Making it Unknown: An Epistemology of Ignorance in South Africa

Monique Whitaker

University of the Witwatersrand
What is an epistemology of ignorance?

The situated knower

Social groups and epistemic advantage

Structures and systems of ignorance

Faulty epistemic norms

Epistemology of ignorance in South Africa

Unemployment rates by race

Speaking “properly” in South Africa

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On matters related to race, the Racial Contract prescribes for its signatories an inverted epistemology, an epistemology of ignorance, a particular pattern of localized and global cognitive dysfunctions (which are psychologically and socially functional), producing the ironic outcome that whites will in general be unable to understand the world they themselves have made.

Charles Mills, *The Racial Contract*
The situated knower

- Limits of ‘S-knows-that-\( p \)’ epistemology
The situated knower

• Limits of ‘S-knows-that-\( p \)’ epistemology

• Knowledge claims:
  – “Transformation of the demographics of South African academic staff will strengthen our universities.”
  – “These medical students are well prepared to work as doctors.”
  – “The last paper I went to was an example of excellent scholarship.”
The situated knower

- Limits of ‘S-knows-that-p’ epistemology
- Knowledge claims
- Significance of a given knower’s identity
The situated knower

- Limits of ‘S-knows-that-p’ epistemology
- Knowledge claims
- Significance of a given knower’s identity
- Perspective without relativism
The situated knower

- “A prodigy in the mould of Mozart or Rimbaud”
The situated knower

- “A prodigy in the mould of Mozart or Rimbaud”

- "prodigy"
- "in the mould of"
- fluent English speaker
- familiarity with formal, literary British texts
- European cultural background
The situated knower

- “A prodigy in the mould of Mozart or Rimbaud”

What is determinative of ignorance is the interplay between individual epistemic situatedness—my location, experience, perceptual abilities, and so forth, not all of which will be relevant in any given case—and what is called for in reaching conclusions about this particular object of inquiry.

Linda Martín Alcoff, ‘Epistemologies of Ignorance’
Social groups and epistemic advantage

- Differences in daily practices of social groups affect their relative epistemic positions
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- Epistemic disadvantage for marginalised groups:
  - Less access to education
  - Assumed lesser epistemic authority

Role of social identity in the development of a critical consciousness

Bad epistemic practice / genuine epistemic difference

Possibility of error remains
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Social groups

Unattributed photo.
Social groups

“It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.”

_The Souls of Black Folk_, WEB Du Bois
Structures and systems of ignorance

- The epistemic consequences of ‘whiteness’
Structures and systems of ignorance

- The epistemic consequences of ‘whiteness’

"[W]hites have a positive interest in ‘seeing the world wrongly,’ to paraphrase Mills. Here ignorance is not primarily understood as a lack—a lack of motivation or experience as the result of social location—but as a substantive epistemic practice that differentiates the dominant group. [...] The structural argument suggests that as a member of a dominant social group, I also may have inculcated a pattern of belief-forming practices that created the effect of systematic ignorance. I may be actively pursuing or supporting a distorted or an otherwise inaccurate account.

Alcoff, and Mills, quoted in Alcoff, 2007: 47–48; original emphasis"
Faulty epistemic norms

- Problematic epistemic motivations, and the difficulty of diagnosing these
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- Knowledge as social product:
  - Women’s interrupted career paths
  - Latinos’ low scores on standardised tests
  - Disparities in mortality rates between African-American and white men
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  - Instrumental rationality is epistemically flawed
  - If reason is restricted, inevitable result is the construction of ignorance
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- Said’s *Orientalism* provides a clear example of this:
  - Problem wasn’t one of inaccuracy, illogicality, or ideologism
  - Lack of reflexivity and awareness of epistemic perspective
  - Reproduced ignorance
Faulty epistemic norms

barbiesavior Only hours after landing I knew that I needed no more time to make a permanent, life-long decision. One week later, I committed. The country of Africa has captured my heart, and now, my heart has captured Africa. “Te Amo” means “love” in African. africaafricanwhitegirl#noregrets
forlife #myheart #mysoul #lovethesothers
loveorphans #called #change #soul
africa #barbiesavior #hero #freediff
orphans #blessed #menderheart
thewords #oneheart #greatwhitehope
disciplesthestreets #likes #forlikes
followme #mission #therealworld #blessed
purpose #thirdworld #stayprayedup
#wheredemorphanset

