* 22(4): 671–695.

Peräkylä, A. (2005) 'Patients' responses to interpretations: A dialogue between conversation analysis and psychoanalytic theory', *Communication & Medicine,* 2(2): 163–176.

Peräkylä, A. (2008) '6 - Conversation analysis and psychoanalysis: Interpretation, affect, and intersubjectivity', in A. Peräkylä, C. Antaki, S. Vehviläinen, et al. (eds.) *Conversation analysis and psychotherapy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Petriglieri, G. (2020) 'F** k science!? An invitation to humanize organization theory', *Organization Theory,* 1(1): 1–18.

Petriglieri, G. and J.L. Petriglieri (2020) 'The return of the oppressed: A systems psychodynamic approach to organization studies', *Academy of Management Annals,* 14(1): 411–449.

Petriglieri, G. and M. Stein (2012) 'The unwanted self: Projective identification in leaders' identity work', *Organization Studies,* 33(9): 1217–1235.

Stein, M. (2004) 'The critical period of disasters: Insights from sense-making and psychoanalytic theory', *Human Relations,* 57(10): 1243–1261.

Streeck, U. (2008) 'A psychotherapist's view of conversation analysis', in A. Peräkylä, C. Antaki, S. Vehviläinen, et al. (eds) *Conversation analysis and psychotherapy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Svennevig, J. (2012) 'On being heard in emergency calls: The development of hostility in a fatal emergency call', *Journal of Pragmatics,* 44(11): 1393–1412.

Vince, R. (2019) 'Institutional illogics: The unconscious and institutional analysis', *Organization Studies,* 40(7): 953–973.

Weinberg, H. (2007) 'So what is this social unconscious anyway?', *Group Analysis,* 40(3): 307–322.

Whalen, J. and D.H. Zimmerman (1998) 'Observations on the display and management of emotion in naturally occurring activities: The case of 'hysteria' in calls to 9-1-1', *Social Psychology Quarterly,* 61(2): 141–159.

Whalen J., D.H. Zimmerman and M.R. Whalen (1988) 'When words fail: A single case analysis', *Social Problems,* 35(4): 335–362.

Wåhlin-Jacobsen, C.D. (2020) 'Open or closed? A social interaction perspective on line managers' reactions to employee voice', *Management Communication Quarterly,* 34(1): 32–57.

the authors

Christian Dyrlund Wåhlin-Jacobsen is an Assistant Professor of Organizational Psychology at the Department of Organization, Copenhagen Business School. His research interests encompass workplace interaction, leadership, and employee participation. His work has been published in outlets such as *Human Relations*, *Management Communication Quarterly, Scandinavian Journal of Management, and Discourse & Communication.*
Email: cdw.ioa@cbs.dk

Elisabeth Naima Mikkelsen is an Associate Professor of Organizational Psychology at the Department of Organization, Copenhagen Business School. Her research interests include work relationships in organizations and she employs qualitative research designs to inquire beneath the surface of organizations and beyond individual experiences of organizing. Her work on hidden, emotionally charged organizing has appeared in journals such as *Human Relations*, *Journal of Management Studies*, *Organization,* and *Group and Organization Management*.
Email: enm.ioa@cbs.dk

ephemera
theory & politics in organization

© the author(s) 2023
ISSN 1473-2866 (Online)
www.ephemerajournal.org
volume 23(1)

How to study strategic ignorance in organizations: A material approach

Meghan Van Portfliet and Mahaut Fanchini

abstract

This special issue is a testament to the interest in ignorance which has been shown across fields. However, questions remain on how to study the phenomenon. Methods diverge based on what type of ignorance is being examined and what field the study is located in. In this note, we find that a method to study a particular kind of ignorance, namely organizational strategic ignorance, is lacking, primarily due to the power and temporal dimensions at play. We offer that a material approach, specifically one focused on 'boundary objects', may be a fruitful avenue for investigating the topic. Objects have long been understood as sites of interpretive flexibility (Star, 2010), and there are parallels that can be drawn between materiality/absence and knowledge/ignorance, incorporating aspects of power, but also the temporal qualities that strategic ignorance encompasses. We draw on our research on whistleblowing to illustrate how boundary objects are a useful starting point for studies of strategic ignorance, and how a material approach in general may be an effective method for ignorance research more widely.

Introduction

Our interest in ignorance emerged from our research on whistleblowing. Not only is it clear that when whistleblowers are retaliated against for exposing wrongdoing, they are the victims of the organization trying to maintain ignorance, but in our own projects, the strategic use of ignorance emerged in different ways. Discussing this led us to explore how others have studied the

phenomenon, and we were frustrated to find that most of the methods on studying 'ignorance' are not helpful for looking at strategic ignorance. This is in large part because strategic ignorance is an *active construction* - organizational actors are actively engaging in the suppression of knowledge and are therefore unlikely to talk about it with researchers. Many studies look at past ignorance, drawing on case studies and interviews with relevant actors to explore how ignorance came to light. Studying *strategic* ignorance implies studying knowledge *while it is in the process of suppression*, examples of which are discussed below. We therefore reflected upon what methods might be useful in shedding light on strategic ignorance. The parallels between knowledge/ignorance and materiality/absence stood out to us as we examined options, leading us to believe a material approach focused on 'boundary objects' may be fruitful. We argue the benefits of adopting such an approach in what follows.

This research note is laid out as follows: First, we introduce strategic ignorance. Second, we present some of the ways ignorance has been studied so far in social sciences highlighting why these are not ideal for studying strategic ignorance in an organizational setting. Third, we turn to materiality, highlighting the parallels that exist between materiality/absence and knowledge/ignorance. We then offer 'boundary objects' as a useful site for the exploration of strategic ignorance. To illustrate the benefits of this approach, we reflexively analyze our own experiences with strategic ignorance, identifying the 'boundary objects' involved, and how these are useful for discussing deliberate ignorance or taboos.

