

Dynamics of wilful ignorance in organizations

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Abstract

Contemporary society is obsessed with knowledge, leaving its less seductive counterpart, ignorance, in the shadows. However, as an expanding literature suggests, it is equally important to understand ignorance and consider its varieties. This study specifies the nature of wilful ignorance in organizations. It does so by (a) making a distinction between the will of an actor and the epistemic properties of ignorance, and showing how these two form a dynamic relationship, (b) linking wilful ignorance to its various drivers and (c) suggesting how our concept of wilful ignorance can be used in the study of organizations. Rather than reducing the phenomenon into a simple to know/to ignore dichotomy, we concentrate on its processual and dynamic nature. Moreover, we explore the complexities and ambiguity inherently involved in all knowing and ignoring as well as the role of agency in reducing the harmful effects of wilful ignorance in organizations.

KEYWORDS

ignorance, knowledge, organizational dynamics, organizational processes, organizations, wilful ignorance

In 2016, millions of people watched the congressional hearing where the Chief Executive Officer and founder of Facebook Mark Zuckerberg refused to admit any intentional wrongdoing or take responsibility for unauthorized users accessing customer data stored on its platform to manipulate voter behavior in a democratic election. Zuckerberg's reaction raises important questions. Was his claimed ignorance justified? Should he and others have known better and taken action to prevent one of the biggest political scandals ever? The Facebook case is but one among others

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that illustrates how organizations have failed to act on readily available knowledge. It displays a common dynamic in organizational life that we will unpack and discuss in this study: wilful ignorance.

Our choice to focus on wilful ignorance in an organizational context is motivated by the need to support organizational members in raising awareness about potential dysfunctions, mobilize local and collective action and create organizational cultures that help reduce the harmful effects of people ignoring signs of problems. We argue that most organizations consist of a rich “landscape” of questionable structures, practices and systems that insiders with some sense of responsibility and curiosity could question and transform. Arguably, much work is poorly organized, needless or counterproductive, sometimes compromising participants' well-being or forming Kafkaesque or otherwise absurd organizational cultures (Alvesson, 2022; Alvesson & Spicer, 2016; Clegg et al., 2016; McCabe et al., 2020; Nörmark & Jensen, 2018; Paulsen, 2017). These types of dysfunctions and other non-trivial problems in organizational life that relate to, for instance, well-being, effectiveness or ethics, call for critical attention. Yet, cues that could trigger deeper reflection tend to be ignored (Jackall, 1988; McGoe, 2007).

Our research on organizational ignorance differs from other scholarly work on the topic. Importantly, we do not address organizations as entities acting with one strategic, elite-driven intent or a homogenous orientation, such as tobacco companies engaging in strategic ignorance (McGoey, 2012a; Proctor, 2008). Neither do we propose to extend and build formal models, like in the field of economics where researchers seek to understand the limits of rationality (Simon, 1972) nor do we propose theoretical explanations for deliberate choices people make to know or to ignore something (Hertwig & Engel, 2016; McGoe, 2020). We also do not address the uncertainty or unknowns inherent in scientific or other knowledge-building projects (Frickel, 2014; Gross, 2007) or the unavoidable ambiguity involved when working with policies and standardized solutions (Best, 2012; Klintman, 2019).

Instead, we conceptualize organizations as dynamic social phenomena and as internally differentiated, pluralistic and socially constructed spaces, where divisions of labor, hierarchies, organizational cultures and internal dynamics are central. We emphasize the *will to try to not know* that includes how organizational members actively seek to refrain from being informed and arriving at a qualified judgment about a relevant subject in their professional roles. We also consider complex motives and drivers of wilful ignorance and the processes involved as well as the inherent ambiguity and ambivalence of the phenomenon.

One obvious challenge in addressing the harmful effects of wilful ignorance is that most professionals, managers and other employees do not have clear boundaries for what they *should* know (Ungar, 2008). A partial exception here are doctors, lawyers and accountants, whose work is regulated by professional codes of conduct and who require a license to exercise their profession—a license they risk losing in case of malpractice. But this only relates to their professional core work and does not concern them as organizational participants. The difficulty to assess with certainty what an organizational member could and should know motivates a systematic exploration of wilful ignorance. Hence, the purpose of this study is to further develop and unpack the concept of wilful ignorance in organizations by focusing on the dynamic interplay between the two elements: wilfulness and ignorance.

For our conceptualization and analysis, we draw on four sources: (a) theoretical and empirical sociological literature on ignorance, (b) general organization studies literature, (c) our accumulated insights from conducting a large number of in-depth research studies in organizations over several decades and lastly (d) our professional work experience in a range of organizations where a wealth of questionable organizational practices and structures are just accepted and indications of dysfunctionality are regularly ignored. In sum, an extensive use of broad observations and experiences we as researchers, organizational participants and citizens frequently encounter enriches our analysis (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2022).

We start our paper with a broad overview of how ignorance is addressed in the general literature before zooming in on wilful ignorance in organizations. We then identify some key elements and develop a model that conceptualizes the dynamics of wilful ignorance in organizations. We further present drivers of wilful ignorance, thus adding to perspectives that tend to emphasize a single motive, for example, maximization of self-interest or reduction of cognitive complexity (McGoey, 2020) or a need to maintain flexibility (Best, 2012). We conclude by showing the relevance of our model through an illustrative case and by suggesting how to further study wilful ignorance in organizations.

1 | IGNORANCE STUDIES

The amount of research on ignorance has grown steadily during the past decades, even though it has not garnered the same interest as knowledge-related topics. There is a persistent neglect of ignorance, despite many attempts by bright thinkers since the times of Socrates to draw our attention to it. As Smithson (1989, 2015) argues, ignorance is multidimensional. There is a bewildering array of definitions and conceptions of ignorance, and refined taxonomies that describe in detail the types and content of ignorance (Gross, 2007). Indeed, ignorance is an enormously rich concept, and merely defining it is unlikely to help attain full clarity and distinctiveness. Many contributions discuss ignorance in broad and abstract terms rather than unpack the concept in more detail. For instance, Gross (2007) identifies ignorance, non-knowledge and negative knowledge as *options*. Other streams of literature focus on how, for instance, wilful or strategic ignorance is related to various other factors—the causes, effects, functions or combinations of ignorance with other dimensions (e.g., Bowden et al., 2021; Grossman & Van Der Weele, 2017; McGoey, 2012a; Moore & Tumin, 1949).

Ignorance means quite different things depending on the domain in which it is used. Research on ignorance sometimes emphasizes epistemological problems, for instance, limits or the absence of knowledge in contexts, such as research, the use of big data or researchers' ignorance of other disciplines (Frickel, 2014; Gross, 2007; Klintman, 2019; Roberts, 2015; Schwartzkopf, 2020). In other cases, it emphasizes clear strategic intentions or political interest in avoiding responsibility or keeping people in the dark (Knudsen, 2011; McGoey, 2007), points at uncertainties and a lack of definite knowledge legitimating inaction in the context of climate change (Bowden et al., 2021) or simply implies neglect or disregard due to division of labor and silo thinking (Essén et al., 2022). Smithson (1989, p. 6) argues that “a single definition (of ignorance) is insufficient” and continues that a “major pitfall in conventional approaches to ignorance is to view it as unitary. Ignorance is multiple and has distinct levels”. Smithson (1989) proposes that we should differentiate between forms of ignorance based on the linguistic distinction between “actively ignoring” and “being ignorant”. His dichotomy distinguishes between a genuine lack of knowledge (being ignorant) and a wilful suppression of knowledge (actively ignoring). Being ignorant is, according to Smithson, relying on a simplistic true/false dichotomy, an “erroneous cognitive state”, which may be “corrected” by adding new knowledge. Ignorance here is related to a cognitive knowledge issue that would be solved by learning more about the topic in question. Proctor (2008) distinguishes between ignorance as a native state, a selective choice and an active production. The first implies that ignorance is a starting point to facilitate more knowledge production, the second relates to the need for a selective focus and the third refers to the active production of ignorance. Similarly, Roberts (2015) highlights ignorance as an absence of knowledge, ignorance about existing knowledge and ignorance resulting from suppressing knowledge.

