

# Session 4. Might ignorance be virtuous?

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## 1 Clear cases of ignorance being needed, virtuous, or helpful

Let's start with some clear cases where ignorance is either **needed**, **virtuous**, or **helpful**.

**The lazy student and the exam.** Suppose that I haven't prepared well for an exam because I'm lazy. We can set up a situation where it's better for me to be ignorant of my lack of preparation (say I'll perform better if I'm confident).

**Effect of stereotyping on performance.** e.g. Margaret Shih (and collaborators) have worked on **stereotype threat**. I'm better off being ignorant of these stereotypes, if I'm subject to stereotype threat. (**Note:** Stereotypes can also have a *positive* effect on performance.)

**The persuasive but flawed research.** Suppose I want to use work from a field adjacent to my own. Suppose it is persuasive, complicated (so I can't be reasonably expected to inspect it in full detail), but ultimately flawed research (perhaps it even has a false conclusion). It seems reasonable to suppose I'm better off being ignorant of this research.

**Avoiding unconscious experimenter collaboration.** Often, experimenters will **deliberately** be ignorant about certain factors (e.g. who's in the control group). Particularly important in the cognitive sciences where we need to avoid unintended experimenter collaboration and subconscious cues. (e.g. Oskar Pfungst's studies on "Clever" Hans the Horse.)

**Question.** Before we get going into the article, are there other salient examples?

## 2 Kourany on cognitive difference research

Kourany's article is embedded within a larger literature on the relationship between **disempowered groups** and **epistemology**.

e.g. hermeneutical injustice, standpoint theory, epistemic injustice more broadly.

Because so much of this concerns the nature of **knowledge**, we should expect there to be corresponding **agnotological** questions.

Kourany's article concerns:

**Main Question.** Should we pursue cognitive difference research between different groups?

**Kourany's Main Conclusion.** Whether cognitive difference research should be pursued is a question of comparing **rights** via a **cost-benefit analysis**, and on this basis a lot of it should not be pursued (given the current sociopolitical context).

**Rough** structure of argument: For **much** cognitive difference research, the **right to equality** overrides the **right to freedom of research**, on the basis said cost-benefit analysis, especially when we bear in mind some **analogies with other areas**.

**Key point for cost-benefit analysis:** Cognitive difference research can reinforce **harmful stereotypes** (e.g. women bad at math).

Some distinctions are needed:

**Cognitive difference research** is the study of different cognitive features corresponding to different groups (e.g. supposed higher risk-taking in men, analyticity vs. empathy, relative IQ levels of different groups).

Given a purported cognitive difference, it can have a **biological** root (e.g. in neurobiology) or a **non-biological** root (e.g. it's a "merely" a case of practice).

**Note:** We might dispute the strength of this distinction, especially if you think that cognitive differences supervene on neurobiological differences.

Given a purported biological cognitive difference, it can be **innate** or **acquired**.

**Note:** Pertinent given neuroplasticity (especially during early development of the human organism).

We can also relativise to **dimension** of cognition (e.g. intelligence, empathy, risk-taking...).

We can then divide Kourany's **Main Question** question according to various parameters.

For example:

**Modified Question 1.** Suppose that there are **no** innate biological cognitive differences (along some dimension) between groups. Should we pursue research into them?

**Modified Question 2.** Suppose that there **are** innate biological cognitive differences between groups (along some dimension). Should we pursue research into them?

This will result in different kinds and strength of conclusion.

e.g. A negative answer to **Question 1** is a very strong conclusion.

e.g. A negative answer to **Question 2** is less strong, but still interesting.

Of course this is complicated by the fact that we don't know what the answer will be before starting out.

**Questions of clarification?**

## 2.1 A rights-based approach

Kourany uses a rights-based approach.

In particular, we look at possible conflicts between the **right to freedom of research** and other rights (e.g. **gender equality**).

Clearly we **do** think that rights conflict and can be curtailed.

e.g. My freedom of speech does not extend to speech that endangers others.

Pretty much no-one is a free-speech absolutist, even when they claim they are (e.g. Elon Musk's recent pickle).

**Question.** Do we need the rights-based approach?

(Perhaps Kourany's arguments can be given a utilitarian-ish spin? Either rule or standard.)

## 2.2 Complication: A lot of cognitive difference research is just bad science

**Example.** IQ tests as a measure of intelligence.

IQ tests are considered by many to be a poor measure of intelligence in general, though they do measure a certain kind of aptitude.

So, assuming that IQ is a bad measure of intelligence, any research that takes IQ to be straightforwardly measuring intelligence is flawed.

This goes for the move from **biological** to **innate** too (much research doesn't exclude environmental factors even if there are biological ones).

