

The Epistemology of Ignorance: Why We Don't Know What We Don't Know

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Abstract

Epistemology is the theory of knowledge, concerned with the nature of reality, what counts as knowledge, and how knowledge is acquired. While epistemological questions often center on “what” we know and “how” we know what we know, far less attention is given to the inverse: “what” don't we know and “why” don't we know it? Tuana argued that ignorance is not merely a passive gap in knowledge but can be actively produced and sustained through systems of power and oppression. Such constructed ignorance can benefit some people and disadvantage others. To further understand the epistemology of ignorance, students in *HEA8100: Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, offered in the New England College Doctor of Education in Higher Education Administration program, explored the concept through a course assignment. This article includes those brief papers and synthesizes their collective inquiry.

Keywords: epistemology, epistemology of ignorance, systems of power and oppression, constructed ignorance

Epistemology of Ignorance

Bethany Jones

Ignorance can be defined as not knowing something because of missing information (Merriam-Webster, 2025). Is ignorance something society chooses, or is it chosen for them? Arango and Lustig (2022) claimed that “ignorance is often overlooked and underexamined, and so are its ethical consequences” (p. 2). In my experience, ignorance stems mainly from two factors: unfamiliarity and fear. I have heard phrases like, “Well, I didn’t know,” which seem to be attempts at or justifications for one's ignorance. Usually, this happens when language barriers occur.

Research published by the American Psychological Association (2023) claimed, “when given the choice to learn how their actions will affect someone else, 40% of people will choose ignorance, often in order to have an excuse to act selfishly” (para. 1), which the researchers called “willful ignorance” (para. 2). Essentially, people choose to avoid learning or creating new knowledge. The challenge then becomes the task of finding ways to increase people’s knowledge. According to Farnum Street (n.d.), “knowledge then, is made up of things we infer, things we experience, and the way our brain processes both” (para. 35). Based on this statement, people should consider having more experiential learning opportunities allowing them an ability for knowledge growth.

While there are many ways to acquire knowledge, one is through language (W, 2023). Antony W. (2023) stated “The basic goal of language is to communicate knowledge, which can be imperfect at times” (Section 1. Language). The knowledge being conveyed is not received correctly similar to the childhood telephone game. In this game, children sit or stand in a line and the person at one end whispers a phrase into the ear of the student next to them. This

transmission continues to the end of the line. What the last student states they heard is often dissimilar to what was originally whispered. For example, the original phrase, “The purple dog ate my math homework,” could result in “The blue cat chewed my algebra test.”

The imprecision of knowledge transmission through language is compounded by the fact that not everyone speaks the same language. Currently, approximately 7,000 languages are spoken around the world, giving people at least 7,000 ways to acquire knowledge (Boroditsky, 2017). Boroditsky (2017) argued that language can shape the way people think and how they transfer knowledge to one another. An interesting point she argued is that languages can have various sounds and structures, leading us, as humans, to think differently when we hear different words or phrases (Boroditsky, 2017).

Sometimes, the challenge focuses more on how language is produced and received, while other times languages have specific phrases that are unique to that language. I think back to the time I sat in my 4th grade classroom. We did a unit on idioms, and each day we were introduced to phrases like “frog in your throat,” “bee in your bonnet,” or “break a leg,” which, to someone who does not know the meaning behind these, might be concerned that I had a literal frog in my throat.

Boroditsky (2017) discussed how language can differ for example assigning a number to count something or a color, can be different across languages, and even how a word might be assigned a gender. Flashback to my high school French classroom days, I can remember my French teacher saying, “this object is a masculine object, so you say le in front of it, versus this object, which is feminine, you would say la.” At the time, I was confused as to how an object could have an assigned gender. But now I realize I was a bit ignorant, because I did not take the time to listen or truly understand how the French language worked.

Boroditsky (2017) discussed in her presentation that the human mind has flexibility; “Languages, of course, are living things, things that we can hone and change to suit our needs. The tragic thing is that we’re losing so much of this linguistic diversity all the time” (12:19). I cannot help but agree with Boroditsky’s (2017) final thoughts of her lecture; “why do I think the way I do? How could I think differently?” If language is what shapes the mind, and can be a method of knowing, then people need to consider the vast differences languages have, including idioms or the structures of languages.