We agree about the need to consider the multidimensionality of ignorance and draw upon the work of Smithson and others. We build on the idea that ignorance is not unitary, and thus, address wilful ignorance linked to its drivers, ambiguities and processes of knowing and ignoring. Our focus is on organizational members' disinclination to try to know what they could or perhaps should know as responsible actors in a given organizational context. This is different from states of knowledge and ignorance, as understood in binary terms. In our view, the will to ignore is not sufficiently and comprehensively treated by the otherwise extensive literature on ignorance. A more nuanced, situated and dynamic understanding of organizational wilful ignorance is important.

2 | WILFUL IGNORANCE IN ORGANIZATIONAL RESEARCH

Much research on organizational ignorance emphasizes “unwilful ignorance”, where organizations try to deal with unknowns, for example, through investigations, innovation, training and recruitment (e.g., Frickel, 2014; Harvey et al., 2001; Israilidis et al., 2015; Roberts, 2015). Whereas an interest in wilful ignorance is not new, its study has until fairly recently remained in the margins of scholarly inquiry. For instance, Friedrich Nietzsche in his book *Beyond*

Good and Evil (1886) famously talks about the will-to-power and the will-to-knowledge, but he also wrote about what he called the “will-to-ignorance”, a near-forgotten concept in his work. As discussed above, “active ignoring”, a notion essential in wilful ignorance, involves an intentional bracketing of knowledge (Gross, 2007; see also Moore & Tumin, 1949; Proctor, 2008; Smithson, 1989). This implies that at times, organizational members make more or less active choices to ignore or to avoid knowing. McGoey (2007, 2012b), for example, argues that a purposeful tactic to disregard knowledge and obfuscate information serves to preserve routines and to protect organizations' existing bureaucratic structures from disruption, and therefore, seems a rational response. Sometimes, however, the degree of rationality is less clear and routines that may be problematic are preserved.

Many conceptions of wilful ignorance in organizations tend to assume a calculative, deliberate or strategic intention (Hertwig & Engel, 2016). There seems to be an assumption that wilful ignorance is directed by top management keen to protect its strategic interests and its relations with stakeholders (McGoey, 2012b). Heimer (2012) illustrates how HIV clinics employ ignorance as a “resource” to protect their corporate interests. The strategic ignorance here has two dimensions: (a) sequestering knowledge that the organizations do not want their stakeholders to know and (b) decompiling knowledge into specific areas to prevent stakeholders from getting the “full picture”. In this case, wilful ignorance is a strategically employed resource and it is based on a systemic, outcome view of organizations.

Our approach focuses less on organizations as aggregated units with a uniform intention exhibiting, for instance, strategic ignorance as an organizational resource or response. Rather, we focus on certain constellations, projects and situations in which individuals and groups in organizations ignore or do not ignore by constructing issues in specific ways [“it is/it is not my job”, “it is risky for my career to ask critical questions (but I must do so)”, “it is difficult for us to know (but we need to find out)”, “we have always done it this way”]. Individuals and groups typically act and interact socially even though sometimes there is a single person standing out, for instance, as a whistle-blower (Kenny, 2018) or as a co-organizer of productive group resistance (Courpasson et al., 2012). Wilfulness is a socially contingent inclination, and it can be triggered by interaction between people or be expressed by a group or a discourse (e.g., associated with environmentalism, religion, a profession) that nudges or subjectifies people to act accordingly (Foucault, 1976, 1980). The will may fluctuate between social situations and various group affiliations and social identities (occupation, organizational unit member, manager). It is thus not necessarily a matter of free, stable individual (or group) will but a processual outcome, where a particular trajectory takes over and “pushes” the will—for instance, when a group starts to move in one direction, and individuals feel forced to go along. For individuals, incremental moves toward either increasing or weakening wilful ignorance can be motivated by the strength or weakness of their own volition and by the perceived knowability of the object (we shall return to this later).

Wilful ignorance is far from being only a matter of protecting self-esteem and hiding behind a subordinate or expert/specialized position legitimizing silo thinking; it also relates to personal comfort and intra-organizational social and political considerations. Jackall (1988) highlights how people in organizations do not want to know about issues that may complicate their work and force them to make difficult decisions. Managers often prefer problematic issues to disappear. Yet, if their ignoring persists, this may become an all too convenient defense. Ignorance is a good tactical resource for blaming and blame avoidance, which are important aspects of managerial and organizational political life, fueled by and reinforcing wilful ignorance.

In a study of managers, Schaefer (2019) extends the concept to managerial practices and defines wilful ignorance as the “active avoidance of gaining and using information that can potentially lead to transformative individual and organizational practices” (p. 1308). He observes how people actively avoid collecting relevant information, which would potentially lead to facing negative insights about failures or call to take difficult actions. A need to protect one's self-esteem and a desire to avoid facing complications were found to be driving forces of managerial wilful ignorance. This is not purely a matter of a lack of knowledge or cognitive ignorance, but there is an act of ignoring or a lack of action to try to know (Bowden et al., 2021; Essén et al., 2022; Knudsen, 2011). Congleton (2001) refers to this as “avoiding the knowable”, which in lay terms means that people in organizations seem to have a sense of what to ignore—and how.

In contrast to studies on deliberate or strategic ignorance emphasizing intentionality, calculations, conscious choice and rationality (Hertwig & Engel, 2016; McGoe, 2012b), we see wilful ignorance as a less clear-cut and less strategic or interest-guided phenomenon. Taking a somewhat different route than, for instance, McGoe (2012b), Heimer (2012) and Roberts (2015), we adopt a pluralistic, process-sensitive view (see also Gross, 2007) concerned with active ignoring constantly occurring in organizational life. Hence, we argue that wilful ignorance is (a) a matter of degree, (b) a matter of active construction of a given situation, (c) shifting rather than static in nature and (d) often involving ambiguity and ambivalence.

We argue that to continue to (wilfully) ignore is a *process* that unfolds over time that includes sustained efforts by one or many organizational members. This process involves organizational members *potentially having access to but neglecting information* (or other indicators) that would allow them to take initiative to improve or positively transform their work practices. A lack of reflexivity plays an important role here, as the person in question refuses to think or find out about “something” that is or could be of concern within their area of expertise, organizational role or general experience of organizational or societal citizenship. Moreover, the issue at hand may be more or less knowable and more or less ambiguous. In much of organizational life, the degree of knowability is seldom a straightforward matter but depends heavily on how persistent or motivated individuals are to find out or avoid doing so. It is less often a matter of simply “knowing” (in the sense of justified or proven belief) versus “not knowing” but of arriving at a well-grounded judgment or simply having carefully thought through the matter and done due diligence to the best of one's ability in a given situation.

