# 6 'Forbidden' Knowledge

**Forbidden knowledge cannot refer to any particular body of knowledge, but is a dynamic category, the contents of which shift depending on culture, political climate, and the interests of researchers.**

**(Kempner et al. (2011, p. 479)**

## 6.1 INTRODUCTION

Developing Chapter 4's focus on the role of the university in producing knowledge and Chapter 5's focus on internal and external restrictions, this chapter interrogates the concept of 'forbidden' knowledge (Kempner et al., 2011). Kempner et al. (2011, p. 476) recognise that the 'knowable unknown' is fluid and expansive, but they use the sub-category of 'forbidden knowledge' in their work, constructed in terms of being 'too sensitive, dangerous or taboo to produce'. The related construct of 'negative' knowledge has also been used to designate knowing what knowledge not to produce (Cetina, 1999), as it can threaten powerful interests mediated through institutions and sociopolitical and religious cultures. The operationalisation of these non-knowledges can entail both formal and informal processes including self-censorship, internal university restrictions, and external sociopolitical restrictions as discussed in Chapter 5, as well as Chapter 4's contextualisation of the production of knowledge within the institutional framework of the university, its mission, public funding, and its national and international contexts. Kempner et al. (2011, p. 475) identify the phenomenon of 'the production of nonknowledge' as a neglected area of research, in contrast to sociologists, philosophers, and historians of science focusing on the production on knowledge and the 'structures and processes that impede that knowledge'.



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This chapter turns its attention to the question of forbidden knowledge deemed too dangerous or 'taboo' to produce, approached in relation to the structural and sociopolitical processes, rather than in terms of gaps in knowledge. As such, agency must be accounted for in such absences of knowledge. For example, the terms 'undone science' (Hess, 2007) and 'agnotology' (Procter, 1995) have been coined in this emerging field to gesture towards agency (Kempner et al., 2011). There is a relative lack of interrogation of how discourses and sociopolitical and historical contexts shape the absence of certain knowledges. Given my transnational approach to the study of the production of knowledge, including 'forbidden' knowledge, my empirical data provides accounts of daily lived experiences of academics operating in and against this terrain. Kempner et al. (2011) highlight how the existing literature on forbidden knowledge takes a universalist approach towards the content of forbidden knowledge, and so this approach focusing on the nature of power, agency, socio-politics and history in relation to forbidden knowledge is both theoretically and empirically novel.

In the first section of this chapter, I conceptualise dominant discourses of forbidden knowledge with respect to three framing rationales arising from the empirical data. These include concerns arising from the applied use of knowledge, discovering 'uncomfortable truths' and 'taboo' topics. Based on the empirical data, the next section of the chapter focuses on four areas of 'forbidden' knowledge: 'bioethics, psychology, and genetics'; 'Palestine'; 'gender and sexuality'; and 'race, religion, security, and extremism'. This is then followed by an examination of academics' experiences of difficulties in publishing and disseminating their research – what has been called 'boundary work' (Kempner et al., 2011).

### 6.1.1 Conceptualising Rationales of Forbidden Knowledge

#### 6.1.1.1 Fear of the Misapplication of Research Findings

On asking interviewees whether they believe there is some research that should not be conducted, the majority of interviewees had a permissive approach to academic freedom, often only highlighting a concern relating to the application or, indeed, misapplication of research findings, particularly in relation to science. For example, Professor Peter Singer, Professor of Bioethics at Princeton University, is well known as one of the intellectual founders of the animal liberation movement and for his work on global poverty. However, some of his philosophical positions on euthanasia and disability have raised significant public controversy. As such, his own

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research operates within and against the terrain of 'forbidden' knowledge. Singer answered this question in terms of what ought not to be published, constructed in terms of weighing dangers and benefits – the language of ethics:

> Some research that should not be conducted ... I guess there might be some things that ought not to be published, you know, an example of this would be, say, I did once object to a ... there was a magazine called *The Progressive* that published an article called 'The H-Bomb Secret', in which it described how to make a hydrogen bomb. I thought that should not have been published but that's rather different from saying that I thought the research on which it was based should not have been done. I do not think there's, I'm generally in favour of finding out the truth ... as I say, sometimes it might be – I suppose you could say 'well, if you do this research someone will find out about it and it could be extremely dangerous', like enabling people to build terrible weapons or maybe a more realistic example now is to bio-engineer a virus that creates a pandemic. So there could be cases of that sort where the dangers clearly outweigh the benefits, then I think it might be better not to do it. But they'd be pretty rare cases I think. (Peter Singer, Professor of Bioethics, Princeton University, US, p. 3)