Through using language people gain the ability to form new knowledge but ignorance inhibits the process of forming new knowledge. Stockly’s (2011) “The epistemology of ignorance” taught some valuable lessons regarding ignorance. It becomes necessary to examine who is harmed and who benefits from blatant use of ignorance (Stockly, 2011). Stockly explained that ignorance can make some knowledge invisible, so that not even the best lenses or glasses can help see it. When viewed in a larger context, ignorance does not serve any real benefit and should be something to be addressed and overcome. Arango and Lustig (2022) suggested that it:

. . . is important to be able to distinguish the origins of our ignorance because when it comes to addressing it, the remedies are different: either correcting wrong beliefs, acquiring information we did not have (which we probably did not know we did not have) or a combination of both. (p. 5)

If language effects one’s capability of forming knowledge, society should have a willingness to better understand the power of language and communication.

Epistemology of Ignorance

Cynthia Burns Martin

Some people (Stockly, 2011) believe that ignorance happens because an oppressive group in power intentionally and actively seeks to erase or make invisible or invalidate the experiences of oppressed identity groups. Some people (hooks, 1994; Stockly, 2011) argued that science and rationality are tools of oppression which should be cast aside in favor of qualitative, non-scientific, identity-based experience, confessions, testimony, and polemics of underrepresented individuals and identity groups.

I firmly concur with those (Cushman, 2016; hooks, 1994; Stockly, 2011) who believe that ignorance happens when diverse voices are drowned out by strident voices, and when diverse epistemologies are supplanted by one epistemology. Where we part ways is over the question of which voices are most strident and which epistemologies are most dominant in the academy now in 2026.

Before I elaborate on my belief about which epistemologies are most dominant in higher education in the United States now in 2026, let me offer a few observations on “Epistemology of Ignorance” (Stockly, 2011). This essay is an opinion piece, editorial in nature. I say this because it is not a logically constructed argument. Instead, Stockly (2011) examined some examples of 20th-century medical practices, the latest in 1951, through a 2011 lens. Stockly loosely cobbled together these few examples as evidence to support Tuana’s (2004) assertion that some types of knowledge or ways of knowing are made invisible by an oppressive class. One example of evidence out of context is when Stockly cited another author (Martin, 1991) who claimed that Henrietta Lacks’s contributions to public health were deliberately “silenced” by the epistemology of ignorance. Stockly’s claim that Lacks’s contributions were “silenced” is not

consistent with the epitaph on Lacks' gravestone, written by her grandchildren, that clearly states the family's perspective that "her immortal cells will continue to help mankind forever" (Henrietta Lacks, 2025). It is true that Lacks's contributions to medical science do not meet 2025 standards for medical research and patient rights, nor 2011 standards for medical research and patient rights. But Stockly is silent on the point of whether Lacks' treatment met 1951 contemporary standards for medical research and patient rights. Stockly is silent, so we will accept Stockly's evidence and agree with Stockly's assertion.

While I believe there is some merit in Stockly's argument that some ways of knowing are less visible, an argument supported by a few secondhand historical examples judged by current standards are not persuasive evidence for a sweeping statement that critical epistemologies ways are intentionally silenced and made invisible by dominant classes to oppress subordinate classes.

As to the question of which voices are most strident and which epistemologies are most dominant in the academy today in 2026, I believe that more than 30 years later, the social sciences have thoroughly embraced what was once a radical rallying cry for change, bell hooks' (1994) recommendation that we should see lived experience of oppression as epistemologically more important than science. Conservative voices are silenced in higher education in the United States today (Gallup & Lumina, 2025), even though the electorate chose a conservative majority in government. The divide between higher education and society has negatively impacted the credibility of higher education in the eyes of the general public (Jones, 2025). This is not good for institutions of higher education, nor is it good for society.

In 2025, the arguments offered in favor of foregrounding critical epistemologies or "ways of knowing" (hooks, 1994) are every bit as aggressive towards rationality and scientific method as the aggression they claim has been wielded against critical ways of knowing. Those who

claim they are oppressed have, in fact, become oppressive dominant voices in the literature of higher education in the United States. Evidence, based on my experience, for this is the foregrounding of the keywords “social justice,” “critical theory,” and “diversity, equity, and inclusion” in accreditor standards and scholarly journal submission guidelines. Critical ways of knowing have quite thoroughly replaced quantitative scientific method and rationality in the social sciences, as evidenced by the literature of this course and program, which I have no reason to believe is not representative of recent literature of higher education in the United States.