3 | WILFUL IGNORANCE: THE MOTIVATION AND THE EPISTEMIC OBJECT

Most of the time, we move somewhere between having *both* a drive to know and to ignore, sometimes simultaneously. We may like simplifications and focus but at the same are curious and feel some responsibility for other issues than prescribed work tasks. In work life and elsewhere, there are many irrelevant issues that we have no reason to be interested in. Social conduct involves abstractions, simplifications, reductions, parsimony and an emphasis on key aspects of our environment. At work (and of course, also outside of it), we need to focus on certain domains of interest, while others remain outside our interest zone and need to be neglected altogether. Some degree of wilful ignorance is thus inevitable and expected, even beneficial, as we need to steer our attention and cannot be overburdened with complexities and constant doubt (McGoe, 2012a; Moore & Tumin, 1949). Sometimes ignorance can also fuel creativity and innovation, for instance, when people are unfamiliar with the existing conventions at the workplace (Roberts, 2015). The line between functional and problematic ignoring is all but clear-cut, and the balance may change over time when circumstances change.

In our conceptualization, wilful ignorance is not a dichotomy but consists of two interrelated, dynamic aspects, namely, *wilfulness* and *ignorance*. We argue that wilful ignorance only makes sense if the two elements are combined, *but the salience of the elements varies*. For this, we need to also consider them separately, rather than lumping them together. The will to ignore may be strong or weak, more or less “stubborn”, robust or persistent, and the reluctance to try to know or carefully reflect on something may be more or less intense. What is being ignored may be more or less salient, ambiguous or knowable. Here we make an analytic distinction between the will of the actor (individual or collective) and ignorance relating to the (real, perceived, constructed) characteristics of the object in terms of (un) knowability, in the domain we are interested in.

The “will” is about motivation involving a person or a group with intentions or interests. It is linked to what Emirbayer and Mische (1998) refer to as *the evaluative dimension of agency*. They define this dimension as “the capacity of actors to make practical and normative judgments among alternative possible trajectories of action, in response to the emerging demands, dilemmas, and ambiguities of presently evolving situations” (p. 971). Hence “will” in our conceptualization is related to making judgments about possible courses of action, including *no* action. Judgment may lead to an inclination to try to know or to ignore. There is an act of judgment, but this may be heavily socially

conditioned and constrained and partly unconscious. The intentionality and the active element may also be formed and driven by discourse or other social forces (Foucault, 1980).

“Ignorance” concerns epistemic aspects and the constructed qualities of the phenomenon under scrutiny as well as its potential knowability or obstacles involved with overcoming ignorance. As such, ignorance is not an absolute dimension but a relational and socially constructed phenomenon. Smithson (1985), for example, critiques the assumption of an “absolutist epistemology” that assumes that ignorance can be eliminated by “true knowledge”. Ignorance, as we use the term, always involves some degree of ambiguity (Best, 2012) and is dependent on both time and space (Gross, 2007). This implies that actors can make attempts to at least try to reduce or alternatively maintain their ignorance.

We consider wilful ignorance a matter of range—a relational and relative concept along a continuum rather than a specific state (Bakken & Wiik, 2017). In what follows, we aim to build a dynamic concept of organizational wilful ignorance where actors possess space for maneuvering and where ignorance is not set in stone or driven by a clear rational consideration and where there is a possibility to attempt to overcome ignorance if actors so decide.

3.1 | WILFUL IGNORANCE and wilful ignorance

We specify different levels or strengths of wilful ignorance by suggesting two distinct types: “WILFUL IGNORANCE” (WI) and “wilful ignorance” (wi). These are characterized by the salience of the phenomenon in a certain situation and can be represented as two diagonally opposite positions on a continuum with two axes: the ignorance axis and the wilfulness axis (see Figure 1).

At one extreme, there is “strong” WILFUL IGNORANCE, where the will not to know is pronounced and there is considerable uncertainty about how to reduce ignorance. Here, knowing is difficult and ignoring is easy because the individual or group prefer not knowing and face real or imagined difficulties in obtaining and assessing information. Thus, there are both strong W and strong I. Here, the phenomenon of wilful ignorance is robust, and much is needed to sway the wilfully ignorant person or group. This may be the case when it comes to “taboos” (Smithson, 1989) and institutionalized secrecy (Costas & Grey, 2014). For example, Burrell (1984) argues that organizations have become “desexualized”, meaning that organizational decision makers have “ignored what novelists and playwrights and organizational members know only too well—that sexuality is a major driving force behind human endeavour” (p. 115). Strong norms, uncertainties and the hiddenness of the object of inquiry have here led to avoiding any engagement

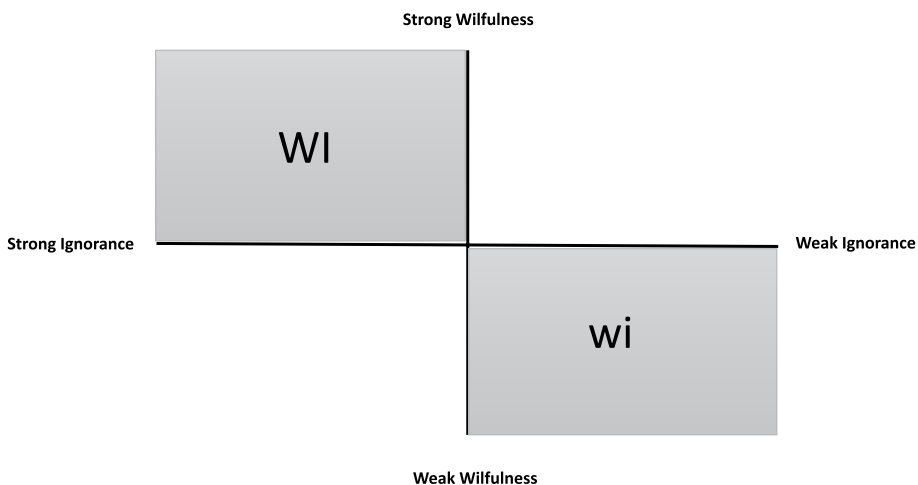


FIGURE 1 WILFUL IGNORANCE and wilful ignorance

and consideration of the sexual nature of organizations. To overcome WI, powerful triggers, such as fear of possible formal sanctions (for neglect or malpractice) or shaming by others (“how can you live with yourself?”), are needed to prompt a change in the will to ignore. Without such strong counterforces, the situation and orientation are mutually reinforced, and there is consistency between the will not to know and the great difficulties in obtaining the needed knowledge. There is little or no guilt for not knowing or not trying to know and little perceived risk for being blamed later for not having addressed the issue, for instance, in the capacity of one’s organizational role (“I was just following directives”).

At the other extreme, we find “weak” wilful ignorance (wi), where the will not to know is moderate or weak, and possibilities to explore the issue, acquire knowledge and “exit” the condition of wilful ignorance altogether are fairly good, or are at least assessed to be. Consider, for example, Hallett’s study of school principals (2010). Hallett illustrates empirically how loosely coupled structures in an elementary school were recoupled. Using the example of “accountability”, he illustrates how a new principal did not, as the predecessor did, ignore the decoupling between claims to accountability and actual practices but set out to implement real practices of accountability in the classroom. Previously, the school principal may have harbored certain doubts about some teachers’ abilities to implement accountability but refrained from finding out through classroom visits. Hence, there was a reluctance to find out, despite that it would not be too difficult to reduce ignorance. Hallett reports in contrast that the newly hired principal made it a point to know by actually checking in on classrooms and teachers. Hence, in this type of wilful ignorance versus knowing situation, the subject is often affected by diverse social forces pointing at different directions, for example, as a professional and a manager with different loyalties and norm sets. Moderate efforts, such as the new principal in Hallett’s study, may lead to knowing as the information is within reach. The situation is thus rather open in terms of outcomes and can easily be transformed into a will and effort to try to know. Preference for comfort, rationalizations or priorities, which seemed to be the previous principal’s desires, may nevertheless lead to continued ignorance.