Strategic ignorance: When ignorance is deliberate

Ignorance is often presented as the opposite of knowledge (Gross, 2010, Gross and McGoey, 2015; Knorr-Cetina, 1999; McGoey, 2012; Moore and Tumin, 1949) - a void that we must fill with new discoveries. Strategic ignorance, however, looks at how ignorance is actively shaped and deployed from a position of power. Strategic ignorance is:

> practices of obfuscation and deliberate insulation from unsettling information [...] the mobilization of the unknowns in a situation in order to command resources, deny liability in the aftermath of disaster, and to assert expert

> control in the face of both foreseeable unpredictable outcomes. (McGoey, 2012: 555)

It involves an active suppression of information and includes taboos (Gross, 2010; Roberts, 2013), denials (Roberts, 2013; Zerubavel, 2006) secrets (Moore and Tumin, 1949; Roberts, 2013) or the active avoidance of knowing (Dana, 2006). In this way, ignorance is not a passive act, or a lack of knowledge. As Eviatar Zerubavel explains:

> Ignoring something is more than simply failing to notice it. Indeed, it is quite often the result of some pressure to actively disregard it. Such pressure is usually a product of social norms of attention designed to separate what we conventionally consider "noteworthy" from what we come to disregard as mere background 'noise'. (2006: 23)

While this type of strategic ignorance may sound menacing, it is present in everyday life in ways that we readily accept. For example, 'trade secrets' are knowledge that organizations go to great lengths to protect and are often protected by law (McGoey, 2012).

We are interested in a particular subset of this strategic ignorance: organizational situations in which topics are deliberately made taboo or kept secret. Strategic organizational ignorance involves power relations, since some actors assert which organizational topics must remain in the shadows, while others must abide by this norm. There is also a temporal element to it: information is kept secret or taboo *now* - so that certain activities can continue unhindered. Once the activity has stopped, the ignorance transforms from strategic organizational ignorance into something like a secret, or a lie. If a secret is found out, there may be some reputational damage, but if strategic ignorance is uncovered, the actions that were being concealed may have to stop.

To our knowledge, there is a lack of literature around how to study this phenomenon. We believe this is because the temporal aspects as well as the power differentials involved make it difficult to study using methods that studies of other types of ignorance adopt. We review some of these studies in the following section before narrowing in on the parallels that knowledge/ignorance shares with materiality/absence as explored in the materiality literature.

How to study ignorance: Methods to the study of ignorance in social sciences

Ignorance has been studied in different ways in different fields. In sciences such as genetics, or research on biotechnology, many epistemic debates question whether 'all means' are acceptable to enhance knowledge and what kind of knowledge is worth investigating. As Gross and McGoey explain, 'the registration and observation of what is not known is often a challenging and politically unpopular field of research' (Gross and McGoey, 2015: 7). According to Kempner (2015), 'political and commercial barriers can constrain scientists from investigating politically insensitive or taboo research areas' (78). In other words, in areas such as science, biotechnology and genetics, professional codes create barriers around what knowledge is taboo, thus enforcing ignorance, 'for our own good'. However, in other less sensitive topics, scholars have managed to engage with unknown subjects.

Many organizational scholars rely on inductive case studies and qualitative analysis to explore ignorance. For example, Holan and Phillips (2004), who are interested in understanding how organizations 'come to forget', have observed alliances in the tourism industry in Cuba. They conducted several dozen interviews and built case studies around their observations of the organizations. Additionally, Gibson (2014) is interested in lies and deceptions and investigates the renowned case of Bernard Madoff's Ponzi scheme, using press data, to come up with six barriers that explain how lies last over time. Schwarzkopf (2020) uses discourse analysis and conceptual analysis to examine how ignorance is reproduced and maintained via large data sets. Using the concept of the sacred - or what is awe-inspiring and dangerous - Schwarzkopf examines texts - magazines, academic texts, industry publications and so on - to explore how the overproduction of data keeps some knowledge off-limits. Thus, from what we observe in the literature, most research in social sciences on ignorance tends to focus on specific types of ignorance: absence, errors, non-knowledge, etc. While these studies are vital to the study of ignorance, we observe that the focus on strategic ignorance has been neglected, as well as the attempt to study it from an empirical perspective.

An area that comes close to strategic ignorance is taboos. Hudson and Okhuysen investigate the dimensions of taboos derived from stigmatization in dirty work or illicit organizations (Hudson and Okhuysen, 2009, 2014). In their studies, they used participant observation, archival research, and interviews to investigate a taboo place, a bathhouse, to understand more about stigma. Because the topic was sensitive, they had to use multiple methods to approach it. As they write in the method section of their article:

> Because of their illicit or illegitimate nature, it was often difficult to access or even identify these bathhouses and collecting detailed data about them proved labor intensive and time consuming. To study these organizations, we needed to develop a research approach that would account for the obstacles that core stigma imposes on bathhouses and on us as researchers. (Hudson and Okhuysen, 2009: 138)

Their methodological approach is certainly inspiring, but taboos and strategic ignorance differ on many levels. As we argue, strategic ignorance is an *active construction* - organizational actors are deliberately engaging in the suppression of knowledge and are therefore unlikely to talk about it with researchers during traditional interviews. The analysis of press data or other large data sets are unlikely to be useful for studying strategic ignorance either. Studying strategic ignorance implies spotting the knowledge *while it is being suppressed*. If we study it after the knowledge has come out, we are observing something else, closer to lies or secrets that have been exposed, as Gibson (2014) has done. Schwarzkopf's (2020) method comes close to being a viable method, but as his object of analysis is buried beneath large data sets, it is 'hidden in plain sight', where other knowledge that is strategically hidden is much less visible.

We thus propose studying strategic ignorance requires a tailored research design or an inventive method (Lury & Wakeford, 2012). As we argue, strategic organizational ignorance is difficult to study as there are powerful forces actively trying to conceal information, but it has organizational effects and consequences which can be observed. We therefore turn to materiality as a possible starting point for studying strategic organizational ignorance.

A turn to materiality: Strategic organizational ignorance as a 'absent presence'

We propose that 'materiality' – or the connection of the social world to material objects - has many parallels to the concept of knowledge. Materiality theories are fruitful for exploring objects in link with spatial questions, and especially the conditions for where absence and presence meet. Such a framing allows us to develop a parallel between knowledge/ignorance and materiality/absence as well as exploring practices of deliberate ignorance.