I cannot agree with hooks (1994) that in the academy, the epistemology of science should be invalidated or discarded because excesses were committed by zealots in the past. I can agree that epistemology has been used to justify many excesses. For example, faith-based epistemologies or ways of knowing were justification for many excesses throughout history, including events as long ago as the execution of my ancestor Rebecca Nurse at Salem, Massachusetts on July 19, 1692, and as recent as the murder of thousands of people in the Twin Towers on September 11, 2001. However, I believe the real problem for higher education is zealotry, not diverse epistemologies.

Zealots who prioritized scientific epistemology did not invalidate scientific epistemology. Zealots who prioritize critical epistemology do not invalidate critical epistemology either. While the favored epistemologies for the social sciences have changed, zealous intolerance remains rife in higher education in the United States today, in 2026.

Understanding Ignorance: The Perspective of a Red Sox Fan

Caitlin MacNeil

I grew up in a family of generational Boston Red Sox fans, where knowledge about baseball—and particularly the Red Sox—was transmitted as a form of cultural and familial

epistemology. This fandom traces back to my great-grandfather, who drove the MBTA subway through Fenway and Kenmore stations, and passed his love of the team to my father and other relatives. From a young age, my childhood was filled with lessons about Ted Williams' heroism, the injustice of the 1975 World Series, and, above all, the importance of disliking the New York Yankees. Through repeated storytelling, commentary, and shared experiences, I internalized these perspectives as a framework for interpreting not only baseball but also social allegiances and rivalries. In this way, fandom served as an early form of epistemic training, shaping the ways I attended to, valued, and processed information about the world around me.

I understand knowledge to be situational and if situations limit a particular set of knowledge, ignorance is the result (Alcoff, 2007). One's social, cultural, and historical contexts shape the knowledge that is obtained by an individual (Alcoff, 2007), so a lack of knowledge is a consequence of those contexts intersecting in such a way. Ignorance, then, can be reinforced by continued access to the same contexts, limiting one's knowledge even further. When ignorance is rooted in circumstance, it reveals that knowledge is not fixed but can be shaped through intentional and thoughtful effort.

What I learned about the Red Sox, baseball, and fandom are all examples of generational knowledge built on the values of love, trust, and commitment. Being a Red Sox fan was a structurally embedded belief system that was acquired by my personal and regional contexts. Like others with values and opinions, I am only a partial knower in terms of baseball teams and limited in my scope as someone who has lived in Massachusetts my entire life. If all knowledge is partial (Alcoff, 2007), then perspectives limit knowledge and how the knower understands the world to be. The gift of generational fandom and my New England regional experiences are examples of my limited yet unintentional ignorance.

On the opposite, willful ignorance is the act of actively choosing to not know information or experiences, with concern for responsibility or guilt of not knowing (Vu et al., 2023).

Individuals who engage in willful ignorance engage in decisions that keep them aligned with their values and moral responsibilities (Kirfel et al., 2025). Willful ignorance is more than simply not knowing, but rather it is a state of transferring blame or responsibility to others (Kirfel et al., 2025). Although unintentional ignorance may cause harm to the knower and others, there is more harm at stake when the knower willfully ignores knowledge. For example, a large portion of my student peers in college from New York and New Jersey also held belief systems similar to mine but with an affinity for Yankees baseball. There would be significant interpersonal or community conflicts if I held my exact beliefs about my strong dislike for the Yankees and their fans. For a Red Sox fan who actively chose willful ignorance, this may show up as avoidance of their fans, dismissing positive stories about the team, or prevent seeing any game highlights that may acknowledge skills or talent. In this case, willful ignorance functions as a way of protecting identity or emotional investment (Reher et al., 2025).