3.2 | WILFUL ignorance and wilful IGNORANCE

We can further combine the two constitutive parts of wilful ignorance by combining a “strong” element with a “weak” one and placing them on the same continuum (see Figure 2). This renders two other possibilities, namely WILFUL ignorance (Wi) and wilful IGNORANCE (wi), depending on which element dominates and whether the main driver of ignoring is the unwilling subject or the complicated object. Whereas WILFUL ignorance means that the person has a

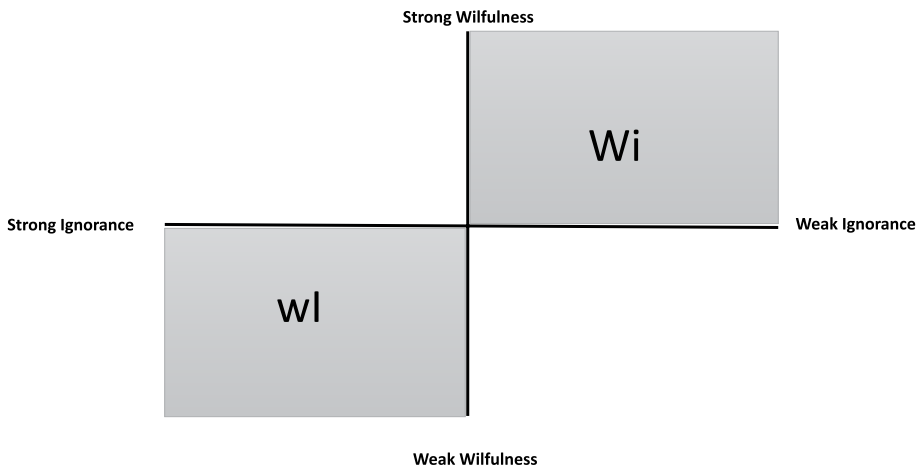


FIGURE 2 wilful IGNORANCE and WILFUL ignorance

strong inclination to ignore/not to know and is defensive or passive about accessing information, wilful IGNORANCE implies a weaker inclination not to know and a real or experienced higher threshold for overcoming the ambiguous or difficult-to-know nature of the object.

A strong “W” in Wi—an eagerness to ignore or to not make efforts to find out includes a pronounced element of intentionality. This may reflect a negative attitude toward knowing, for instance, due to fear, political complications or cognitive overload. Alternatively, it can reflect a lazy, indifferent, irresponsible or opportunistic attitude or conformism to institutional norms, for instance, when a person only does what they are formally expected to do (“I am not paid to think”, or “I concentrate on my job”) (see Essén et al., 2022). Unwillingness to know may be a collective driving force in universities with nepotistic cultures where senior academics and academic managers, rather than hiring for competence, hire for personal convenience—and no one wants to know because this would imply an imperative to act or face the personal insight that one accepts corrupt behavior. Davies and McGoey (2012) explored the 2008 financial crisis and examined the *usefulness* of the failure or refusal to act on warning signs. Social silence surrounding unsettling facts enabled profitable activities to endure despite an unease about their implications, and earlier silences were mobilized to absolve inaction. Hence, there was a strong collective will to ignore the warning signs of the impending collapse of the financial markets.

The weak “w” in wi, in contrast, indicates a less strong—or even lack of—motive, intentionality or drive not to know and a higher degree of ignorance or difficulties experienced in obtaining knowledge about the subject matter. Here, obstacles to knowledge, real or perceived, dominate. This is relatable to Smithson’s (1989) notion of “undecidability”, where individuals and groups have difficulties “to designate true or false either because they consider the problem insoluble or because the question of validity and verifiability is not pertinent” (p. 8). A case of a strong “I” could be when an inexperienced, uncritical entry-level trader of financial assets at an investment bank, eager to do as they are told, sells high-risk, ethically questionable housing-related securities in the wake of the financial crisis in 2008, experiencing great problems to find out the truth about the products. These securities are relatively complex, and one needs advanced knowledge of mathematics, financial instruments and how markets work to understand them—a difficult but not impossible task for someone with a training in finance. By comparison, a senior partner in the same firm—with extensive experience in the field, access to more information and more capacity to know about hidden risks—could represent a case of a weak “i”, as the obstacles to overcoming or reducing ignorance would be minor—while there would possibly be a strong “W”—a motivation to not overcome ignorance. Here, we can see ambiguity regarding the degree of knowability/unknowability around the object of ignorance.

Outside our conceptualization are such “extremes” as *fraud*, *deception* or *political maneuvering* illuminated by, for example, Proctor (2008) in his research on the tobacco industry. Our primary interest is thus *not* in cases where there is an active, systematic interest and “ability to exploit the unknowns in an environment in order to get more power or resources” (McGoey, 2020, p. 198), that is, a clear-cut motive to signal ignorance as a shield or as an element in a power game aiming to optimize advantages. Other examples that fall outside include *legitimate ignorance* where a person in their organizational role and as a member of a given profession cannot be expected or required to know, or when things are either generally unknowable, irrelevant or beyond the person’s capacity to understand. Of course, what is legitimate and what is fraud or deception may not always be easy to delineate. While these distinctions are of analytical importance, the ambition of this study is not to clearly define borderline cases and boundary conditions for the phenomenon but to illuminate the dynamic nature of wilful ignorance.

4 | WILFUL IGNORANCE AND SITUATIONAL STRENGTHS

Wilful ignorance is not monolithic, so we need to consider variation. Hence, we add one more element to our concept, namely, *situational strengths*, which range from strong to weak (Snyder & Ickes, 1985). *Strong situations* imply that the will to ignore has a firm grip on an individual or a group. Obstacles of various kinds—limited time and knowledge, a local environment hostile or unhelpful to knowing—may characterize the context. Here, an organizational member

may have little choice but to follow the imperative to ignore. In *weak situations*, external constraints are modest and contain less pressure in terms of difficulties to overcome. Efforts to know are not met with sanctions, and information is not very difficult to obtain. This is a much more open situation, and modest triggers undermining the will to ignore may change the situation but still the individual may be stubbornly fixated on ignoring because of a given personal orientation. We work further with this static and polarized conceptualization and create *four ideal typical situations* organizational members can move between (see Figure 3) that bring the rather abstract concept of wilful ignorance closer to organizational life.

If a person is eager to ignore and faces an issue that they perceive as hard to know, there is a combined effect of strong wilfulness and strong ignorance. We refer to this as a *reified situation*, typically combining a strong situation and an individual or group with a strong will not to know. At the opposite end of the spectrum, if the wilfulness drive is weak and the knowledge situation is open so that ignorance can be overcome without great sacrifice, then wilful ignorance is more loosely in operation. The direction is indetermined. We refer to this as a *transformable situation*. When there is strong wilfulness to ignore but this ignorance is possible to overcome with modest effort, we use the term *defensive situations*, while weak wilfulness combined with perceived difficulties to overcome ignorance is referred to as an *ambiguous situation*.