At the heart of this connection is French geographer Henri Lefebvre (1980), who identified 'space' as the area where presence and absence intermingle. It is a place that allows for a 'becoming': where materiality can be seen as temporary as meaning changes depending on what events are unfolding (Dale, 2005). In other words, spaces are places where things can come into being, with absence being a necessary precursor to this, but also a constant presence, where the possibilities of all things that could be is realized. This contrasting and intermingling of 'absence' with 'presence' (Lefebvre, 1980) can be compared to the contrast and intermingling of ignorance and knowledge: both refer to what is there/known or not there/unknown.

Additionally, just as the connectedness of ignorance and knowledge has been problematized and explored, the process of creating something has also been emphasized by those interested in materiality (e.g. Dale, 2005; Knox, O'Doherty, Vurdubakis, and Westrup, 2015) - absence and materiality are not opposites, but rather intertwined concepts that are socially, as well as physically constructed (Giovannoni and Quatronne, 2018). For example, Giovannoni and Quattrone explore 'the role of absence in producing organizing effects not because absence eventually takes form but because of the impossibility to fully represent it' (849). Absence shapes an organization and the process of organizing just as much as presence does, if not more so because of the infinite possibilities it encompasses. The creative effects of absence, rather than being 'nothing' or the opposite of presence, are generative in their own right and co-create the organizations along with the present material objects. Cooper (2007) also explores absence and finds it is the stimulus for human production, as individuals are driven by the need to make visible and tangible something that is known but absent physically.

Another meaningful concept for our purpose is that of 'absent presences' (Knox, O'Doherty, Vurdubakis, and Westrup, 2015). According to them, some 'absences' (i.e., what is not physically *there* and visible) produce dynamism as they become immanent presences in organizations (Giovannoni and Quattrone, 2018: 852). In other words, what is missing drives what is present and shapes what will be.

Turning back to ignorance and knowledge, we asked ourselves - given the parallels between the two areas, how does knowledge relate to materiality, and where are the knowledge 'spaces' – or areas where knowledge and ignorance intertwine? If knowledge and meaning are inscribed in objects, where can the ignorance be found? We looked for where knowledge was contested in real time and where power dimensions were at play, and this led us to boundary objects, which we propose as a site for studying strategic ignorance.

Boundary objects: A methodological tool for approaching strategic ignorance?

Boundary objects were initially conceptualized within literatures interested in innovation, change and problem-solving (Star, 1989). In this seminal article, boundary objects are considered as a data structure which is plastic enough to welcome multiple viewpoints, in the context of exploratory research about artificial intelligence:

> Boundary objects help reconcile evidence from different sources, in the face of heterogeneity produced by local constraints and divergent viewpoints. […] They are both plastic enough to adapt to local needs and constraints of the several parties employing them, yet robust enough to maintain a common identity across sites. (Star, 1989: 46)

In other words, boundary objects are objects that both generate contested meanings - or have 'interpretive flexibility' (Star, 1989, 2010), but also bring together disparate views on some level, allowing cooperation to take place. These can be technical drawings, written definitions, product designs, or any other material object that is presented to different groups, from different backgrounds and areas of expertise to serve as a focal point, or a bridge of knowledge. Boundary objects also have two more components: 'the structure

of informatic and work process needs and arrangements, and [...] the dynamic between ill structured and more tailored uses of the objects' (Star, 2010: 601). They are things that people act towards and allow people to coordinate activities. When they work well, boundary objects can become 'standards'- the action they mitigate becomes standardized and routine. When they don't work so well, however, the cooperation that they are supposed to facilitate becomes more difficult, and it is here we believe that boundary objects can be considered as a place where knowledge and ignorance meet and can be a useful starting point for studying ignorance.

Meaning is inscribed on objects, and this meaning is usually shared. Boundary objects can be actual objects, such as manuals, computers, desks, chairs, office spaces etc. but also abstract places, for example, a 'situation' where knowledge is contested, an event, a conversation etc. As Star states:

> An object is something people (or, in computer science, other objects and programs) act toward and with. Its materiality derives from action, not from a sense of prefabricated stuff or 'thing'-ness. So, a theory can be an object, just as a car can but it is the action (use between groups) that matters. (2010: 603)

Boundary objects, however, have interpretive flexibility - so the meaning is not always shared. This is important, as Oswick and Robertson (2009) point out– instead of only being 'bridges and anchors', or objects that create sense out of disorder, boundary objects can also be 'barricades' and 'mazes', or objects that obscure information and produce confusion. This nuanced view invites us to recontextualize boundary objects in terms of what is known and what is ignored. In the context of strategic ignorance, it is important to also note that actors might not share the same power position, nor the same objective.

When we frame an object as a boundary object on which we will act, the meaning we attribute to it diverges. A desk becomes a place for work, or study, a symbol of prestige (for an executive) or a confining cage where one must stay still (for a child). Our meaning is present for us, and the other infinite possible meanings are absent, but 'presently absent' (Knox et al., 2005) as the potential for them exists, whether we recognize it or not. A boundary object then is a site where knowledge and ignorance are present and absent at the same time. It is a site where the 'correct' interpretation of meaning is bound

up with power relations and is temporal as those relations shift and change. For example, when a teacher tells a student that a desk is not a canvas for their art - the student's interpretation must take a back seat and become invisible, absently present.

Since ignorance and knowledge are co-constructed, we argue that, from a critical perspective, when considered as objects which convey organizational politics and workplace agendas, boundary objects might be useful to investigate further deliberate ignorance, or knowledge purposefully kept in the shadows.

In the following section, we explain and explore the contexts that motivated our interest in ignorance, noting the boundary objects, and proposing how these can be gateways to studying ignorance. We thus offer an example of how boundary objects can be understood as places where knowledge ends and ignorance starts, and hence an appropriate site for studying strategic ignorance.

