Willful Ignorance: a Meta-analysis

Abstract

Research endeavors in the last two decades have highlighted that decision making is prone to willful ignorance. While deliberate avoidance is beneficial to the decision maker to maximize self-interest, this behavior can induce adverse externalities to others, from another individual in the small scale of a social interaction, to the labor force in the large scale of a consumer market. To obtain a comprehensive understanding of this topic, we present the first meta-analysis on willful ignorance. The aggregated results from 34 papers indicate that in an ambiguous setting, a significant amount of subjects rely on ignorance to make the selfish choice while protecting themselves from learning the impact of their action. We propose an explanation for this deliberate tendency as a violation of one's rationality. Most notably, our study highlights the need for interventions that promote thoughtful and sustainable decision making.

Introduction

Willful ignorance refers to the behavior where an individual deliberately choose not to obtain freely available information. It can be used as a strategic device to shield ourselves from learning the harmful impact of our action (Hertwig & Engel, 2016). Despite expressing care for ethical concerns, consumers often shy away from requesting information about labor practices and environmental protection (Ehrich & Irwin, 2005). This has been clearly demonstrated in a seminal paper by Dana, Weber, and Kuang (2007). When given the opportunity, a large share of the participants avoids learning the negative consequence of their action to maximize their own earning. At the same time, some participants, who are provided with the information by the experimenter, will use it to change their behavior and act more prosocially. These patterns so far cannot be explained using standard models of economic rationality (Grossman & Van der Weele, 2017). Beyond the laboratory, strategic avoidance has also been observed among Norwegians who benefit from the oil industry while remaining oblivious to its effects on the climate (Norgaard, 2006).

Objective

Whereas willful ignorance has been studied extensively, no work up to date has provided a comprehensive and quantitative summary of this behavior. Thus, by conducting this meta-analysis, our aim is threefold.

First, we want to quantitatively aggregate the existing evidence on willful ignorance. Synthesizing the empirical findings will allow us to answer the following questions: How prevalent is willful ignorance? What is the impact of willful ignorance on the choice that people make? How do prosocial individuals react in case of uncertainty?

Second, we aim to identify the personal and situational factors that can aggravate this behavior. Does a high cost to acting altruistically increase information avoidance? How much reward are people willing to renounce to remain ignorant? How generalized is this behavior?

Third, by reviewing the literature, we aim to identify gaps of knowledge that can pave the way for future research. Our goal is to advance the theory of willful ignorance and craft interventions that promotes sustainable decision making.

Method

Inclusion criteria

To be included, all studies meet the following criteria. First, the experimental study presents participants with a choice, which carries consequences for themselves and another party. Second, within the choice architecture, there are two scenarios: (1) in the No-Conflict scenario, the participant's and the other party's interest are aligned, (2) in the Conflict scenario, the participant's and other party's interest are not aligned. Third, the experimental set-up includes a Full Information treatment, where participants are fully informed of the consequences of their action. Fourth, in the Hidden Information treatment, participants are to choose either to learn the impact of their action or to proceed without the knowledge.

Literature search

To obtain relevant literature, we conducted a pre-registered search on Google Scholar, Web of Science, PsycINFO and Scopus. Additionally, we looked for all journal articles that cited the three highly relevant papers done by Ehrich & Irwin (2005), Dana et al. (2007), and Grossman & Van der Weele (2017). Simultaneously, we disseminated a call for published and unpublished papers via several associations and mailing lists. In total, we obtained 3255 records of which 34 papers meet the inclusion criteria.

Analytical approach

Data analysis was conducted using the *metaphor* package (Viechtbauer, 2010) for the R software environment (R Core Team, 2020). Categorical outcome variables were analyzed using random-effects models. To quantify the prevalence of willful ignorance, the proportion of ignorance was converted into log-transformed odds ratio (*OR*) before model fitting. The effect of ambiguity on prosocial behavior was tested using the *OR* of the prosocial choices made in the Hidden information treatment to those that were made in the control treatment. Inverse variance method was used to assign weight to each study, and restricted-maximum likelihood was the chosen estimator of the heterogeneity of variance (τ^2).

Key finding #1: 38% of participants chose ignorance in case of ambiguity

When given the chance, results indicate a significant amount of participant choosing to remain ignorant, even when full information is freely obtainable, *OR* = -0.51, 95% CI [-0.79, -0.23], z = -3.56, *p* = .0004.

Key finding #2: Because of the choice of ignorance, prosocial choices under ambiguity are only 41% of those made when full information is provided.

Participants make significantly more selfish choices in case of uncertainty compared to when full information regarding consequences of the choice is given, *OR* = -0.89, 95% CI [-1.14, -0.64], *z* = -7.04, *p* < .0001. Publication status (*b* = 0.32, *z* = 1.14, *p* = 0.26), student status (*b* = -0.33, *z* = -1.28, *p* = 0.20) and country where the studies were conducted (*b* = -0.29, *z* = -1.20, *p* = 0.20) do not explain the heterogeneity in the choices made.

Conclusion

In the ideal world, people will inform themselves as much as possible before committing to decision. This is yet to be a case in reality but it is what we want to promote. With this meta-analysis, we highlight the responsibilities of not only the consumers but also

the providers of good and services. Working together in transparency is how we can achieve

a fair and sustainable future.

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