How to study strategic ignorance in organizations: A material approach

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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.

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