Boundary objects as a site for studying strategic ignorance

In the first example, strategic ignorance was observed when researching advocacy and whistleblowing: it became clear that there was conflict inside of advocacy organizations, but this was not to be spoken about. For example, a participant read a draft of a research paper (as was promised when consent was gathered to assure participants of their anonymity) which described their behavior and the role it had in legitimizing an individual that spoke up as a 'whistleblower'. Not liking what they read, the participant revoked consent to be included in the study. This opting out was given via a legal notice that publication of any material related to this participant would result in a lawsuit. In this example, the manuscript can be understood as a boundary object - a thing that was interpreted differently by two different audiences and one where cooperation of activities and actions broke down (consent was revoked). It was an object that was going to be published - an action that both agreed on while the meaning of it was shared. The researcher was going through the required motions to publish the piece and understood it as an interesting finding that had practical and important implications. The

research participant, however, attributed a different meaning to it - perhaps it was seen as a threat to their reputation or ego, or as a mis-construal of facts. The action that this participant engaged in with relation to the manuscript was now suppression. This information needed to be hidden away now, and the power of the participant, via their legal knowledge, ensured that their interpretation of the manuscript was the one that would be complied with. There is a temporal aspect to the suppression as well. The manuscript detailed behaviors by the participant that were normal, and perhaps even widespread in the industry. Widespread knowledge of the behaviors, however, may have brought scrutiny, and required behavioral change. Should the participant leave the field, however, the behaviors would no longer be relevant, and the information would not potentially trigger this change. In this example, the knowledge contained within the manuscript was suppressed from publication, resulting in the perpetuation of ignorance about certain behaviors to the wider public. At the same time, the unpublished manuscript contained knowledge, even if an uncomfortable or even disputed knowledge, that now existed between the scholar and the participant. The boundaries of this knowledge were purposefully maintained - creating 'negative knowledge' and ensuring that further knowledge was contained and allowing ignorance to thrive (or producing strategic ignorance). Looking to the boundary objects helps us identify how this ignorance is perpetuated, at very least, if not produced actively. It is a site where struggles take place over what information should be made available or ignored.

As mentioned above, however, boundary objects can be more abstract, and here the second example sheds light on how these types of boundary objects can be useful in studying ignorance.

This example involves an organization entangled in systemic tax evasion practices; an issue that was not to be openly spoken about. The whistleblower in the case would instead discuss at length two subsequent issues, 'the unusually high turnover of staff', and the 'disappearance of one's files'. Speaking about these two issues, apparently meaningless or non-related to the main fraud, allowed the employee to talk about wrongdoing without naming it. The 'unusually high turn-over of staff' signaled a context in which employees resigned from the company, afraid they would have to engage with the illegal practices; while the 'disappearance of one's files' - all but an

inadvertent technical bug - signaled the Director's intention to suppress critical documents. In this case the knowledge was hinted at, talked around, or avoided - suppressing it, while still communicating that it was there.

In this example, these two topics appear as a concern for the organization: they can be identified as ordinary organizational issues to deal with in the routine course of business. However, the whistleblower in the study was not speaking about them (acting toward them) in this way, using the concepts instead as a signifier for more sinister activities. The divergence in meaning or shifting of the issues to 'boundary objects', is tolerated by the powerful organization, as long as the meaning that the whistleblower attributes to these 'ordinary' issues does not become widespread. In this whistleblowing case, the participant voiced concerns for a protracted period, for example during meetings with Directors, and it was not until the whistleblowers' meaning started to take hold for others that the organization acted to suppress that meaning, utilizing their power differential via retaliation. Boundary objects, in this situation, can be understood as objects that help employees to manage an unequal situation of domination and oppression.

Both examples show that where meanings diverge, objects can transform into 'boundary objects'. These are sites where knowledge and ignorance co-exist, as meanings are both present and absent for those involved. When power dynamics come into play, one or more of the meanings that are inscribed on the objects are suppressed, resulting in strategic ignorance. But this suppression does not always have to happen. Boundary objects are often items that different people interpret differently, but which facilitate cooperation regardless. Therefore, while not all boundary objects are sites of strategic ignorance, they are a good place to start looking. If power dimensions are at play, they may be a site where active constructions of meaning are suppressed. In the case we describe above, the turn-over of the employee can be referred to, in the organization's perspective, as a human resources health and safety-related issue but not as a tax evasion marker. In other words, one way to give meaning to the issue is allowed by the powerful, but not another.

The method, then would be interviews with, or observations of, organization members, noting the objects that they 'act toward'. We can then look for these objects to arise in other interviews/observations and compare the meanings

that they are attributed. When these meanings diverge, special attention can be paid to the object, and to the actors, noting who has the power in a given scenario and if this power is used to enforce one interpretation at the cost of another, or in other words - suppression. This method allows us to see not only what is suppressed, but how, shedding light on how strategic ignorance is deployed and maintained.

Conclusion

In this research note we have identified a site that may be fruitful for studying strategic ignorance: boundary objects. By looking at situations where meaning diverges and cooperation breaks down, and identifying the boundary object that was involved, we identify a method for exploring strategic ignorance. These situations can be identified via interviews (by comparing multiple accounts of the same object/topic), participant observation, document and narrative analysis or a combination of these. When power dynamics are considered, boundary objects can become a site where meaning is suppressed, transforming it into strategic ignorance. However, boundary objects can also be used to manage situations of unequal power, as those with less power can inscribe new meaning on objects, allowing them to speak about knowledge that is taboo. A material approach, then, allows for examination of not only strategic ignorance, but may be fruitful for ignorance studies more generally, as boundary objects are sites where ignorance and knowledge co-exist. Researchers interested in ignorance only need to ask what objects are imbued with different meaning, and by whom? When objects are identified, questions around power can be raised: who's interpretation is the dominant one? Why? This type of analysis raises questions around who the arbiters of knowledge are, and how ignorance is maintained. It also moves the field of ignorance studies forward by providing a methodology that is sensitive to power and domination, but also how these can be overcome by those with less power.

references

Cooper, R. (2007) 'Organs of process: Rethinking human organization', *Organization Studies*, 28(10): 1547–1573.

Dale, K. (2005) 'Building a social materiality: Spatial and embodied politics in organizational control', *Organization*, 12(5): 649–678.

Dana, J. (2006) 'Strategic ignorance and ethical behavior in organizations', in A. Tenbrunsel (ed.) *Ethics in groups*. San Francisco: Elsevier.