As I was away for what seemed like an eternity, I couldn’t help but continue to be convicted by my wasteful tears. I have now begun collecting them, one by one. Each one has meaning. Each one has purpose. God is revealing BIG things to me lately. I can’t wait to share it with you! #ransforme #Gods #prevail #stayhearts #tearsoflove #tearsofforAfrica #youneverlearnawayfromhere #godblesstheearsdowninafrica #tearsoflastobest #tearsforchange #collectyourtears
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“[Whites’] share of the wealth, jobs and land will decline commensurately over the next 30 years. As the BBBEE noose tightens, it may become increasingly difficult for white South Africans to find employment. Inevitably, many will be forced to leave South Africa.

FW De Klerk, speech to the Conference on Unity in Diversity, 2016.”
Epistemology of ignorance in South Africa

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- Implicit assumption:
  Whites are currently less able to find employment than members of other racial groups.
  This racial disparity is unjust.
Epistemology of ignorance in South Africa

#UCTExpression4214, Cape Town:

This has been irritating me for so long now and I have actually had enough. This country we live is so "amazing" and "full of freedom". Well guess what? That is all bullshit. The only thing this country is good for is contradictions at its best. We fight for freedom and we are against racism and all of that, right? WRONG. This country is just backwards. Whites are blatantly told that we cannot get the job because we are white and they are only hiring blacks. That's Old Mutual banks for you. Why must blacks only give 80% and are offered the best of the best in universities or whatever when whites have to give 100% and get offered nothing? All this talk of lowering unemployment and whites who have been working in a company for years are being fired so that unskilled black people can be employed in their place and then given all the top positions. This is all just unfair. If we say something about liking being white, or why must blacks get everything, then we are racist but if its the other way around its okay? I am so sick of you all thinking you can get away with everything by scraping past with the bare minimum and we have to give our best but its still not enough. Yes, I'm white in case you haven't figured that out. (29 September 2013)

Francois Gilbert Collin, Pretoria:

‘Cuba to be paid R6 billion to manage South African ground water | praag.org’

Are the Cuban experts BB-BEE compliant? Why not simply employ the unemployed South Africans with the necessary skills that cannot get jobs because they are too white? I’m sure it would be a lot cheaper and more productive! (5 July 2013)
Unemployment rates by race

Graduate broad and narrow unemployment rates by race (1995 – 2011)

Van der Berg and Van Broekhuizen, 2012: 39
# Unemployment rates by race

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race &amp; gender</th>
<th>Total population (15–34)</th>
<th>Unemployed*</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Black male</td>
<td>8,187,887</td>
<td>2,892,127</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black female</td>
<td>8,057,561</td>
<td>3,677,561</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White male</td>
<td>603,917</td>
<td>82,605</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White female</td>
<td>593,795</td>
<td>132,395</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indian male</td>
<td>234,022</td>
<td>51,365</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indian female</td>
<td>219,281</td>
<td>74,199</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coloured male</td>
<td>810,492</td>
<td>260,793</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coloured female</td>
<td>822,535</td>
<td>321,577</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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Speaking “properly” in South Africa

**Tessa Schlesinger, Cape Town:**
I truly have an issue with people who are less than intelligent. I am tired of people who can’t speak English properly and then they get agitated because I am asking for clarification and they are too ignorant to comprehend my question. The worst of it is that they think you are stupid because you can’t understand what they saying.

(28 August 2016)

**Robyn Hurly, Sandton, to Gautrain:**
Stuck in a lift for almost 45 minutes in Sandton Gautrain station. You think a place like this would have staff on site to assist in situations like this. Instead Gautrain has idiots who can’t speak English properly who think there’s no urgency to getting people out of a space with little to no ventilation. There was a pregnant woman struggling to breath in that space. Gautrain 1 step closer to metrorail.

