

strategic unknowns:

The usefulness of ambiguity and ignorance in organisational life

Workshop Report*

***Please note the following is a preliminary report of the meeting, to be further developed in a forthcoming special journal issue derived from talks. For permission to cite the report, please contact Dr. Linsey McGoey, Linsey.mcgoey@sbs.ox.ac.uk. To request draft copies of individual papers, please contact individual speakers directly, or write to Dr. McGoey to be added to a mailing list for information on the forthcoming special issue.**

On October 9th 2009 the Institute for Science, Innovation and Society and the Oxford Centre for Entrepreneurship and Innovation hosted a workshop on Strategic Unknowns: the usefulness of ambiguity and ignorance in organization life. The meeting provoked much dialogue and debate about the 75 participants, who ranged from students and faculty at SBS, the wider University, and numerous academic institutions and policy institutes throughout the UK and Europe.

Linsey McGoey, convenor of the meeting, offered opening remarks, thanking the hosts and organizers, with particular thanks to co-organizers Matthew Harris, a former research fellow at SBS now working at King's College, and Emily Davis at OxCEI. McGoey set the stage for the talks by referencing a variety of literature in the social sciences on the strategic uses of ambiguity and ignorance, stressing that ignorance should not be treated as the absence of knowing or understanding, but as a productive force in itself, often harnessed by managers, politicians and policymakers as a way to assert authority, command funding, and exonerate liability in the aftermath of disasters.

Jacqueline Best, from the University of Ottawa, was the first speaker, offering a description of how policymakers at the IMF have alternatively sought to dispel and to magnify ambiguity when implementing conditionality policies. IMF conditionality – where a country must implement a range of economic policies in order to receive funding – is a framework that has undergone numerous rhetorical and practical reconfigurations since the IMF's inception in the 1940s. Best noted that since John Maynard Keynes' insistence that conditionality should not be imposed as a prerequisite for receiving IMF loans, to the Asian crisis of the late 1990s, when “in some cases over one hundred conditions” were placed on recipient countries, the guidelines governing IMF conditions have been consistently ambiguous. Moreover, Best noted that the ambiguity surrounding the efficacy and the implementation of conditions, through fostering “future flexibility in

interpretation,” is often used strategically “by those in the best position to take advantage of that interpretive power.” Yet the very ambiguity of the guidelines makes it difficult for any one institutional actor to maintain their strategic advantage over the longer term.

Said Business School’s Marc Ventresca drew on an empirical analysis of changing structures at international stock exchanges in order to critically interrogate the question of why ambiguity has been under-examined by management and institutional theorists over the past 40 years. Overwhelmingly more focused on “uncertainty reduction” at the expense of recognizing the persistence of ambiguity as both a hindrance and a resource in organizational life, Ventresca suggested the dearth of attention to ambiguity might stem from the *de facto* assumption that eliminating uncertainty is the best strategy when faced with competing decisions. Drawing on Ventresca and Hallett’s notion of “inhabited institutionalism,” where organizations must grasp the diverse cultures and interests of those living within institutions, recognizing the ways that conflicting cultures might compound the unintended effects of decisions taken to reduce uncertainty, Ventresca’s talk charted new avenues for embracing ambiguity as a useful tool for understanding the limits and possibilities of organizational change.

Christian Borch, from Copenhagen Business School, considered the strategic use of ignorance in light of Foucault and Rose’s assertions that forms of governance are intimately tied to the ability to visualize and track the mobility of political subjects through a range of cartographic and surveillance techniques. He asked the question of, if knowledge is linked to vision, could strategies of ignorance be intimately bound up with other senses, such as touch, smell and hearing?, then drew on crowd theory developed by Canetti, Tarde and Le Bon in order to consider whether the fear of the “touch of the unknown” (Canetti) was something leading the “crowd” to act in alternatively strategic or irrational ways. Borch’s talk raised the parallel question of whether, in general, through privileging the association of knowledge with the ability to visualize the movements of populaces, social theorists have tended to ignore the ways both democratic and non-democratic regimes exploit non-visual senses for political and economic gain.