Gibson, D.R. (2014) 'Enduring illusions: The social organization of secrecy and deception', *Sociological Theory*, 32(4): 283–306.

Giovannoni, E. and P. Quattrone (2018) 'The materiality of absence: Organizing and the case of the incomplete cathedral', *Organization Studies*, 39(7): 849–871.

Gross, M. (2010) *Ignorance and surprise: Science, society, and ecological design*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Gross, M. and L. McGoey (2015) *Routledge international handbook of ignorance studies*. London: Routledge.

Holan, P.M. and N. Phillips (2004) 'Remembrance of things past? The dynamics of organizational forgetting', *Management Science*, 50(11): 1603–1613.

Hudson, B.A. and G.A. Okhuysen (2009) 'Not with a ten-foot pole: Core stigma, stigma transfer, and improbable persistence of men's bathhouses', *Organization Science*, 20(1): 134–153.

Hudson, B.A. and G.A. Okhuysen (2014) 'Taboo topics: Structural barriers to the study of organizational stigma', *Journal of Management Inquiry*, 23(3): 242–253.

Kempner, J. (2015) 'The production of forbidden knowledge', in M. Gross and L. McGoey (eds.) *Routledge international handbook of ignorance studies*. London: Routledge.

Knorr-Cetina, K. (1999) *Epistemic cultures: How the sciences make knowledge*. Harvard: Harvard University Press.

Knox, H., D.P. O'Doherty, T. Vurdubakis and C. Westrup (2015) 'Something happened: Spectres of organization/disorganization at the airport', *Human Relations*, 68(6): 1001–1020.

Lefebvre, H. (1980) *La présence et l'absence*. Paris: Casterman.

Lury, C. and N. Wakeford (eds.) (2012) *Inventive methods*. London: Routledge.

McGoey, L. (2012) 'The logic of strategic ignorance', *British Journal of Sociology*, 63(3): 533–576.

Moore, W.E., and M.M. Tumin (1949) 'Some social functions of ignorance', *American Sociological Review*, 14(1): 787–95.

Oswick, C., and M. Robertson (2009) 'Boundary objects reconsidered: From bridges and anchors to barricades and mazes', *Journal of Change Management*, 9(2): 179–193.

Roberts, J. (2013) 'Organizational ignorance: Towards a managerial perspective on the unknown', *Management Learning*, 44(3): 215–236.

Schwarzkopf, S. (2020) 'Sacred excess: Organizational ignorance in an age of toxic data', *Organization Studies*, 41(2): 197-217.

Star, S.L. (1989) 'The structure of ill-structured solutions: Boundary objects and heterogeneous distributed problem solving', in L. Gasser and M.N. Huhns (eds.) *Readings in distributed artificial intelligence*. San Francisco: Morgan Kaufmann.

Star, S.L. (2010) 'This is not a boundary object: Reflections on the origin of a concept', *Science Technology and Human Values*, 35(5): 601–617.

Zerubavel, E. (2006) *The elephant in the room: Silence and denial in everyday life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

the authors

Meghan Van Portfliet is an Assistant Teaching Professor at Leeds School of Business, University of Colorado Boulder. Her research focuses on whistleblowing and how those that speak up can be protected by more than just legislation.
Email: Meghan.VanPortfliet@colorado.edu

Mahaut Fanchini is an Assistant Professor at the University of Paris-Est Créteil. Her current research focuses on ignorance as an organizational resource in cases of whistleblowing. She also investigates gender dimensions in whistleblowing narratives.
Email: mahaut.fanchini@u-pec.fr

ephemera
theory & politics in organization

© the author(s) 2023
ISSN 1473-2866 (Online)
www.ephemerajournal.org
volume 23(1)

Oracles, ignorance and expertise: The struggle over what not to know

Philipp Arnold

review of

McGoey, L. (2019) *The unknowers: How strategic ignorance rules the world*. London: ZED Books. (PB, pp xiii + 256, £ 12,99, ISBN 9781780326351)

Introduction

The unknowers certainly addresses a heated contemporary discussion around the rise of populist politics and the state of democratic capitalism. The review of such a book presents a certain challenge; *The unknowers* attempts a comprehensive interpretation of contemporary social relations all the while oscillating between historical analysis and political intervention. It is this balancing act that makes the book both captivating and provoking. In mixing both intuitive concepts and delving deep into classical social and economic theory, McGoey, who holds a professorship in sociology at the University of Essex, challenges both academic readers as well as the wider audience that she is targeting.

McGoey's point of departure is a critique of the enlightenment-fuelled self-understanding of Western industrialized democracies as *knowing*. This modernist narrative of the Kantian 'sapere aude' (Kant, 1784: 481) is sharply

contrasted by McGoey with the notion that contemporary sociality is indeed far better defined in terms of rational modes of ignorance. The book sets out to explore the defining 'ignorance pathway' [15] of contemporary democratic capitalism in the ideas of the 'free market' and 'free trade'. Drawing not only on academic literature but also on illustrative interviews, investigative journalism and media sources, McGoey explores the relation of this 'macro-ignorance' and 'micro-ignorance' [12], which she finds in contemporary examples drawn primarily from the USA and UK.

The main thrust of the book is to explore the notion of 'strategic ignorance', which McGoey understands as

> any actions which mobilize, manufacture or exploit unknowns in a wider environment to avoid liability for earlier actions. But I also use strategic ignorance to refer to situations where people create or magnify unknowns in an *offensive* rather than a *defensive* way, to generate support for future political initiatives rather than simply avoid liability for a past mistake. [3]

Thus, McGoey understands ignorance not in contrast to knowledge or interest, but as an arena of a social power struggle. She makes no secret of her political stance regarding her study; in fact, it is her explicit intention to settle the score with what she terms the 'political right' [4]. More specifically, McGoey opposes epistocratic conceptions of government, which centre around establishing thresholds of expert knowledge required for political participation such as voting. Such perspectives cast ignorance as a stigma of a lack of knowledge or interest and, following McGoey, underestimate ignorance as a general social dynamic.

