Knowledge, Ignorance, and Relations of Dominance

Introduction to the mini Special Issue, “Power of Ignorance: Education and Relations of Dominance beyond the Knowledge-Power Model”

(author version)


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Abstract
This mini special issue investigates ethnographically the ways in which the acknowledgement of ignorance gains various meanings and leads to diverse actions depending on the position of those deemed ignorant within the existing relations of dominance. Building on the insight of Hervé Varenne (2007) that acknowledgment of ignorance is a productive moment that pushes one to ponder what one might do with a previously unnoticed object in one’s environment, we add an emphasis on the notion of power and examine various uses of ignorance embedded in given fields of relations of dominance. By showing that being ignorant is not a given state of the dominated, a straight-forward cause or effect of the relations of dominance, or an inevitable precursor to knowing, this mini special issue offers an alternative approach to the existing discussion of knowledge and power, which usually connects having knowledge to being in a relative position of dominance.

Investigating Ignorance

American students living in Japan have found faking ignorance of Japanese customs and language a useful strategy of survival in certain contexts. In Aotearoa/New Zealand, Anglophone Pākehā (white) New Zealanders complained to a school principal about speeches in Māori language in school functions because they could not understand them. In Japan, a discourse that mothers today are ignorant circulated at the time when the Koizumi administration sought to introduce community volunteer support systems for new mothers.
The above situations, which contributors to this mini special issue examine, show that ignorance is not merely a state of lacking certain knowledge. Hervé Varenne (2007) suggests that acknowledgment of ignorance is a productive moment that pushes one to ponder what one might do with a previously unnoticed object in one’s environment. The following collection builds on this understanding of ignorance by introducing the issue of power around the notion of ignorance. It does so by investigating ethnographically the ways in which the acknowledgement of ignorance gains various meanings and leads to diverse actions depending on the position of those deemed ignorant within the existing relations of dominance. In some cases, ignorance was a tool called upon by the dominant to perpetuate the relations of dominance. In other cases, the acknowledgment of ignorance was proactively produced in such a way as to introduce a new method to govern an individual’s conduct. Here, being ignorant is not a given state of the dominated, a straight-forward cause or effect of the relations of dominance, or an inevitable precursor to knowing. By showing various uses of ignorance embedded in given fields of relations of dominance, this mini special issue offers an alternative view to the existing discussion of knowledge and power, which usually connects having knowledge to being put in a relative position of dominance.

In this introductory piece, I review briefly some research on knowledge, ignorance, and power and introduce and situate articles in this mini special issue.

**Studying Ignorance**

In studies of ignorance, ignorance is usually linked to being in relative positions of dominated. In the research on development aids, ignorance is discussed as a way to
legitimize the need for “development” of Third World countries. In order for development projects to exist, “Western scientific knowledge” needs to be valorized, and the existing knowledge of the people whose lives were to be “developed” needs to be considered irrelevant if not an obstacle to the “rational development” of the country. People whose lives are the development target come to be presented as “ignorant”: “without such underdevelopment and ignorance, the West could not represent itself as developed and possess knowledge” (Hobart 1993, p. 2).

A new field of study in history called agnotology, developed by Robert Proctor and his colleagues, investigates “the conscious, unconscious, and structural production of ignorance, its diverse causes and conformations, whether brought about by neglect, forgetfulness, myopia, extinction, secrecy, or suppression” (Proctor 2008, p. 3). Proctor (2008) suggests three kinds of ignorance: (1) a native state of an individual, which is a resource, a spur or prompt for knowledge; (2) a lost realm or selective choice, which is a result of a selective distribution of knowledge; and (3) a deliberately engineered strategic ploy, which makes, maintains, and manipulates ignorance for reasons such as to avoid its improper use (e.g. scientific knowledge), for legal or public relations purposes, or for national security. In agnotology, the basic understanding is that knowledge is power, especially when they analyze the third kind of ignorance, something that is deliberately engineered: there is an assumption that a lack of access to knowledge leads to the position of dominated.

While agnotology is interested in ignorance as a factual state of being to be analyzed, in the following collection we focus instead on what is considered as “ignorance.” That is, we view calling something “ignorance” an act of giving meaning to
a certain situation, not a given fact. What we investigate is the discourses developed around the notion of ignorance and their effects. One of the questions we ask is how the unmarked, unproblematicized state comes to be seen as “ignorance” and what effects they produce.