The more typical and perhaps most interesting situations are those at the right bottom and close to the center of the figure where the situation can change depending on how the dynamics of wilful ignorance play out. If an actor or an organization can shift from any other situation to the bottom right, transformable situation, where both the wilfulness and ignorance elements are weak, it is possible to neutralize or to get out of the trap of wilful ignorance. Without denying the existence of constraints, problems and opportunities, situations are typically not objectively strong or weak. Two people in a similar situation may choose to frame and enact that situation as one filled with possibilities or as one i.e., severely constrained. Social interaction and new impulses may also lead to a revision of a given situation. People starting to ask questions and open up areas for inquiry and consideration—for instance, about discrimination or safety issues—may change the dynamics of wilful ignorance.

5 | DRIVERS OF WILFUL IGNORANCE

The dynamic nature of wilful ignorance suggests that states of wilful ignorance can change, depending on how an individual or group make sense of the environment and interact with each other. Changes are thus dependent on what we call *drivers of wilful ignorance*. Variations and contingencies are countless, so we limit our discussion to (a)

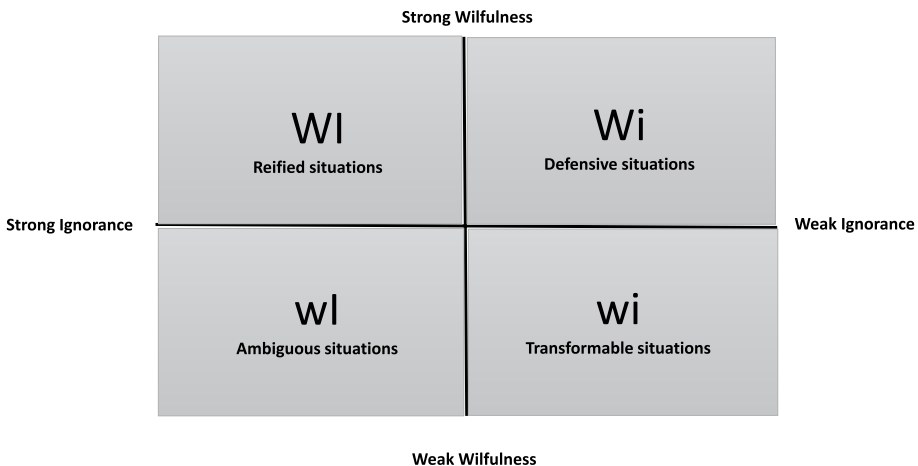


FIGURE 3 Wilful ignorance and situational strengths

institutional pressures, (b) organizational norms and dynamics, (c) individual motives and (d) accessibility of information (see Figure 4).

5.1 | Institutional pressures

With institutional pressures, we refer to tacit and codified meanings, rules and norms prescribing how individuals ought to think and behave in fields or social settings, like industries, state bureaucracies and professions. These may become recurring practices and established routines and include “taboos” (Smithson, 1989) and “secrecy” (Proctor, 2008). Institutions are reproduced when people are wilfully ignorant of alternatives and perpetuate institutional pressures and ways of working, including conventions of not disrupting norms. What is prescribed and normalized becomes difficult to transcend. Examples include an industry with tolerance for building colluding partnerships or a profession celebrating strong group loyalty and a disinclination for addressing colleagues' misbehavior. In academia, for example, there is an institutionalized understanding of the importance of research and journal publication that people in the field are expected to share and express (although there are sometimes outbursts of doubt and critique about the meaningfulness of this). Many academics are then subjugated to a journal publishing regime and sometimes a rather constrained way of viewing the world, including blinders that stop them from seeing alternatives (Alvesson et al., 2017).

Institutional forces can create tacit, uncodified guidelines for ignoring. DiMaggio and Powell (1991) distinguish between coercive, normative and cognitive isomorphism, all factors that can lead to conformism. While these authors address organizational structures, their concept is also relevant for understanding socially shared forms of wilful ignorance. Following their reasoning, institutionally driven wilful ignorance may be based on a combination of coercion, normative pressures and cognitive limits as well as the result of compliance and group thinking. It touches upon how practitioners feel the pressure of norms and then comply with them to advance their careers or to avoid being exposed as complainers. “Don't complicate things unnecessarily” seems to be a rule, because those rocking the boat run the risk of being thrown off. In this vein, Abbott (2010, p. 186) describes two functions of ignorance. One function is illustrated by the maxim “let sleeping dogs lie” that points at the conservation of existing institutions or norms.

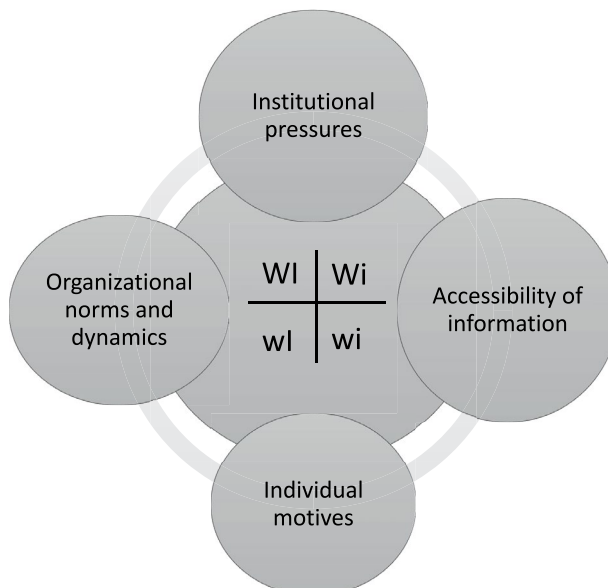


FIGURE 4 Drivers of wilful ignorance

This is similar to normative isomorphism suggested by DiMaggio and Powell (1991). A second function of ignorance, according to Abbott, is the resignation to try seeking alternative explanations because life seems too complex. This is what he refers to as the “cunning of reason” type of ignorance that is linked to cognitive isomorphism.

If we accept the premise that institutions offer strong cognitive constraints (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991), then there is a socially produced inability to think differently outside of the institutional cognitive frame. If such a paradigm controls an actor's capacity to think for themselves, then the matter is more of “cannot” rather than “will not”. Of course, in practice the institutional cognitive limits are seldom fixed and in an open society, with ample potential resources for reflexivity (Giddens, 1991), there is seldom an absolute cognitive barrier preventing wilful ignorance from being countered. However, cognitive limitations often coexist with normative pressures for limiting one's will to know, reinforcing the coercive dynamics. Alvesson and Sandberg (2014), for example, find that people tend to stay in their collective “boxes”, such as a particular camp or tradition in academia or a specific subspecialty within a profession, as much as for conformity's sake as for being incapable of or considering alternatives.

5.2 | Organizational norms and dynamics

Institutional pressures are reproduced and put strong imprints on organizations. But organizations are much more—and less—than carriers of field-level institutions and institutional logics. There is variation in terms of organizational cultures and subcultures, producing local dynamics (Martin, 2002; Martin et al., 2006). Some (parts of) organizations and occupations may encourage transparency and value employee efforts to be well informed and speak up, while others may be less tolerant of people asking questions, questioning current practices and spending time trying to find out things that are not of immediate instrumental interest or part of the job description. Vaughan (1996) illustrates how “cultural production” can lead to the “normalization of deviance”, which means that deviant behavior becomes normalized over time. The “normalization of deviance” implies that even though risks are known, individuals and groups may deviate from processes that mitigate those risks. In organizations, newcomers are discouraged from questioning prevailing practices as organizational self-understanding may include notions of superiority and disinterest in learning about alternatives (Alvesson, 1995).