People's group memberships, including race, gender, class, and cultural affiliations, influence what knowledge is deemed relevant, accessible, or valuable. Social norms and power hierarchies can actively discourage engagement with certain perspectives (Koski et al., 2017). A factor to maintaining my beliefs as a Red Sox fan was the social norms of being a part of my family. Being a fan of any other team, in particular any New York team, was deemed unacceptable and would create distance in my relationships. Structural conditions, such as access to media and other information resources, even further perpetuated my fandom. Red Sox commercials and advertisements are constants in the media in New England, which even

furthered my selective attention to the team. My way of knowing in Sox fandom was impacted by my personal and environmental contexts.

I have intended here to use the analogy of baseball fandom in comparison to the epistemology of ignorance. I recognize that following a professional sports team does not weigh in comparison to the personal identities and social positions that Alcoff (2007) and other theorists have emphasized, but the analogy illustrates how ignorance can operate in low-stakes contexts too. Just as a fan may selectively attend to information that aligns with their team allegiance, individuals with more consequential domains may similarly avoid knowledge that challenges their beliefs or threatens their power. By sharing this context of my personal life, I hope to illustrate that ignorance serves not merely as a lack of knowledge but as a socially and psychologically motivated mechanism for maintaining group cohesion and emotional comfort for group belonging.

Epistemology of Ignorance

Jamie Wronka

Ignorance is often assumed to be a lack of knowledge, an accidental gap that can be filled by acquiring new information. However, scholars in feminist, decolonial, and critical race traditions have asserted that ignorance is not merely an absence, but something actively produced and maintained (Mills, 1997; Tuana, 2004). The epistemology of ignorance is the study of how not knowing is socially constructed, for what purposes, and with what effects (Tuana, 2004). Ignorance is not neutral, but often works in service of power, protecting social hierarchies, and silencing marginalized voices (Mills, 1997; Tuana, 2004).

Why Ignorance Happens

Ignorance happens because knowledge production is deeply tied to power (Mills, 1997). Mills (1997) described “white ignorance” as a systemic feature of racial domination, allowing dominant groups to deny the realities of racism while continuing to reap benefits. Similarly, Tuana (2004) chronicled how patriarchal science erased and distorted women’s sexual knowledge. For centuries, scientific discourse framed the vaginal orgasm as the “mature” form of female pleasure, pathologizing women whose experiences did not align with this model and erasing the centrality of the clitoris. These distortions preserved male authority by subordinating women’s bodies and experiences (Tuana, 2004).

Institutions such as universities, governments, and scientific bodies claim the authority to define what counts as legitimate knowledge, shaping curricula, research funding, and access to academic prestige (Weiler, 2011). David-Chavez et al. (2024) noted that privileging empirical and objective forms of evidence marginalizes experiential, relational, and Indigenous forms of knowing. Institutionalized ignorance preserves hierarchies of race and gender and sustains the legitimacy of dominant institutions.

How Ignorance Happens

Ignorance is actively produced through distortion, omission, and institutional practices. Harvey (2016) demonstrated this in her analysis of Henrietta Lacks and the HeLa cell line. Scientists initially assumed Lacks was White, erasing her identity and later racialized her cells as hypersexual when contamination occurred (Harvey, 2016). Narratives deemed true within the scientific community dehumanized Lacks and reinforced stereotypes, while obscuring the exploitative conditions under which her cells were taken (Harvey, 2016). The ignorance was not an oversight but a racialized construction.

Martin (1991) analyzed how biology textbooks described the egg and sperm using gendered metaphors. Sperm were depicted as active, powerful agents, while eggs were portrayed as passive, waiting to be fertilized. Such language naturalized male dominance and female passivity, embedding stereotypes into what was presented as objective science.

Ignorance is also embedded in educational and assessment systems. Cushman (2016) criticized how the concept of validity in testing creates hierarchies of knowledge. By defining what counts as valid evidence, testing systems exclude forms of knowledge not aligned with Western norms. Even reforms meant to address fairness remain tied to imperial logics (Cushman, 2016). Huff (2022) showed how U.S. public schools reproduce ignorance by teaching Eurocentric histories that celebrate figures like Columbus while erasing Indigenous perspectives.

Factors That Influence Ignorance

First, power and authority play a central role in producing ignorance. Institutions define what counts as legitimate knowledge, reinforcing dominant perspectives while excluding marginalized voices (David-Chavez et al., 2024). Second, cultural narratives justify and normalize ignorance. Myths of discovery, progress, and Manifest Destiny frame colonization as inevitable and beneficial, erasing the violence of dispossession and silencing Indigenous perspectives (Huff, 2022).