Analysing strategic ignorance

The first of *The unknowers'* thirteen chapters (including the introduction and conclusion) introduce the analytical vocabulary, political stance and general narrative of the book. Using the fire in the Grenfell Tower in London as an example, McGoey introduces the common narrative that ascribes ignorance to *the people* in a contrast to informed and credible *experts*. Against this narrative, the Grenfell Tower fire shows how tenants were acutely aware of the problems that plagued their homes but their voices could not compete with the voices of experts consulted on the topic in public discourse; leading

to the disastrous fire which sparked public outrage about how glaring safety issues could go ignored for so long. This social construction of expert knowledge entails a form of agenda-setting power: recognized expertise is oftentimes not only regarded as a superior form of knowledge, but also has the power to determine what to remain ignorant of.

Following McGoey, examples such as the Grenfell Tower can be understood as 'micro-ignorance' [12], which is embedded in and influences forms of 'macro-ignorance' [12], which she understands as 'the sedimentation of individual ignorance into rigid ideological positions and policy perspectives [...] leading to new patterns of individual micro-ignorance' [12]. Subsequently, McGoey unfolds her analytical vocabulary to explore the dynamic between micro- and macro-ignorance to identify trajectories she calls 'ignorance-pathways' [13]. Her central concept is 'oracular power', which is understood as 'the ability to shape social consensus about where the boundary between ignorance and knowledge lies' [61]. This form of power allows social elites to construct 'ignorance alibis' [56] in an effort to defend against claims for responsibility or strategically mobilize 'useful unknowns' [51] in the first place. With the nexus of knowledge/ignorance established as a social power struggle, McGoey identifies two societal *camps* that are primarily involved in the strategic use of ignorance as its profiteers, yet importantly, fail to recognize their own ignorance. These *camps* are the 'autocratic *strongs* and the autocratic *smarts*' [69]; the smarts are understood as the proponents of an elitist rule of knowers while the strongs are understood more generally as a societal elite able to leverage uncertainty. These categories are less analytical than political and McGoey primarily enlists them to establish her own political position, which she frames as a defence of democratic, egalitarian politics against the rise of populist politics exemplified by the Brexit-vote and the presidency of Donald Trump.

Focusing on these two examples, McGoey reconstructs how both the Brexit-Vote as well as the 2016 presidential elections in the USA were surrounded by a discourse that accused *the masses* of ignorance. McGoey claims that *the masses* where painted ignorant largely for their lack of cultural and economic capital, making them susceptible to fearmongering concerning economic insecurity. As a consequence, stigmata such as a lack of knowledge on the question of Brexit or being knowledgeable about Trump's racism and

misogyny and supporting it are cast as problems of a populace of low social status. McGoey takes a firm stance against these ascriptions of ignorance to *the masses* and instead sets out to explore *elite* forms of ignorance such as government misinformation and a sensationalist media discourse. McGoey's diagnosis is clear: the primary contemporary struggle in Western industrialized societies is about what *not* to know.

From Adam Smith to Rupert Murdoch

In the following chapters, McGoey takes her reader for a ride that starts at the end of the 18th century with the Scottish moral philosopher Adam Smith and his famous *The wealth of nations* and goes all the way into contemporary political-economic thought, interweaving her central narrative of the ignorance-pathway of the free market with issues such as discrimination, economic inequality and corporate scandal. McGoey proposes a re-reading of Smith's classic that has indeed not been able to garner widespread public attention: that *The wealth of nations* is as much about market regulation and economic and social equality as it is about the free market and its often-cited *invisible hand*. McGoey traces this reading through 19th and 20th century thinking, referencing influential authors such as Mills, Burke, Tocqueville and Popper as well thinkers that have been historically silenced in academic discourse like Mary Wollstonecraft.

McGoey criticizes the mainstream reading of historic sources on political-economic thinking not only as a silencing of female thinkers, but also as a misreading of its perceived protagonists: following her argument, Smith, Tocqueville and others were acutely aware of the dangers of unregulated free markets but, at the same time, largely failed to reflect upon their own social positions. Historical reception of those classics has concentrated on the apparently natural asymmetrical distribution of wealth, mostly completely disregarding oppression by colonial powers or even social and economic inequality in Europe. In effect, McGoey deconstructs contemporary neoliberal theory about the free market as ideological and contingent rather than natural or fixed.

Interestingly, she illustrates the trajectory of such entrenched thinking about the free markets by reflecting on the 2011 *News of the World* scandal, during which it came to light that employees of *News International*, a major UK news corporation, had illegally wiretapped a huge number of politicians, officials and prominent persons alongside allegations of corruption. McGoey retells this incident in light of her ignorance-pathway of the free market: the regulatory agency tasked with supervising corporations such as *News International* and journalistic (mis)conduct became aware of the illegal activities of *News of the World* journalists. However, following McGoey's argument, the regulatory agency was ill-equipped to deal with illegal conduct of such proportions in terms of financial power and manpower, owing to policies aiming at the idea of a self-regulating market. Confronted with this dilemma, the agency walked the thin line between complicity and strategic ignorance in choosing not to investigate the most severe allegations against *News of the World* to ensure their own organizational survival.

A self-fulfilling prophecy and the social 'elite'

In the later chapters, McGoey explores what has already been hinted at with the *News International* case: in the UK and the USA, regulatory entities have become increasingly dependent on market financing, driven by the idea of the free market as superior distributive mechanism to the benefit of all. Much corporate governance is also realized within the market, as, for example, through professional audit firms. By reconstructing the cases of *Enron* and the *FDA* [1], McGoey sheds light on how corporations can mobilize complex regulatory arrangements to their advantage. Questions of responsibility in case of misbehaviour can be distributed to a wide network of contractors, audit firms or legal loopholes to avoid legal consequences in what truly seems like strategic ignorance. Even more, McGoey explores how corporations attempt to establish forms of ignorance towards possible consequences of business decisions and misbehaviour as *unknowable* and thus exempt from legal punishment.