— feeling angry in Sandton, Gauteng.

(11 March 2015)

**Trevor Trout, Roggebaai:**
We at the Mc Donald’s waterfront. Bad service by the black staff on duty. They cannot speak English properly. Eventually we get our order and take a seat close to the TV set. Only to discover that the person sitting next to us watching the soccer game on the TV dressed in an Imvula security uniform is on duty. Its heart sore to see how the black are ruining our country and it’s expected that we say nothing, because when you do comment you racist.

(18 October 2014)

**Sandra Sharon Crompton Castres, Port Elizabeth:**
never knew it was such a mission yo get a sim swop..And Vodacom needs to hire call centre operators that understand and speak English properly!!!!!!!!!!!!Pissed off!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

(10 December 2012)

**Rhodes Confession 992, Rhodes University, Grahamstown:**
Dear confessor #988, Stop encouraging people from thinking that it is in any way appropriate to spell incorrectly, use high-school text or murder the English language. You are studying at an English University, and it does not matter what your background is. If you can’t speak the language properly, then save yourself from looking stupid and just don’t speak. If you are going to publish someone for others to read, GET IT RIGHT.

Kind regards, a proud supporter of protecting English from being mauled to death.

(30 June 2013)

**Da Exit-Syabangena (@MidasDaExit):**
I’m Zulu but you diss me because I can’t speak proper English. Why?
Constructing ignorance

- Combining perspectives on the epistemology of ignorance:
  - Importance of knower's situation (Code)
  - Epistemic effects of social group identity (Harding)
  - Structural determinants of epistemic position (Mills)
  - Problematic epistemic norms (Horkheimer, Alcoff)
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- Implicit, assumptions:
  English is the most important linguistic standard
  Every South African ought already to speak English
  English proficiency is attainable by all
  Everyone has the time, money, energy, and access necessary to achieve English fluency
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- Following epistemic norms of reasoning rationally, requiring independent evidence, etc.:
  - Cannot compensate for faulty, unexamined ends
  - Generates further ignorance
### Constructing ignorance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Job site</th>
<th>Number of job listings in which proficiency in the specified language is required/an advantage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mitula (job.mitula.co.za)</td>
<td>23,728</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Careerjet (careerjet.co.za)</td>
<td>14,759</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>indeed (indeed.co.za)</td>
<td>13,406</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PNet (pnet.co.za)</td>
<td>1,833</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jobmail (jobmail.co.za)</td>
<td>851</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career Junction</td>
<td>716</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Constructing ignorance

- Structural predominance of English:
  - Ease of using English
  - Ease of English monolingualism

Perverse motivations for sustaining this ignorance:
- Of others’ reality and discrimination
- Of harms of non-native education
Constructing ignorance

- Structural predominance of English:
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- English fluency and ignorance of black South African languages:
  Cultivates ignorance of barriers to English fluency, and burden of non-mother-tongue language use
  Promotes naturalistic fallacy—English proficiency (and accent) as measure of intelligence
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• Perverse motivations for sustaining this ignorance:
  Of others’ reality and discrimination this encourages
  Of harms of non-mother-tongue education
[S]tatistics by the CHE (2010; 2013) have consistently shown that African learners have the highest dropout rate in higher education and are least likely to complete their studies in minimum time. This applies at both the undergraduate and postgraduate levels (CHE 2010; 2013). Thus, while formal access (e.g. in terms of the statistics) to higher education has improved in South Africa since the dawn of the democratic era, epistemological access, incorporating but not limited to assumptions about the nature of reality, ways of knowing and thinking, and the relationship between the knower and that which is to be known (Watson-Gegeo 2004), remains a challenge (Boughey 2002). It has been argued that language is important as far as epistemological access is concerned; this incorporates the metaphorical use of language and its implication for teaching and learning (Boughey 2002; Watson-Gegeo 2004). Attention to epistemological access is critical if South Africa is to attain the democratic ideals enshrined in its noble constitution (Morrow 1993).