Third, epistemological frameworks matter. Western epistemologies emphasize objectivity, individualism, and abstraction, privileging knowledge detached from relationships. In contrast, Indigenous epistemologies emphasize relationality, reciprocity, and humility. David-Chavez et al. (2024) proposed a relational science model grounded in Indigenous values, showing how knowledge can be produced through community accountability and respect for

interconnectedness. When Western frameworks dominate, relational approaches are dismissed, sustaining epistemic inequities.

My autistic son's public-school team preferred applied behavioral analysis methods to approaches that center relationship building and sensory needs. Refusing alternate strategies harmed his ability to participate in public-school education. The educators were not consciously choosing to harm him; they believed they were supporting his education. However, when we presented an alternative viewpoint, there was a power struggle, and they refused to consider another viewpoint. In this way, my son's teachers were rooted in their ignorance and firm in their belief that the "objective" strategies of behaviorism were the only appropriate option, despite many first-person testimonies of harm (Stop ABA, Support Autistics, 2019).

Finally, political agendas influence ignorance. By prohibiting the teaching of systemic racism, policymakers not only restrict knowledge but actively promote White ignorance, framing equity efforts as threatening or divisive thereby protecting their power (Mills, 1997).

Personal and Societal Impacts

On the personal level, distorted knowledge shapes identities and lived experiences. Tuana (2004) delineated how scientific distortions of female sexuality produced shame and pathology for women. Harvey (2016) highlighted how the erasure of Henrietta Lacks' identity and the exploitation of her cells devastated her family, who were denied recognition, consent, and control.

Within society, ignorance justifies and reproduces inequities. Mills (1997) argued that white ignorance sustains systemic racism by preventing acknowledgement of injustice. Huff (2022) showed how colonial curricula limits students' ability to critically engage with history, weakening democratic participation. Cushman (2016) revealed how assessment systems act as

gatekeepers in higher education, disproportionately disadvantaging marginalized students by defining validity in exclusionary terms. The broader effect is a society where inequities are normalized, mistrust in institutions grows, and opportunities to learn from diverse epistemologies are lost.

Conclusion

Ignorance is not merely the absence of knowledge but an active social construction to preserve power. It occurs through omission, distortion, and institutional practices. Factors such as authority, cultural narratives, epistemic frameworks, and politics all shape how ignorance is produced and maintained. The consequences are both personal, affecting identity, agency, and dignity, and societal, reinforcing systemic inequities and narrowing the scope of what can be known. Addressing ignorance requires valuing plural epistemologies and cultivating what Harvey (2016) called an “ethic of knowing,” one that respects difference and seeks knowledge on just and relational terms.

Epistemology of Ignorance

Julie Hackert Zahn

Why Ignorance Happens

The epistemology of ignorance examines how and why ignorance persists, even when evidence is readily available. Studying this concept is important because it reveals the mechanisms through which individuals and societies remain unaware of information or truths that are directly accessible to them. Moreover, it invites critical reflection on whose knowledge is legitimized and whose perspectives are marginalized or silenced. As Mills (1997) argued, ignorance is not merely the absence of knowledge; rather, it is often actively produced and sustained in order to preserve existing systems of power. Similarly, Tuana (2004) emphasized

that “ignorance is not a simple lack. It is often constructed, maintained, and disseminated and is linked to issues of cognitive authority, doubt, trust, silencing, and uncertainty” (p. 194).

Together, these perspectives position ignorance as a social and political phenomenon rather than an individual failure.

How Ignorance Happens

Reflection on my own upbringing highlights several of the processes through which ignorance can develop. I was raised in a household where access to information was limited, and much of what I knew about the world came directly through my parents. As a result, certain forms of knowledge remained inaccessible. These limitations were reinforced by broader social and cultural structures. For instance, we were not permitted to watch television, which significantly restricted exposure to alternative viewpoints and contemporary social discourse. Additionally, being raised within a strict Catholic cultural tradition meant that many questions were addressed primarily through a faith-based framework, leaving little room for negotiation, critique, or alternative interpretations.