1 The US-American Food and Drug Administration.

An example for such a case is a class of antidepressants, which was shown to produce significant harmful side effects after it had gone to mass use when approved by the *FDA*. Despite early warning signs the drugs approval was not revoked; in fact, the *FDA* tried hard to ignore the evidence that surfaced. McGoey avoids simplifying accounts of this story, as she shows how the *FDA's* failure was not necessarily one of malicious intent, but rather entangled in a very complex web of inter-dependencies and path-dependencies. The *FDA* had to navigate their increasing dependency on industry money, their reputation as a competent government agency and their shortcomings in terms of established scientific routines for the testing and approval of new drugs which had failed to detect the side-effects. McGoey shows also how this established arrangement was mobilized strategically by the pharmaceutical firms producing the drugs to ignore inconvenient findings even though they seemed apparent. *FDA* management was willing to comply in this strategic use of ignorance and even went as far as punishing internal voices of protest.

What seems puzzling about this report is how a network of experts with significant education and resources failed to appropriately respond to a severe social problem. This leads McGoey right back to her larger political point: that ignorance is by no means a problem of *the masses* but permeates all realms of society; and powerful actors such as multinational corporations are in a much more advantageous position to exploit it.

Ignorance and politics

The unknowers makes very convincing points. Indeed, while many academics might be at least familiar with the skewed reception of Adam Smith and the silencing of certain strands of theory, contemporary democratic capitalism is still hailed as the only and natural form of modern societies, thus cementing existing inequalities as unquestionable. McGoey's book is an intervention into this belief that seeks to suspend the naturalness of this historical interpretation. She unfolds a powerful critique towards essentialist notions of knowing (such as knowing the best form of sociality) especially in the face of an emerging discourse that argues for privileged access to voting rights based

on expert political knowledge.[2] The argument for expert voting is based on the assumption that informed voting decisions would necessarily lead to better political decisions and more just politics. McGoey refutes this point by arguing that ignorance is not neutral, but a constitutive part of political struggles. Expert voters, she argues, are not necessarily more reflected and impartial, they are simply entrenched in forms of ignorance that are more in line with socially accepted pathways of macro-ignorance. The question is thus not only *what* is unknown but also *how* the negotiation of what is worthy of (un)knowing unfolds and how different social actors mobilize this oracular power.

To open up this debate and provide a though-provoking counterpoint to the neutrality of ignorance is indeed meritorious and reason enough to wish *The unknowers* brought reception. McGoey argues that currently, there is already too little democracy rather than too much, with public institutions undermined by a mainstream of anti-regulatory rhetoric which has conferred a lot of regulatory power mechanisms to market actors and thus weakened the means of political decision making. In this respect, her argument is fairly social-democratic in highlighting the virtues of public bureaucratic regulation as a balance of power between corporate elites and other social groups. She shows how, against common interpretation, such ideas can be found in classic economic thought currently mobilized to justify the exact opposite line of thinking around the free market. For McGoey, this twist is 'perhaps *the* greatest academic hoax in modern western history' [311].

'Two souls, alas, are dwelling in my breast'[3]

McGoey's reconstruction of contemporary ignorance is thought provoking and offers a persuasive twist on the commonly held assumption that knowledge is power. Indeed, it might be much more powerful a strategy to enlist ignorance in one's own favour. This book on strategic ignorance is

[2] Most prominently maybe the philosopher and political scientist Jason Brennan, who is referenced repeatedly by McGoey and who has recently proposed different strategies for the distribution of knowledge-based access to voting in his 2016 book *Against democracy*.

[3] (Goethe, 1962: 145).

strongest when McGoey reconstructs tangible examples from recent history. Here, she can fill her overarching narrative of the ignorance-pathways of the free market with life and convince her readers that even the power to ignore is asymmetrically distributed in contemporary western societies and fierce struggles are fought over what *not* to know.

Yet, the way in which McGoey approaches her investigation is marked by a tension that is felt throughout the book and not always easily reconciled. Just as Goethe's Faust struggles with the two souls dwelling in his breast, torn between his desire of carnal and visceral involvement in the world on the one hand and his pursuit of transcendental knowledge on the other hand, the reader gets to know two Lindsey McGoeys: one seeking activist involvement and impact in the lived world, the other aspiring to analytical clarity and more abstract theorization. One of McGoey's souls is a passionate *public intellectual* that fiercely criticizes the way in which the notion of expert knowledge is mobilized as an attack on the rights of democratic participation, as certain societal groups are marked as ignorant. This McGoey coins a strong and convincing metaphor in her use of *strategic ignorance*. Her reconstructions of the scandal around *News of the World* as well as her explorations of the relationships of the British and US-American pharmaceutical industry with their respective regulating bodies make her descriptions of strategic ignorance tangible and intuitively understandable.

Against the background of such illustrations, McGoey makes a case to defend equal rights of democratic participation against epistocratic conceptions of rule. Such notions of the rule of expert knowers effectively declares parts of the populace unfit to make democratic decisions on their own life and position in society. McGoey, on the other hand, sees democracy as an 'epistemologically superior' [297] form of rule that inherently dispels the ascription of ignorance to *the masses*, as it values different forms of knowledge as equally legitimate exactly through the equal integration of different groups into the political decision-making process. The verve with which McGoey presents her argument, I believe, sometimes disregards academic rigor, but it is well in line with questioning her own position as an expert knower in her role as an academically educated sociologist.

Yet, this *analytical sociologist* is the other McGoey that the reader gets to know over the course of the book. This McGoey is not content with an intellectual intervention into contemporary discourse and instead pursues a line of investigation probably more akin to the expectations of the academically interested readership. Especially in her second chapter, she outlines a promising conceptual vocabulary around 'oracular power' and 'useful unknowns' and continues to work conceptually later on in the book, as for example when she differentiates strategic ignorance from secrecy: 'Secrecy hides; strategic ignorance creates: constructing plausible rationales [...] for why problems should not exist, and therefore do not require closer investigation or penalization' [294].

Furthermore, this McGoey seeks to embed the study of strategic ignorance historically through a re-reading of classical authors in national economics, political theory and sociology. McGoey makes visible that the reception of classic theories is also part, both today as well as historically, of political negotiations about which parts of a theory are deemed worthy of knowing and which parts are deemed worthy of not knowing. This re-reading stresses the contingent character of expert knowledge about society and how academic discourse, something that might seem quite abstract for certain readers, is grounded in its own regulating practices such as editing and re-editing over the course of which parts of a theory can slowly but surely vanish from edited volume to edited volume (or be rediscovered, for that matter).