**Legitimacy and Power**

Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron (1977) argue that the dominant group’s cultural arbitrary becomes legitimate “knowledge” and cultural capital through schooling. Schooling has three roles in the production of certain knowledge as cultural capital. First, the education system creates a single market for cultural capital by producing a single market for qualification\(^2\) (Bourdieu 1977). By accepting the legitimacy of the dominant group’s knowledge, the dominated classes devalue what they know, rendering themselves “ignorant.” The dominated groups provide “a market for … symbolic products of which the means of production (not least, higher education) are virtually monopolized by the dominant classes” (Bourdieu & Passeron 1977, p. 42). Second, through creating the single market of qualification, the education system guarantees “the convertibility of cultural capital into money, at a determinate cost in labor and time” (Bourdieu 1977, pp. 186-187). Third, the education system provides a smokescreen for the connection between educational qualification and the cultural capital dominant class children inherit. The logic of meritocracy, on which the education system is based, masks the fact that what is considered as legitimate knowledge at school is something that is inculcated in family upbringing through familiarization—habitus—not what is
taught at school. Through schooling, relations of dominance get reproduced (Bourdieu & Passeron 1977, p. 128).

Here, for Bourdieu and Passeron, everyone has knowledge; however, only the legitimized knowledge becomes cultural capital and considered “knowledge.” That is, “ignorance” is an acknowledgment of one’s knowledge being de-legitimized. In Bourdieu and Passeron’s formulation, then, ignorance is by definition a symptom of being dominated. However, through the education system that reproduces the legitimacy of the dominant group’s “knowledge” without teaching it (because it is learned only through familiarization at home), being “ignorant” becomes also the cause of being dominated; hence reproduction of relation of dominance.

While resonating with Bourdieu’s theoretical formulation that it is relations of dominance that create the legitimacy of knowledge, this project pushes a step further and argues that the relations of dominance can create legitimacy even in ignorance. That is, where relations of dominance exist, raising the legitimacy of the dominated’s knowledge can be contained by “legitimized ignorance,” which we call the power of ignorance.

In studies of education, many scholars draw on Bourdieu’s notion of cultural capital. For example, multiculturalism in education³ draws on the notion of cultural capital when it aims at diversifying legitimate expression in art, music, and literature (Freedman 1996;), classroom management and teaching styles (D’Amato 1993; Fuller 1996; Shaw 1996), and perspectives in approaching school subjects (Acosta-Deprez 1996; Tate 1996). Multiculturalism undercuts the unity of the cultural market, upon which cultural capital depends, and undermines the idea of cultural consensus: it “recodes practices represented as ‘deficiencies’ as ‘distinctive learning styles’ and as ‘strengths
upon which to build.’ It validates students’ experiences and ‘cultural referents’ as worthy of classroom study and activity’ (Olneck 2000, p. 324).

However, Michael Olneck (2000) argues that such multiculturalism does not question the very foundation of the reproduction of cultural capital insofar as its objective is to redistribute cultural capital by transforming what constitutes cultural capital. That is, struggles over cultural capital in multiculturalism reinforces the value of the game, the mechanism through which relations of dominance are reproduced: the school’s monopoly on sanctioning what cultural capital is, separating those with cultural capital from those without, and expressing these differences in qualification.

Critical pedagogy seeks to change this role of schooling by focusing on the notion of knowledge as produced through pedagogical processes, inspired by Paulo Freire’s works. Freire (1997) critiques the “banking education” that treats knowledge as “a gift bestowed” by teachers upon students. He says it projects “an absolute ignorance onto others [students], a characteristic of the ideology of oppression” (1997, p. 53). Freire calls for “problem-posing education” that treats “knowledge as processes of inquiry” and teachers as well as students as simultaneously “teachers and students” (1997, P. 53; emphasis original) and are critical thinkers that reflect and act upon reality. Following this lead, critical pedagogy calls for schools to become a place of transforming students via self-discovery and new understanding of their own lives and how they are shaped by the constraints and possibilities of the wider social order (Giroux 2007). However, critical pedagogy still remains in the game Olneck criticizes, in which schools and teachers ultimately have a monopoly in sanctioning cultural capital and in producing qualifications (Ellseworth 1989; Fendler 1988).
**Toward Ethnographies of the Power of Ignorance**

In the above studies of knowledge and power in general and of education in particular, while their focuses and theoretical formulations differ, researchers connect “knowledge” to empowerment and “ignorance,” disempowerment. In this mini special issue, we argue instead that ignorance, if it is maintained by the dominant, can be used as a tool to subordinate the already dominated or used to manage and organize others’ lives.

