

INTEGRATING THE UNKNOWN

Michael Smithson, The Australian National University

My interest in the unknown began when I was a mathematics student, and morphed into a life-long obsession while I was pursuing a PhD in sociology. These slides present a portal to my work in this domain. If you follow their links, you'll see how these and other, apparently disparate, disciplines are intertwined when it comes to the unknown.

This portal works by providing a series of connected assertions containing links. Clicking on a link takes you to another page that “unpacks” the word, phrase, or assertion covered by the link. These additional pages also have links, taking you to articles, books, extracts from books, or blog posts. They, in turn, take you to still more sources, ideas, and works. You can navigate and dwell in this world at your pleasure.

Relevant conference theme: concepts and methods

The topic of unknowns has no natural "home" in a single discipline. Instead, it sprawls across a large range of disciplines and domains.

Nonetheless, a productive starting-point for an overview of unknowns is recognizing that unknowns are socially constructed.

In the past two decades, work has emerged on how unknowns are socially constructed and why.

Unknowns are not all one thing. Several distinctions are important, as are various metaphors.

There also is evidence that people think and act as if there are different kinds of unknowns, and regard them as having different consequences. Different unknowns also may carry different moral statuses.

In Western culture (and others) there is a marked tendency to regard unknowns negatively, as things to be rid of. This bias can be mistaken and needlessly limiting.

Unknowns do not always have negative consequences for their bearers. In fact, people can benefit from unknowns. They have justifiable uses for them. Sometimes an ignoramus can even outdo a know-it-all.

The topic of unknowns also is a crucial aspect of debates about rationality. According to some, a hallmark of rationality is knowing what you don't know.

Unknowns underpin important forms of social capital, so at the socio-cultural level they can have benefits as well.

Therefore, coping, deciding and managing with unknowns does not boil down to getting rid of them. Other more viable approaches are available and being developed.

Well, that's my work on unknowns over the past quarter-century, all summed up in a couple of slides.

Thanks for taking a look! If you're interested in the rest of my work, you can find that [here](#).



Michael Smithson, Research School of Psychology,
The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia

W: http://psychology.anu.edu.au/_people/people_details.asp?reclD=130

Email: Michael.Smithson@anu.edu.au

This digital poster was prepared for the First Global Conference on Research Integration and Implementation, <http://www.I2Sconference.org/>