To have your cake and eat it

In light of such a setup, to expect a book that can successfully marry interventionist mind-set with sociological analysis seems reasonable. Yet, along with much deserved praise, some critical aspects about *The unknowers* must be raised: as mentioned at the outset, walking the line between academic analysis and political intervention is an ambitious task that probably offers as many dangers as it promises insights. And indeed, *The unkowers* is not always a happy marriage. Throughout the book, McGoey's two souls, the sociologist on the one hand and the public intellectual on the other hand, seem to be locked into eternal struggle. The public intellectual sometimes draws fairly direct comparisons of historical accounts and

contemporary thinking as well as political phenomena, which are illustrative of her argument and used against her political enemies. Yet, the sociologist is aware that such linear comparisons are not sufficiently complex and academically untenable, oftentimes repudiating them on the following pages. In these instances, McGoey's stated intent to settle the score with the 'political right' battles with her analytical precision. Two logics compete in this struggle: while the political commentary of the public intellectual requires some amount of closure to evoke the 'political right' as opposing position, the sociological analysis strives to reveal the complexity around different forms of ignorance that subverts such friend/foe-patterns. Instead, it seeks to resist closure and illuminate the issue from different perspectives.

The aspirations of political intervention and sociological analysis come at a further price from this reviewer's perspective: the book will be measured both against academic expectations and standards as well as against the expectations of a broader audience. From a sociological perspective, McGoey's analytical potential remains largely unexplored. The analytical categories in relation to strategic ignorance that she develops in chapter two are sparsely used in the following chapters and make mostly illustrative appearances. And the categories of the 'autocratic strongs' and the 'autocratic smarts' remain rather blurry as well. McGoey repeatedly distinguishes between 'the wealthy' [226] and 'poorer groups' [245] or uses similar vocabulary such as 'America's power elite' [240] to gauge the factions in the social struggle for unknowing. This terminology does oftentimes not seem sufficiently complex in the face of the wide networks of ignorance that are reconstructed, and McGoey subsequently oscillates between studying strategic forms of ignorance and forms of ignorance, which seem rather unintentional or embedded in a wider social logic (such as adherence to established rules, even if they are not optimal or, at worst, dysfunctional). While in line with her analysis of the relation between micro- and macro-ignorance, the analytical distinction between intentional ignorance and unintentional ignorance becomes blurry and it is not always clear how the two interrelate. Furthermore, through the combination of a vocabulary of an abstract *elite* and the stated focus on strategic forms of ignorance, this blurriness is sometimes in danger of evoking an imagery of a social elite that can somehow freely combine historical interpretations and contemporary

knowledge to suit their goals. The conflictual character of this struggle over interpretational sovereignty seems underappreciated in the book, even though McGoey reconstructs it in her examples, and the heated political climate in both the USA and UK specifically seem to pay testament to it. Some aspects of the critique here presented might also be due to the fact that some passages in the book are republications of McGoey's earlier work, reworked into a larger narrative.

For academic readers, *The unknowers* might thus provide a fertile analytical vocabulary waiting to be explored in further studies. In the field of management and organization studies, the notion of strategic ignorance seems especially apt to connect to recent literature on organizational secrecy that conceptualizes secrecy as performative social process (Costas and Grey, 2014; Costas and Grey 2016). Otto et al. (2019: 11) further emphasises the notion of 'the secret as such' in this line of research and its strategic effects in the social practices of its (re)production. Given McGoey's interest in the organization of (strategic) ignorance, as in the case of the FDA, her concepts might be productively adapted to further explore secrecy and ignorance in organization and management.

From the perspective of a general audience, the book provides a thought-provoking perspective on the notion of knowledge in contemporary society. Without a doubt, McGoey contributes to an important social debate that is marked by buzzwords such as *fake-news* or *post-truth*. *The unknowers* illuminates some of the social practices around seemingly self-understood knowledge and their history. In other instances, the book might seem daunting to many readers. While the chapters that describe real-world examples of strategic ignorance are accessible and informative, significant parts of the book closely interweave these events with fairly demanding academic theories. For an audience less familiar with the writings of Adam Smith, Alexis de Tocqueville, Karl Popper and, in fact, many others, it will probably be quite difficult to follow the narrative of the book at all times.

McGoey's projection of a possible way to construe ignorance in a politically empowering way is 'enlargement', as 'the capacity to imagine one's circumstances differently and the human will and capacity to do so' [312]. She sees Smith and other classic thinkers in line with a form of solidarity that is

'to see and to speak when it is least in one's self-interest to do so, even when others may deride or try to harm you' [321]. Even when one might be sceptical against such idealizations and the attribution of such qualities to the group of the 'greats' [312], it is the contingency of both knowledge and ignorance that McGoey sees as politically empowering: that the boundary of what is considered legitimate knowledge and what is considered ignorance is by no means natural.

references

Brennan, J. (2016) *Against democracy***.** Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Costas, J. and C. Grey (2014) 'Bringing secrecy into the open: Towards a theorization of the social processes of organizational secrecy', *Organization Studies*, 35(10): 1423-1447.

Costas, J. and C. Grey (2016) *Secrecy at work: The hidden architecture of organizational life.* Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Goethe, J.W. von (1962) *Goethe's Faust***.** New York, NY: Anchor Books.

Kant, I. (1784) 'Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?', in J.E. Biester and F. Gedike (eds.) *Berlinische Monatsschrift***.** Berlin: Haude und Spener/ Unger.

Otto, B., J.G. Pors and R. Johnsen (2019) 'Hidden in full view: The organization of public secrecy in Miéville's The city and the city'**,** *Culture and Organization*, 25(2): 91-103.

the author

Philipp Arnold is a doctoral candidate at the Faculty of Business Administration and Economics of the European University Viadrina. He currently studies private security contractors and their activities and role in German Arrival Centres for refugees and asylum seekers. His research interests include politics, violence and aesthetics in management and organization as well as links between organization theory and sociological theory.

Email: parnold@europa-uni.de