Organizational structures also often reduce the will to know. Division of labor, hierarchy, power structures and complicated Human Resource processes are part of most organizations' basic structure and have implications for wilful ignorance because they support the convenience of following structures rather than questioning them. At the same time, organizations are not static but include changing projects, committees and interactions across parts. People may have broader networks within organizations and be more or less capable of navigating the organizational landscape. New people also enter and may raise questions and inspire new ways of thinking, affecting the dynamics of wilful ignorance in a variety of situations.

Being a limited part of a broader organizational structure nevertheless often makes one's vision blurry and reduces self-confidence: “perhaps senior management, consultants or other staff know best?” Relying on one's own judgment may be difficult. Uncertainty may drive ignoring. Trust in authorities or the hierarchy, as part of organizational culture, may further fuel ignoring. Essén et al. (2022) illustrate that there is a persistent will to not know about dysfunctions outside of one's core narrow definition of the job or function if there are no obvious problems calling for a stronger will to know. Too much ignorance, however, may turn into malpractice and unprofessional behavior, corporate losses or a general waste of time and resources that may eventually lead to disciplinary action or sanctions. Many organizations are full of inefficiencies, wastes of time and resources on various activities, ethical problems, and projects and arrangements that may not stand critical scrutiny (Alvesson & Spicer, 2016; Jackall, 1988; McCabe et al., 2020; Nörmark & Fogh Jensen, 2018). This creates a dilemma between ignoring to perpetuate organizational structures and not ignoring to reduce inefficiencies. Hence, dynamics that pull in different directions may be at play.

There is also a wealth of other reasons emphasizing difficulties in knowing, such as performance pressures and time constraints. In jobs with a high workload there is limited time and energy to think about other things besides

meeting performance targets or responding to requirements from managers, colleagues, customers and others. People may also be suspicious but cannot know for sure that the new organizational value statement or the new policy will *not* work. Spicer (2018) argues that much rhetoric in organizations can be labeled as bullshit, talk and text that have no bearing on reality and do not say anything. Yet, distinguishing what is “hot air” from serious thought and speech may be difficult.

5.3 | Individual motives

Wilful ignorance may be an outcome of social forces but also a reflection of personal motives. Individual motives are often influenced by others, by group processes and contingent on how the object or theme of ignoring is constructed. As Salancik and Pfeffer (1978) show, social information processes lead to certain needs, values and motives being salient. Depending on these processes and resulting experiences of needs, individual may respond by wanting to know or choosing to ignore. Often, a distinction is made between extrinsic and intrinsic drivers (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The former emphasizes outcomes, rewards and fear of sanctions, the latter curiosity, a want to know or a sense of duty and obligation, which is sometimes related to a sense of guilt and shame of ignoring things that should not be ignored. Whistle-blowers typically feel that they need to do the right thing, despite hostility from others (Kenny, 2018).

Identity work, a desire to retain one's coherent sense of self, project a desirable image or protect oneself from inconvenience and harm (Brown, 2015; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2016), may drive both wilful ignorance and work toward reducing it. Identity work is a situated practice and not an expression of an essential inner core self. Here, wilful ignorance is a rather subtle, individual phenomenon driven by a person's want to preserve a positive self-view, avoiding taking risks or making an extra effort to find out. Schaefer (2019), for example, finds that managers fantasize about their competence and actions, while ignoring the actual practice. He further argues that symbolic work produces a favorable image and possibly also a coherent identity, at least for the time being.

Drivers for wilful ignorance sometimes run deeper than mere compliance with organizational norms. There is also an existential dimension, which means that a person seeks to secure, as far as possible, a safe sense of self. Ego-serving wilful ignorance implies that you do not really know (at least not for sure) and hence do not have to experience an identity conflict, while if you know but do not act, the situation becomes a case of compliance, and you may experience guilt and self-contempt for not addressing the issues under consideration. Being ignorant, then, may help preserve a positive identity, avoiding tensions and conflicts that may emerge when considering problematic issues in the workplace.

A subordinate position can work as a shield and a reinforcer of wilful ignorance—attributing responsibility to management and one's own less powerful position. Being a follower to a (much more powerful) leader enables the positioning of oneself as a person with limited will to know outside the domain of followership. Unconditional trust in the leader can reduce the inclination to scrutinize one's own actions and dispositions (Einola & Alvesson, 2021). There is a range of versions of followership (Bligh, 2011) but at the very core is a tendency to cultivate a degree of wilful ignorance in order to maintain the constrained but often comfortable position to mainly follow guidelines and instructions—and to escape the burdens of freedom (Fromm, 1941) and responsibility.

5.4 | Access to information

Wilful ignorance is also driven by difficulties in accessing and assessing information about the phenomenon at hand. In many instances, access restrictions lead to challenges when trying to follow up on cues, limiting organizational members' ability to know, thus fueling their wilful ignorance. In some organizations with policies for transparency and a climate of open discussion, people are freer to find out about issues that matter at work than in organizations with policies for secrecy and restricted access. There may also be cover-ups and direct political resistance that hinders

moving beyond ignorance (Costas & Grey, 2014; McGoey, 2007). Often information is hard to assess. In a complicated situation there may be many stories, truth claims, hearsay, contradictory indicators and blame games going on (Jackall, 1988). As Heimer (2012) shows, reports and data may be incomplete or uncertain, and such complexity may lead to a will to ignore. In many cases the object of ignorance is elusive, complex and highly ambiguous. In a study of failed efforts to create successful innovations—no patents being produced at a pharmaceutical firm—the people involved attributed the cause for this failure to unconnected different circumstances, ranging from bad management, failed strategy, recruitment of too many experienced people to retaining too many old-timers and a culture centered on comfort and fringe benefits (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2011). Serious efforts to “find out” may not lead to any clear results, so to choose to ignore is the easiest solution. Many organizations have a heavy bureaucracy (Jump, 2015) and many layers and units, so it may be seen as a difficult task to find out where all plans, rules and procedures come from, what all the administrators do and whether any of that could be seriously questioned in an informed way.

Information as well as disinformation and statements about the degree of (un)knowability of something can also serve interests of power. Politically inspired behavior in organizations is often facilitated by the avoidance or flexible use of “facts”. This implies an inclination of a “will-to-produce-convenient-facts” rather than a will to know what is really going on (Jackall, 1988). Sometimes this may be simply fraudulent, but in many cases people may avoid direct deceit or facing moral problems through the selective production of truths, for example, drawing attention to the positive or highlighting uncertainties concerning problems, encouraged by the will to ignore. For instance, Jackall (1988) shows that PR people, sounding very much like postmodernists, argued for near-impossibilities in really knowing the truth. Wilful ignorance may then be supportive of political acts by circumventing the dilemma of risking being accused of deceit and the possibility of engaging in questionable acts.

6 | WILFUL IGNORANCE IN PRACTICE: THE EXAMPLE OF GOOGLE

We now show how our dynamic concept of wilful ignorance and its drivers can be applied to analyze an organization in terms of *ambiguous, defensive, transformable* and *reified situations*. Our intention is to demonstrate on a macro level how the framework could be used to interpret available empirical material illuminating organizational wilful ignorance.

