

Diversity and multiplicity in uncertain times: the category of “difficult knowledge” in the sensitive contexts of education and social research

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Urszula Markowska-Manista¹ & Mariusz Baranowski²

¹ University of Warsaw, Faculty of Education, Mokotowska 16/20, Warsaw, Poland. ORCID: 0000-0003-0667-4164, Email: u.markowska-ma@uw.edu.pl

² Adam Mickiewicz University, Faculty of Sociology, Szamarzewskiego 89C, 60-568 Poznań, Poland. ORCID: 0000-0001-6755-9368, Email: mariusz.baranowski@amu.edu.pl

ABSTRACT: This article explores the category of “difficult knowledge” within the sensitive contexts of education and social research amidst contemporary global transformations. Uncertain times marked by humanitarian crises, wars, migration, and socio-economic shifts challenge the stability and security of societies. Difficult knowledge encompasses emotionally charged, complex topics integral to social, political, and educational spheres, compelling individuals and groups to confront uncomfortable truths and deconstruct human understanding. This concept, introduced by Britzman (1998), addresses the cognitive and emotional struggles in engaging with traumatic representations of historical and social events. The paper highlights the necessity for educators and researchers to navigate these challenges, fostering critical and reflective analyses while managing their psychological impacts. It underscores the dual role of researchers as both empathetic human beings and objective professionals, particularly in extreme field conditions. Additionally, it discusses the implications of conspiracy theories as a form of difficult knowledge, emphasizing the need for educational strategies that promote critical thinking and resilience. The article calls for greater attention to the sensitivities of the research process and the ethical responsibilities in studying and teaching difficult knowledge.

KEYWORDS: difficult knowledge, uncertainty, education, conspiracy theory, sensitive contexts

Whereas learning about an event or experience focuses on the acquisition of qualities, attributes, and facts, so that it presupposes a distance (or, one might say, a detachment) between learner and what is to be learned, learning from an event or experience is of a different order, that of insight. Both of these learning moves are made fragile in difficult knowledge. (Britzman, 1998, p. 117)

The text contributes to the discussion on the category of difficult knowledge in sensitive contexts of education and social research relating to diversity and multiplicity in uncertain times.

Uncertain times refer to the contemporary transformations affecting European and non-European societies, i.e. humanitarian crises, wars, armed conflicts, increasing refugee and migration processes, as well as climate, economic and social changes that make the nearer and more distant living worlds uncertain in terms of security, stability and peace. These processes raise several fundamental questions for societies, amongst others, about the reception of difficult knowledge to cope with traumatic representations of the nearer and more distant world.

“Difficult” is a term defined in dictionaries and lexicons as requiring effort to accomplish or achieve, and thus not easy to understand and charged with emotion. Difficult knowledge refers to ubiquitous topics and content that have become integral to the real and virtual social, political and educational worlds, challenging individuals and groups out of a safe and stable status quo. These topics involve diverse areas of human life, are embedded in time, place, and space, and contain a strong emotional component. Although they have accompanied humans since the dawn of time, as they are, in a sense, a product of human action, they construct and deconstruct human thinking about the world as well as the directions and paths of understanding particular phenomena, processes and events (Battista, 2024). Human life is marked by difficult knowledge that exposes the cognitive gap between experiences, understandings and representations of this knowledge in different contexts. Difficult knowledge is a theoretical construct that refers to encountering individuals and groups in diverse learning and research situations with information and topics that can be challenging due to their emotional, social and normative components. When confronted with difficult knowledge, individuals with experience with a particular subject can relate to this knowledge based precisely on this experience. Those for whom difficult knowledge is merely a theory or a distant case study may rely on representations of difficult knowledge and seek references to their own context or remain passive.

In social research and social science education, various content and topics represent so-called difficult knowledge, as they often refer to discrimination, conflict, war, poverty, genocide, slavery, hunger, social inequality, death, exploitation, abuse, violence and power. The theoretical lens of difficult knowledge is used in education and social research to break down established patterns and highlight intersections, e.g., between power, sys-

tems, structures, materiality and situationality, action, emotions, values and rights or their absence and violation.