Stockly (2011) explained that “if we want to more fully understand how our culture produces information, we must also understand the practices that account for not knowing” (para. 1). In my own experience, such practices of “not knowing” were embedded within familial expectations and cultural norms that shaped both what information was available and which questions were considered acceptable. These early structures contributed to a narrow understanding of the world that persisted well into adulthood.

Factors That Influence Ignorance

Human beings can only process and retain so much information and the way knowledge is presented has a significant impact on understanding. People learn in different ways, and when

information does not match their learning style, comprehension can break down. I experienced this myself when I first read about the epistemology of ignorance. In written form, the material was difficult to fully understand and retain. However, during the doctoral residency during which the topic was discussed in a group setting, I was able to grasp the concept much more clearly. Dialogue and discussion helped me process the material in a way that simple reading did not.

In addition to cognitive limits, psychological factors contribute to ignorance. People often avoid information that might challenge them. For instance, fear of being wrong, embarrassed, or uncomfortable may keep someone from exploring new knowledge. Confirmation bias, the tendency to notice or accept only information that supports existing beliefs, reinforces this process. Fricker (2007) described this as an *epistemic injustice*, where certain voices or perspectives are excluded, leaving gaps in understanding that are socially reinforced. Ignorance can also stem from choice. At times, individuals consciously decide not to know. This form of willful ignorance occurs when people choose to accept only what they already believe, closing themselves off to new perspectives. Medina (2013) called this *meta-ignorance*, not only failing to know, but also failing to recognize the limits of one's own knowledge. In such cases, ignorance does not result from limited resources or cognitive barriers but from a lack of openness to change.

Broader Personal and Social Impact

The personal and social impacts of ignorance are far-reaching. On a personal level, ignorance may restrict growth, limit perspective, and narrow one's understanding of the world. In my own experience, growing up in an environment with limited access to outside information delayed my ability to consider diverse perspectives until later in life.

This awareness has strongly shaped how I reflect on my own political beliefs. I recognize that my views are influenced by the knowledge I hold, the environment in which I was raised, my education, my career path, and the experiences that have shaped my values over time. As I have grown older, I have come to understand that beliefs do not develop in isolation, but rather through a complex interaction of personal history and social context. At times, I find myself questioning how I arrived at certain conclusions or why I continue to support or challenge particular political ideas.

Although this process of self-examination is often uncomfortable, I believe it is necessary. I strive to approach my own beliefs with curiosity rather than certainty, recognizing that ignorance can exist even when one feels confident in their views. By acknowledging the limits of my understanding and remaining open to learning, I aim to engage with political differences thoughtfully and without undue bias, even when doing so challenges my deeply held assumptions.

On a societal level, ignorance is not neutral. As Mills (1997) described, it can serve as a tool to maintain social hierarchies, privileging some forms of knowledge while silencing others. Ignorance can reinforce systemic inequalities, particularly around issues of race, gender, and class, by obscuring marginalized voices. For example, ignoring the lived experiences of women or people of color in educational settings diminishes the richness of collective understanding and sustains existing power structures. Stockly (2011) underscored this point when noting that “the epistemology of ignorance serves to marginalize types of knowledge and erase or simply make invisible what was once and has always been available” (para. 1). Recognizing the epistemology of ignorance allows us to challenge these dynamics and create more equitable spaces for knowledge and truth.

In conclusion, it is the responsibility of each individual to seek knowledge actively so that they do not remain ignorant. While learning from others can be valuable, it is not the responsibility of individuals, particularly those from marginalized groups, to educate us through their lived experiences. We must take ownership of our own learning by engaging with diverse sources of knowledge, questioning our assumptions, and remaining open to perspectives that challenge our worldview.

Conclusion

Gavin W. Henning

Through their essays, Bethany, Cynthia, Caitlin, Jamie, and Julie explored the epistemology of ignorance in their own lives illustrating how knowledge is cultural, historical, and contextual and articulated. Through their examples, they show how familial upbringing, religious traditions, sports affiliations, language, and social norms shape what is both known and not known. Ignorance does not always result from systems of power and oppression; however, when it is, voices, perspectives, and ways of knowing are silenced limiting available knowledge. Ignorance produced through power and oppression reifies those systems to privilege some and subjugate others. For educators to fulfill their responsibilities to advance knowledge, we must investigate not only what we do not know, but why we do not know it.

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