Tristan Harris, a former design ethicist at Google shares some of his experiences of working at Google between 2011 and 2015 in the documentary *The Social Dilemma* (2020):

When I was at Google, I was in the Gmail team, and I was just starting to get burned out. Because we had so many conversations about what the inbox should look like, what colour it should be ... and I felt personally addicted to email and found fascinating that there was no one at Gmail working on making it less addictive. And I was like: is anyone else thinking about this? I have not heard anyone talking about this. And I was feeling this frustration with the tech industry overall that we kind of lost our way.

You know, I really struggled to try and figure out how from the inside we could change it. And that was when I decided to make a presentation, a kind of call to arms. Every day I went home and worked on it [for a] couple of hours, every single night. It basically just said that never before in history have 50 designers, 20–35-year-old white guys in California, made decisions that would have an impact on 2 billion people.

Two billion people will have thoughts they would not have otherwise had because of a designer at Google said that this is how notifications work on that screen you wake up to in the morning. And we have a moral responsibility as Google for solving this problem. I sent this presentation to about 15–20 of my closest colleagues at Google and was very nervous about it. I mean, I was not sure how it was

going to land. When I went to work [the] next day, most of the laptops had the presentation open. Later that day there was like 400 simultaneous viewers, and it just kept growing. And I got emails from all around the company, I mean, people from every department saying, 'I totally agree with you, I see this affecting my kids, I see this affecting the people around me. We have to do something about this.'

I felt like I was sort of launching a revolution or something like that. Later, I found out that Larry Page had been notified about this presentation at three separate meetings that day. So I created a sort of cultural moment that Google needed to take this seriously.

And then ... nothing.

Tristan's job at the company was to help Google develop a platform that would steer the thoughts of billions of people in an *ethical manner*. As the excerpt shows, after an initial will to know about and address the ethicality of email development, his well-intended initiative failed, and he was met by wilful ignorance. It turned out that Tristan's job to raise awareness that one of the most powerful companies that has ever existed may manipulate users by using algorithms that encourage addiction to their platforms was a mission impossible. But why did he fail? What were the organizational dynamics at play that made Tristan's carefully crafted presentation about the harmful effects of company technology go from company-wide buzz to bust in a matter of 24 h? Of course, there were formal power dynamics and profit motives at work. We are not going to analyze those. Our interest here is on the dynamics of wilful ignorance in which the two key elements constitutive of wilful ignorance may intersect with different drivers of wilful ignorance as well as with situational strengths (see Figures 3 and 4).

Let us, somewhat speculatively (we were not there to know for sure), shed some light on the events at Google through our model and the four types of situations, illustrating the interplay between the wilfulness and ignorance elements.

6.1 | Ambiguous situations (wl)

These situations are characterized by a strong element of ignorance (I) and a weak element of wilfulness (w). People may be open about knowing/ignoring but find it difficult to know. The relative difficulty to know more about—and address—the phenomenon can lead to continued ignorance. The weak wilfulness manifested in the way Google employees first reacted to Tristan's "call for arms" for Google to become more accountable for the addiction its platforms caused in users. Many colleagues told him that they had had similar thoughts and agreed that something had to be done to prevent an excess of user addiction. The individual motives for some favored knowing, and significant parts of the organization at first seemed receptive. The element of ignorance (I) was accentuated because the industry was new, still being formed. Internet companies' business models and platforms were developing, and the positive hype around these overshadowed voices of concern. Social media companies and the Silicon Valley culture were widely admired as doing something good—connecting people and offering free or low-cost services with their technology. Serious concerns with their business models of treating advertisers as customers and end-users as products surfaced later.

6.2 | Defensive situations (Wi)

"Wi" implies that the subject is or becomes defensive or passive about access to information. The major element in this situation is then the motive (will or lack thereof) to reduce ignorance. The moment when Tristan, the company's ethicist, sent out his presentation calling for the company to start taking moral responsibility for its platforms' harmful

effects marks a turning point. Along with the company-wide distribution of his presentation package, the ignorance component was reduced ($I > i$) at all hierarchical levels. Here was a call for knowing. With shared, collective forces, the low knowability of the topic was, at least potentially, reduced. When the buzz around his message was replaced by silence, what was previously low wilfulness became strong wilfulness ($w > W$). There was a collective will not to know more about the problems. Top management signaled, or was interpreted as signaling, that addiction was a taboo or unwanted issue. Silence became a dominant norm. From the outset, there are no reasons to assume that the company was engaging in intentional wrongdoing or purposeful malpractice that would be considered fraud—outside the sphere of wilful ignorance. People simply became defensive, looked the other way and did not want to know more, probably driven by anxiety for going further with the issue than appeared authorized and going against organizational norms, despite initial individual interests to address the issue.

6.3 | Transformable situations (wi)

An alternative reaction to Tristan's presentation would have been to support or at least show some openness about the initiative, embrace the reduced ignorance ($I > i$) and transform the situation by mobilizing organizational (and perhaps also political and industry-wide) resources. This would have created a situation in which wanting to know would have become more normalized, making ignorance less salient. Broader discussions would have also made it easier to access information, thus increasing the knowability of the object, following certain norms of professional and social responsibility. This could have collectively reduced wilful ignorance around the unaddressed and unknown effects of social media platforms on people, such as illegitimate surveillance, cyber security, privacy and the use of algorithms to target people for unwanted and unethical advertising, all themes that social media and Internet institutions could and should be concerned by. There could have been broad institutional pressure to address these topics. Here, the CEO's silence was key in not shifting the pendulum toward reducing ignorance. Had he or some other senior people, perhaps supported by media and consumer groups, grasped the momentum, the rest of the company would most likely have followed, and the balance would have tipped in favor of knowing. But even faced with executive silence, people could have continued to show interest and perhaps encourage top management or large parts of the organization to not ignore the topic. Tristan solved his own dilemma by an exit strategy and ended up leaving the company sometime after the event to become an activist for more humane technology. He opted out of being part of a company that supported what he thought had become unethical behavior and a culture of wilful ignorance.

6.4 | Reified situations (WI)

A pronounced wilfulness (W), a will not to know, may further lead to greater ignorance (I) when the conditions and context change, there is a shared silence and the collective gradually devotes attention to other concerns. For instance, with the ever-increasing speed of change, increased corporate size and complexity, the spread of Internet companies to new areas and markets, and the profound influence they have on our lives and society a continued wilfulness not to know is likely to lead to bigger problems in overcoming wilful ignorance. Once these problems are institutionalized and dominant, possibilities to establish clear, productive "knowing" reduce and a general feeling that it is difficult to alter course in a changing landscape takes the upper hand. The problems accessing information increase as the object of concern becomes more difficult to grasp. This problem increases the unwillingness to make an effort. Even though there are sometimes openings and external pressures to break the will to ignore, people within the organization may have become overly compliant, further ignoring both the issues raised by Tristan and other issues that emerge with time. This is a loop that may be very challenging to break, both in terms of will and difficulties in seeking knowledge about the subject matter.

7 | STUDYING WILFUL IGNORANCE IN ORGANIZATIONS

We suggest that our framework can help researchers design and carry out empirical studies that consider the different elements of wilful ignorance, its various drivers and situational forces in organizations. Even though we cannot explore in depth here how to study wilful ignorance in organizations, we offer some suggestions. As emphasized, our interest is how people in an organizational or occupational context address sensitive phenomena. These, unlike in the case of the Google event above, do not usually lead to mass media exposure and public reporting that would allow researchers to use publicly accessible documents and trace events backwards. At the same time, events leading to public exposure may be difficult to study in depth, the situation can be sensitive, the people involved protective and the case organization difficult to gain access to. Actively searching and spotting instances of wilful ignorance in organizational everyday practice is therefore called for. Our framework and the four situations may give clues regarding whom to study and what obstacles to consider: is the problem epistemic difficulties in knowing or reluctance to try to know/desire to want to ignore?

