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Ignorance, Uncertainty, and the Development of Scientific Language

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Abstract

Robert Proctor has argued that ignorance or non-knowledge can be fruitfully divided into at least three categories: (1) ignorance as native state or starting point; (2) ignorance as lost realm or selective choice; and (3) ignorance as strategic ploy or active construct. This chapter explores Proctor's second category, ignorance as selective choice. When scientists investigate poorly understood phenomena, they have to make selective choices about what questions to ask, what research strategies and metrics to employ, and what language to use for describing the phenomena. This chapter focuses especially on the selective choice of language for describing and categorizing phenomena in the face of uncertainty. Using several case studies from recent pollution research, I show that linguistic choices are especially significant when we have severely limited knowledge, because those choices can emphasize and highlight some aspects of our limited knowledge rather than others. These selective emphases can in turn influence societal decision making, and they can exacerbate the selectivity of our knowledge by further steering scientific research in some directions rather than others. I conclude with some suggestions for developing scientific language in socially responsible ways, even in the face of significant ignorance and uncertainty.

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