Gregory Kamwendo, Nhlanhla Mkhize, and Nobuhle Ndimande-Hlongwa
‘Editorial: African Languages in South Africa’s Dispensation of Freedom and Democracy’
Constructing ignorance

Genocide Watch warns Boers to ‘defend themselves’

June 4 2010 – The political group Genocide Watch has warned members that they should be prepared to protect themselves against escalating violence.

“If racists like Julius Malema and his ilk come after you, don’t think they will ask you to put up or shut up. They will do exactly what they said they would do, which is to put you down,” wrote Stanton.

Stanton continues: “As bad as this is, it is only the beginning. If they are not stopped now, they will become worse. There will be no more hoping that they will be stopped. They will have to be stopped.”

Are SA whites really being killed ‘like flies’? Why Steve Hofmeyr is wrong

Published: 24 June 2013 Last updated at 07:17

South African musician Steve Hofmeyr has claimed that the number of white South Africans killed by blacks would fill a soccer stadium, that white Afrikaners are being killed “like flies” and that a white farmer is murdered every five days. But the claims are incorrect and grossly exaggerated. In fact, whites are less likely to be murdered than any other race group.

Key facts

- 32.12 The number of murders per 100,000 people in South Africa in 1970
- 30.9 The number of murders per 100,000 people in SA in 2011/12
- 1.8% The number of white murder victims in a police analysis of 2011/12
If we take \( W \) to be a representative of white US thinking, and \( g \) to be the proposition, “Black America’s grievances are real”, then “\( W \)’s ignorance involves not a simple lack of knowledge of \( g \) nor the embrace of a false belief about \( g \) (the false belief that \( g \) is false). \( W \) ignores \( g \), avoids as much as he can thinking about \( g \). He wants \( g \) to be false, but if he treats \( g \) as something that could be false, then he would also have to regard it as something that could be true. Better to ignore \( g \) altogether, given the fearful consequences of its being true. Better not to have thought at all than to have thought and lost. \( W \) is quite happy about not believing \( g \) is true but unhappy about not believing \( g \) is false. Ignoring \( g \), not thinking about it, allows \( W \) to stand by \( g \)’s being false, to be committed to \( g \)’s being false, without believing \( g \) is false.

Spelman, ‘Managing Ignorance’
Playing the Race Card

THERE is more than a hint of "cry-baby capitalism" in Khologelo Maponya’s recent article (Hard reality of economic racism, March 3). Rather than the colourless, cut-throat nature of competition, Maponya would have us believe his business is the victim of a conspiracy.

Conveniently enough, the cause of this conspiracy is racism.

The absurd nature of Mr Maponya’s claim is revealed in his proposed solution: "Government departments and institutions should also empower black business. The Preferential Procurement Policy Framework Act of 2000, which gives effect to section 217 of the Constitution, needs to be applied rigorously."

In other words, Mr Maponya wants a free ride for his business.

Michael Moore, letter to Business Day, 2016
Constructing ignorance

Discrimination can also cause unemployment. In South Africa many jobs were reserved for whites during the apartheid era. Qualified people from other population groups did not have access to these jobs. By contrast, since the mid-1990s affirmative action (or employment equity) has caused unemployment among qualified, skilled and experienced people who happened to belong to a particular race group.

Mohr and Fourie, 2004: 565
Constructing ignorance

I continue to be amazed by the extent to which the work [Alexis de Tocqueville’s 1835/1840 *Democracy in America*], the first volume in particular, maintains its status, given what the author writes in the chapter on “... The Three Races ...” and given Tocqueville’s apparent lack of firsthand, respectful, open-minded experiences with Negroes (or with “Indians”). His ignorance was no impediment to his producing what would subsequently be accorded the status of authoritative knowledge and would be put to service in the production of still more ignorance.”

Lucius T. Outlaw, ‘Social Ordering and the Systematic Production of Ignorance’
References


Bhorat, Haroon. 2015. ‘Is South Africa the most unequal society in the world?’, Mail & Guardian, 30 September 2015.