**Question.** It might be nice to think about false advertising from last week at this point?

**Question.** What about bad research with socially-positive outputs?

I think it's pretty clear that the most interesting cluster of questions concerns whether we should do this kind of research when we assume **that the research conducted will accurately reflect reality**.

Of course if you do crappy research that reinforces harmful stereotypes, this **shouldn't** be done.

**Question.** How to handle this **practically**?

Especially when there's evidence to suggest that **merely hearing** harmful stereotypes can be detrimental (e.g. in the cases of stereotype threat).

## 2.3 Cost-benefit analyses and handling conflicting rights

**Observation.** Resources for research are **finite**.

The question is then how we should **direct** research support.

This can be via:

1. Legislation.
2. Social norms and the profession.

I think clearly (2.) is a **preferable** manner of directing research, but is it **practical**?

e.g. I think we shouldn't rely on the profession to regulate a study of head trauma performed by giving people head trauma.

**Point 1.** Cognitive difference research **can** be (prima facie) helpful. (e.g. changing test scores for women in math)

**Point 2.** Cognitive difference research **can** be (prima facie) harmful. (e.g. stereotype threat)

This harm affects disempowered groups **more**.

**Precedent 1.** 1993 US National Institutes of Health Revitalization Act forced the inclusion of women and minority ethnic groups in biomedical research.

**Precedent 2.** Review boards and ethics commissions protecting rights violations in the context of research.

**Precedent 3.** Genomic research is controlled (e.g. into vaccine-resistant mousepox) with good reason.

**The core argument:** Via effects like stereotype threat, cognitive difference research, especially the kind that purports to be about innate biological differences, is harmful and shouldn't be carried out (especially **compared** with these other areas).

## 2.4 Some questions

**Question.** Is **every** instance of research freedom restriction **agnotological**? (Especially with respect to **Precedent 2**).

**Question.** How do cost-benefit analyses relate to **epistemic** or **non-epistemic** values?

**Question.** e.g. There's some of the usual questions about known/unknown risk and expected utility here.

e.g. large possible utility gain, large risk, low possible disutility vs. large possible utility gain, low risk, large disutility.

**Question.** *How* severe are harms resulting from cognitive difference research?

**Question.** **How** severe are the risks?

**Question.** The conclusions might be sensitive to the socio-political context. Are they?

There is a possible answer to the intuition that the genomics research vs. cognitive difference research here are disanalogous; both should be understood as context-relative, but this (perhaps?) just trivialises for genomics research.

But note: Even this might be argued to be context sensitive. In a case in which the risk of deliberate/accidental viral release is zero, we might think it's allowed. It's just that this is perhaps a **very remote possibility**.

## 3 A more ambiguous case? Solomon on neurodiversity

**Hermeneutical injustice** occurs when a group lacks the concept or linguistic resources to express their predicament.

**Canonical example.** Sexual harassment.

Miranda Fricker commenting on Susan Brownmiller and Carmita Wood:

We realized that to a person, every one of us—the women on staff, Carmita, the students—had had an experience like this at some point. . . . And none of us had ever told anyone before. It was one of those click, aha! moments, a profound revelation

Plausibly the case of **Asperger's Syndrome** has some similarities with cases of hermeneutical injustice.

This classification was retired.

Some felt harm as a result.

This looks like a case of hermeneutical injustice.

But it's unclear if there were not corresponding harms conferred by "othering" that were combated by retiring the term.

The case of hermeneutical injustice highlights something we've seen already:

**Propositional Ignorance.** Ignorance of a proposition you can express.

**Conceptual Ignorance.** Ignorance of the concepts required to express a proposition.

Clearly related to *p*-predicaments and *b*-predicaments.

We have to think not just of **what** we're researching.

But the **set up** concepts are important.

These can **also** figure into **cost-benefit** analyses.

There will be choices to be made **any** time we have **underdetermination**.

**Question.** Are there examples of this phenomenon **outside** the sociopolitical context?

**Question.** Might we think there are cost-benefit analyses applying to the selection of concepts in these areas?

## 4 Analogy with slurs

Example (taken from Adam Sennett) **slurs**.

When discussing a slur like "limey", I feel OK to put it in quotation marks (especially as I'm English).

But there are other slurs "S" that I **won't** put in quotation marks when discussing.

The reason, even the appearance of the slur within quotation marks, can cause **offence** and **distress**.

**Conjecture.** I should only write "S" in full where the **shock-value is necessary** for establishing or articulating my point

In the current context, it's not needed.

Perhaps we need a **finer grain** of classifications of cognitive difference research (even purporting to be innately biological!).

At the end of the day though, we're faced with the following question:

**Question.** How to analyse what's **important** and **direct research in general**?

Obviously this is a **really** hard question.

## **5 Housekeeping**

**Presentation** for next session?