Kumagai and Sato’s article examines the ways American students living in Japan recognized the uses of their ignorance of Japanese language in various contexts and how such uses of ignorance are unevenly mapped among Americans of various racial backgrounds. Some Anglo-American students reported how they could solicit assistance by merely looking ignorant. They also discussed how they could even intentionally fake ignorance of Japanese language in order to dispel an accusation of misconduct. On the other hand, Asian-American students reported that they could not use their ignorance in the same way. Their ignorance of Japanese worked to empower them only when it was expressed as their knowing only English (as a choice of language of communication). Through these comparisons, Kumagai and Sato analyze the link between the degrees of legitimacy ignorance achieves and race politics in Japan.

Doerr’s article analyzes two implications of acknowledgement of ignorance regarding Māori language by mainstream Pākehā (white) New Zealanders in response to Māori speeches at school functions (Māori is an official language of Aotearoa/New Zealand besides English) in Aotearoa/New Zealand. Doerr argues that complaints that the speeches are rude because most of the audience could not understand what is being
said worked to undermine Māori cultural revitalization and support the hegemony of English. Here, she argues, the ignorance of Pākehā regarding Te Reo, developed from not having to learn Māori in the English-dominant Aotearoa/New Zealand, is used to perpetuate the relations of dominance between Pākehā and Māori reflected in the English monolingualism. On the other hand, the presence of other Pākehā who acknowledged their ignorance of Māori language but accepted Māori speeches at school functions, Doerr argues, indexes a new sensibility of ethnic co-existence that does not rely on the knowledge about each other’s culture.

Konishi’s article illustrates how the discourse of “ignorant mothers” employed by childcare specialists signaled a new mode of governing – neoliberal governmetality – while Junichiro Koizumi was prime minister of Japan (2001-2006). To solve the problems of the declining birthrate and the economic recession, the Koizumi administration tried to transform women into working mothers who could help maintain the social security system by both earning salaries and producing children as future labor force. Konishi suggests that the discourse of “ignorant mothers” became a means to motivate Japanese people to create a society in which childrearing of mothers was supported by fellow members, thereby facilitating women to become working mothers. Konishi’s case illustrates the role of acknowledged ignorance in the education in a wider sense, as “continued efforts to change both oneself and one’s consociates through often difficult collective deliberations” (Varenne 2007, p. 1559).

In the Afterword of this mini special issue, Hervé Varenne situates these three articles in the current discussions of knowledge and ignorance in the anthropology of education and beyond, with special attention to the temporal aspects of human interaction
around ignorance and sociability. Zooming out to a wider historical backdrop as well as zooming in to questions individuals face in daily life, Varenne discusses each article and points us to further dimensions and areas of inquiries.

Together, articles in this mini special issue open up a discussion about the relations of dominance that go outside the simple equation of “knowledge is power” by shedding light on the power of ignorance. To the studies of education in particular, our understanding of ignorance complicates the efforts of multiculturalism that seek to turn the knowledge of marginalized cultures into cultural capital. It is because the notion of a power of ignorance suggests that efforts to change the relations of dominance by changing the legitimacy of subjugated knowledge might miss the point; with the relations of dominance intact, legitimacy can be given even to the ignorance, justifying not bothering to know, teach, or respect a subordinated culture and language.

Our focus on ignorance is not new. What is new is our understanding that ignorance is not a necessarily cause and/or effect of being in the position of dominated in opposition to those with knowledge, but potentially a tool of the dominant to further reproduce the relations of dominance or to govern others and themselves in particular ways. Ignorance is an acknowledgement, which produces various readings of the situation, actions, and effects that reflect, perpetuate, subvert, or go beyond the given relations of dominance. By examining the cases that show the power of ignorance, this mini special issue calls for examining critically diverse ways ignorance operates in and around the relations of dominance.

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Reference


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Notes:

1 While Proctor cites several quotes that allude to the notion of ignorance giving one confidence (as in “blissful ignorance”), this was not explored in actual discussions.

2 However, Michael Apple (2000) argues that dominant groups do not impose their views but create situations where the compromises that are formed favor them. Thus, there are compromises, which never guarantee the reproduction of the dominant group’s hegemony.

3 There are many types of multicultural education. For example, James Banks and Cherry McGee Banks (1993; also, see Korn 2002) distinguish (1) an additive approach that celebrates cultural diversity through heroes and holidays; (2) an infusion approach that infuses the mainstream curriculum with new multicultural content; and (3) a transformative approach that alters curriculum fundamentally and encourages student empowerment. The type of multiculturalism under discussion is the second type. For another categorization of multiculturalism, see Goldberg 1994 and Kincheloe & Steinberg 1997.

4 Varenne uses the notion of deliberation as “the joint activity of people talking about something that happened outside their immediate setting; making practical decisions
about what is to happen next; and then publicly reflecting on what just happened. The prototype for such an event would be the deliberation of a jury at the end of a trial” (Varenne 2007, p. 1569).