Brian Rappert, University of Exeter, examined the practices of secrecy, deception and ignorance deployed by various policymakers and state officials seeking to either halt or to enact an international treaty prohibiting the use of cluster bombs, a type of explosive that scatters smaller bombs over large areas. Rappert’s talk addressed some of the methodological and epistemological challenges of studying the strategic use of unknowns; including how social research into ignorance can itself entail the production of ignorance. He described how officials, NGOs, and academics strategically sought to expose what others with opposite political stances did *not* know about the humanitarian effects of cluster bombs in order to defend the need for a treaty. In other words, Rappert suggested how a precautionary form of ignorance – exposing the non-knowledge that prevailed in this area – was used as part of the argumentative strategies to negotiate a comprehensive international treaty.

Carol Heimer, at Northwestern University, draw on empirical fieldwork at five HIV centres, located in the US, Uganda, South Africa, and Thailand, in order to examine the ways that organizations conceal their ignorance by carefully collecting and disseminating *more* information. Relating her study to work in management and social theory on “ceremonial forms of compliance,” Heimer discussed how strategic ignorance is deployed as a tactic for researchers faced with the task of having to communicate risks in

order to obtain informed consent, while at the same time seeking to mitigate or undermine the magnitude of the risks they are forced to convey. In order to fulfil research needs and enrol patients in clinical trials, trial investigators must create *more* ambiguity about how dangerous or safe risks actually are in practice, something that conflicts with the often elusive and impractical goal of trying to clarify risks on informed consent forms.

Steve Rayner, Institute for Society, Innovation and Society, Said Business School, gave the final keynote lecture of the day. He outlined a number of research projects he had been involved with as a director, participant or observer in order to explore how ignorance is constructed in practice to allow individuals to function as if they are unaware of the “uncomfortable knowledge” inconvenient for them to acknowledge or to act on. He listed four “D’s” useful in examining the social construction of ignorance: denial, dismissal, displacement and decoy, and sketched out empirical examples of their use in practice. He then invited Steve Woolgar, one of the chairs at the meeting, to reflect on how strategies of ignorance, as well as strategies of knowledge, relate to techniques to “configure the user” (Woolgar) – or to predetermine what the user of a new technology will want to know or to gain from a new innovation. Rayner suggested that preconceptions about what the potential users of a new technology will want to *avoid* knowing, or are incapable of understanding, often factor in problematic ways in public understanding of science exercises.

Brian Balmer, University College London, and Noortje Marres, InSIS, Said Business School, offered closing remarks. Balmer drew on his previous research in order to describe how, much as the credibility of knowledge claims are contingent on one’s social or political position, the ability to draw on strategic ignorance and to express “legitimate doubt” about a phenomenon are often linked to the scientific and social capital an individual possesses. He stressed that social scientists should examine the social and political context of ignorance claims when examining the strategic uses of ambiguity and non-knowledge in practice.

During her closing comments, Noortje Marres cautioned against the temptation to attribute excessive novelty to discussions of the usefulness of ignorance and ambiguity in political and organizational life. She stressed that the value of ignorance has long been acknowledged and examined by social scientists and philosophers, from Aristotle and Plato, to work during the 20th-century from pragmatists such as Lippmann, to STS scholars today. In comments that raised parallels to Borch’s talk, Marres pointed out that Lippmann, for example, was focused on how knowledge and ignorance of the crowd’s dynamics and desires have been central to work in democratic theory.

Balmer and Marres’ closing comments were followed by an open discussion among all participants which raised important avenues for future inquiries: How do strategies of ignorance and ambiguity relate to work on social and political control? What are the ethical questions raised by a focus on ignorance? How does work on ignorance and ambiguity contrast with work in STS and political theory on the ways that knowledge is linked to the maintenance or disruption of political or economic authority? These questions and others will be addressed in the special journal issue forthcoming shortly.