We believe that in-depth research is needed to capture the richness of the phenomenon and illuminate dynamics of wilful ignorance in organizational life. There is an abundance of wilful ignorance in most organizations, so the key is to find a worthy target for study. It is often reasonable to not address wilful ignorance directly but instead approach a domain and then explore further the possible emergence of wilful ignorance. Our research interest therefore calls for an open, explorative approach. A study asking questions, such as “what goes on here” and “(how) do people involved think about the matter”, in an initially demarcated but fairly broad area, like bureaucracy, organizational change, bullying, sexual harassment or equal opportunity policies, could gradually lead to insights on wilful ignorance, as long as the researcher mobilizes their experience, curiosity and imagination. Researchers may, after an explorative phase, decide on a specific theme to explore in depth. Such an empirically driven approach is different from much of the ignorance literature, where the problem is relatively clear, such as in retrospective studies of publicly exposed companies denying knowledge about the harmful effects of their actions and decisions (e.g., McGoe, 2007). The focus is also different from other studies addressing anticipated problems with an excess of data (Schwartzkopf, 2020) or difficulties in dealing with uncertainty and the lack of knowledge inherent to much scientific work, sometimes with clear “known unknowns” (Frickel, 2014; Gross, 2007).

The study of ignorance tends to elude both observation and quantification (McGoe, 2020, p. 199). Studying ignorance empirically can therefore be challenging because it is not something that many people can or like to report on—or perhaps even think about. Subjects with a weak or modest will to ignore may be co-operative, while those with a strong preference for ignoring will be more difficult to interview as they are more likely to want to avoid the subject matter. Generally, motives are difficult to investigate. We can study espoused motives or vocabularies of motives (Mills, 1940), but these may say little about “real” motives. The epistemic aspect is also difficult to investigate, as interviewees may exaggerate obstacles, as part of a want to legitimize their will to ignore/disinterest in the topic. Studies call for interview subjects to be (a) knowledgeable, (b) willing and (c) able to communicate about the subject matter. Informants, however, are not necessarily willing and able to straightforwardly report on their experiences (Alvesson, 2011; Silverman, 2006). The general problems with (in)accurate, constrained, selective or in other ways low-quality accounts are no doubt amplified in studies of ignorance and ignoring, calling for careful work and source critique (Schaefer & Alvesson, 2020).

There is typically some variation in an organization, where a full spectrum of different orientations of wilful ignorance can be traced. Some people with at least some willingness to know could be approached and, if they score highly on knowledgeability, willingness and ability to communicate on the topic, they could be recruited as key informants or *para-ethnographers* (Holmes & Marcus, 2005).

A small example from a seminar held by one of us with a group of HR managers in a large municipality is illustrative. One of the managers suddenly remarked, “I have recently moved from HR and became an operative manager”, and then added, “I discovered the enormous amount of steering documents we are supposed to relate to and comply with. Friends, we really need to consider how we think!”. This was followed by total silence, indicating a strong will

to ignore. This observation could be an excellent starting point for further empirical inquiry. Those present could be asked about the meaning of the event, the steering documents, the underlying management control systems, and their value, relevance, consequences, and so on and, in particular, their (lack of) response and disinclination to explore the view of the former HR person turned line manager. In this case, a researcher cannot necessarily expect straight answers and naively rely on initial interview statements but needs to carefully interpret and use source critique when working with the empirical material, expecting rationalizations and legitimations (Alvesson, 2011). Therefore, some detective work may be needed.

In these types of studies, conventional codification and data management approaches, such as grounded theory based on the assumption that the data are robust building blocks for creating knowledge and theory, are problematic. Data are often unreliable or ambiguous (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2018). Researchers need to doubt their inclinations (Locke et al., 2008) and challenge and test interviewees' accounts (Schaefer & Alvesson, 2020). An important aspect of inquiry is to critically assess claims that indicate strong situations. Wilfully ignorant people may refer to strong obstacles or risk of sanctions. Overcoming ignorance leading to speaking up may indeed be risky, but people may also refer to negative consequences in the absence of signs of repressive management (Milliken et al., 2003).

It is important to consider the range of drivers behind wilful ignorance, and thus, pay attention not only to individuals and groups in organizations but also to the wider institutional context. In the case of the HR managers above, they may have been heavily influenced by the HR profession as well as the public sector field in the country, with a wealth of regulations and broadly shared structures and practices often being taken for granted.

Studies on wilful ignorance can also be triggered by the researcher's theoretical and interpretative repertoire. When something interesting and relevant emerges, these pre-understandings can be used as a resource for further exploration. An attentive researcher can spot an opening for this type of inquiry, irrespective of their initial interest, as organizational life is full of interesting themes that people tend to ignore, for both good and bad reasons. Questions, such as "why are you (and others) doing this? What is the meaning of this?" can be asked. If people respond with (a) "I don't know", (b) "I have not thought about this" or (c) produce vague or inconsistent answers, then there may be a good case for a wilful ignorance exploration exercise. A study like this is less about aggregating interview statements or survey answers than about assembling a more complex story around the will to ignore, its drivers, content and potential consequences.

8 | CONCLUSION

In this study, we have specified and elaborated the concept of wilful ignorance. Ignorance and ignoring are often used as very broad concepts. It is therefore important to specify and contextualize these concepts to make them more applicable to specific domains and areas of interest. Abstract definitions need to be supplemented by domain-specific uses. Ignorance about ambiguous organizational structures and practices that may appear to be problematic, calling for further exploration, is quite different from ignorance in the sense of direct denial of uncomfortable facts or dealing with unknowns in science, calculations or planning. Motives to ignore need to be related to the context, and complexities and ambivalence considered, going beyond a clear strategic or calculative interest. As we have shown in this paper, a context-sensitive use of wilful ignorance means that the phenomenon can be empirically studied. This knowledge may then be valuable for understanding and improving organizational practice.

The main contribution of this study is thus the development of the concept of wilful ignorance, especially when applied to organizations. We unpacked and made explicit the elements of wilful ignorance and demonstrated the dynamic and often ambiguous nature of the phenomenon—both in terms of an individual's will and the epistemic nature of the knowledge object. We also identified a typology of ideal-typical situations in which wilful ignorance is enacted. Additionally, we discussed multiple drivers of wilful ignorance in organizations. Here, we identified institutional and organizational conditions, individual dimensions and possibilities to attain information as important drivers

in a multilevel understanding of how wilful ignorance may unfold. Finally, we suggested possible methods to study wilful ignorance and showed how the concept can be researched and adapted to organizational inquiry.

Our study has practical implications as well. Many organizations have implemented knowledge management systems, but hardly any have policies, expertize or activities focusing on ignorance, its effects and its reduction. One possible practice could be to assign someone to be in charge of harmful, avoidable ignorance—a chief (anti-)ignorance officer. Relatedly, organizations could organize events or provide a platform for questioning instances of wilful ignorance. Wilful ignorance could also be discerned and dealt with by making it visible as a part of workshops, for instance, by focusing on “important issues we don't seem to discuss” as an item on management or team agendas, or it could even be part of individuals' job descriptions. Moreover, simply clarifying the nature of various forms of wilful ignorance to organizational members may be a helpful first step.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

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