Deborah Britzman (1998) identifies “difficult knowledge” as representations of social and historical trauma related to, for instance, perceptions of injustice, suffering and death in pedagogical situations. Difficult knowledge refers to “both representations of social trauma in curriculum and the individual’s encounters with them in pedagogy” (Pitt & Britzman, 2003, p. 755). In education, in particular, the process of dealing with this challenging traumatic knowledge can initially seem rather complicated. It may thus require the individual and the group to find safe channels for dealing with this knowledge or result in disregarding it and delaying a response (Pitt & Britzman, 2003) and “postponing” it. It may also involve non-reactivity and other resistance strategies due to fear of being unable to cope with the traumas that such knowledge may generate or reluctance to explore painful content. In the educational process, in particular, numerous complications of an emotional and pedagogical nature arise when an individual or group is confronted with difficult knowledge, e.g. representations of social or historical trauma (Garrett, 2011). They relate to the context the topic addresses, the teaching methodology and how the content is conveyed, the content itself, and the preparation for the encounter with difficult subject matter and, therefore, the readiness to receive information and its critical and reflective analysis and interpretation. In addition, preparing the educator to handle this kind of knowledge in education can be complicated. On the one hand, it involves developing strategies for dealing with this content in the personal field and, on the other hand, understanding how this knowledge can be skilfully conveyed to the individual and the group through pedagogical practice, which contributes to deconstructing existing knowledge and eliminating stereotypes. Therefore, the challenge for education and those involved in teaching is to recognise the reception and cope with representations of difficult knowledge relating to the unequal relationship between the material reality of what happened and the subjective experience of difficult knowledge (Zembylas 2015).

Some of the topics that represent difficult knowledge are, at the same time, socially sensitive topics and are interpreted as causing an excessive emotional reaction to a situation or event. Others are the subject of protests, social change movements, and social media debates. Still, others serve as fake news and are used as slogans to intimidate the masses in the propaganda machine. Others still become drivers for grassroots movements and groups calling for the cessation of warfare, respect for human rights or environmental protection.

In social research, difficult knowledge refers to knowledge that is important to investigate as it reveals mechanisms and factors that are invisible to the individual or group and relevant to a given situation, action and context. Difficult knowledge in qualitative research implemented in the field is preceded by queries on thematically “difficult” literature. It is usually linked to a difficult context and a difficult area of academic exploration. Field research may include a front line, a refugee camp, a city at night, a hospice

or an area affected by a natural disaster, massacre or epidemic. Difficult field knowledge is also associated with the uncertainty of events and tension resulting from the dual role (a human being and researcher) and the focus on an ethical and humanistically oriented professional practice. This duality of roles means that the social researcher has to empathise with the pain and share in the suffering and trauma of others. This exposure to stimuli (the sight of death, the fear of danger, fleeing the front line, the stress of putting a gun to the researcher's temple), on the one hand, makes it possible to understand difficult knowledge in the context in which it takes place, and on the other hand, burdens the researcher's psyche and includes this profession among occupations at risk of post-traumatic stress syndrome.

While there are debates in academic discourse about the methodological and ethical issues involved in researching difficult knowledge about sensitive topics and sensitive groups (Liamputtong, 2007), there is still little attention paid to the sensitivity of the research process itself and its impact on the researchers doing research in sensitive contexts. No vaccine would make one immune to sensitive research in sensitive contexts. This type of research may be sensitive as a whole or due to a specific factor within it and may affect the researcher's situation "here and now" and in the future. Hence, it seems essential to address the situation of researchers, especially those exposed to extreme circumstances, threats to life or health and traumatic experiences encoded in the form of emotionally charged images. The power of difficult knowledge and its importance means "having to tolerate the loss of certainty in the very effort to know" (Farley, 2009, p. 543).

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During times of uncertainty, conspiracy theories often serve as a means of coping for individuals and groups faced with complex and distressing realities (Del Vicario et al., 2016). These theories provide simplified explanations for convoluted events, offering a semblance of control and comprehension. However, they also present a challenging form of knowledge. Conspiracy theories can perpetuate misinformation and create cognitive dissonance, particularly when they challenge established facts and scientific reasoning (Jabkowski, Domaradzki, & Baranowski, 2023). Consequently, the task of deconspiration (Verdery, 2014), or debunking these theories, becomes an essential educational and social endeavour. It necessitates addressing the emotional and psychological foundations that attract individuals to these beliefs in the first place. Deconspiration entails not only correcting false information but also engaging empathetically with the fears and uncertainties that drive conspiracy thinking. This undertaking emphasizes the broader challenge of managing challenging knowledge in an era characterized by rapid information dissemination and societal upheaval, underscoring the urgency for robust educational strategies that foster critical thinking, resilience, and informed scepticism (Simon, 2011).

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