This kind of argument is also reflected in other public discourses typically concerned with the misapplication of technology. This is evident, for example, in the history of assisted reproductive technologies, leading to ethical debates on applications leading to single parenting, same-sex parenthood, increased multiple births, sex selection, and the usual prohibitive costs, creating a classed marketplace. There have also been anti-racist, gendered, classed, and ableist critiques of eugenics – not only of historical 'positive' eugenics practices but also of contemporary 'negative' eugenics practices such as prenatal screening, and as mentioned, Singer's positions on euthanasia and disability.

In the United States, the heightened sociopolitical and religious contexts around abortion debates have also affected assisted reproduction technologies. The case of assisted reproductive technologies illustrates that what is perceived as 'dangerous' is not fixed, but has changed over time, and varies according to geopolitical, cultural, and religious contexts. The determination of what becomes dangerous and then forbidden can be seen through state law-making, as evident in cloning and nuclear weapons. Singer distinguishes further in proposing boundaries around publication as opposed to the research itself, which Klein (2021) refers to as boundary work that occurs during the peer review process, where knowledge becomes forbidden for

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normative reasons, examined later in the chapter. Public and disciplinary discourses also become internalised by researchers themselves, as elucidated in the previous chapter.

#### 6.1.1.2 Fear of Alternative Positions: Discovering 'Uncomfortable Truths'

Another set of concerns raised by interviewees relates to the notion of uncovering 'uncomfortable truths'. In the two accounts below – one academic working on the conflict in Northern Ireland and the other academic working on sectarian differences in Lebanon – self-restraint and institutional mechanisms such as the institutional review board (IRB) or ethics committee act to harness the perceived potential dangers of the findings:

> I'm not sure whether it's academic but more sort of intellectual freedom – openness about pursuing ideas and feeling a sense of confidence that there's not going to be any boundaries or kind of borders in doing it. I mean occasionally in doing research in conflict and peace building you find out very uncomfortable truths, you know, whether it's in Northern Ireland, whether it's the State and its counter-insurgency processes or whatever. You know, that's kind of a slightly different issue because that makes you think about, you know, how your research can potentially be used or how can we deploy it in different ways which may not have necessarily the intention which you originally hoped. (Professor of Sociology, Queen's University Belfast, UK, p. 2)

The conception of the strategic use of not knowing (Gross and McGoey, 2015) is an emerging concept in the interdisciplinary emerging field of 'ignorance studies'. In relation to policymaking, strategic not knowing is not addressed by collecting evidence, but is rather a 'constitutive feature of policymaking than an external disturbance' (Paul and Haddad, 2023). Paul and Haddad (2023) argue that ignorance can be conceived of as a material good which can be weaponised in policy disputes, which they illustrate in their examination of the COVID-19 pandemic, which they coin as 'institutionalised ignorance' (p. 224). The above example with respect to Northern Ireland politics and sensitivities about making visible 'uncomfortable truths' in research illustrates a policy collusion through self-censorship. The following case, in contrast, shows the institutional boundaries imposed based on a rationale of ethical concerns:

> IRB, instead of looking at the wellbeing of participants and the protection of their rights and so on and so forth, went into the content of my questionnaire, they were like 'hm, this is a question that you are asking that might be sensitive, what if

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> the data results show that Christians are more 'x' than the Muslims, Sunnis or the Shias or whatever and that can create a problem. We were similarly frustrated over a period of years after that, the first years when the IRB was operated where every single research that was proposing that involved intergroup relations or intergroup contact or whatever was scrutinised beyond the issue of wellbeing of the researcher and/or the participants. (Professor of Psychology, AUB, Lebanon, p. 4)

The potential of dangerous statistics, despite policy knowledge typically favouring quantifiable empirical data, is not deemed strategic in this instance. In conflict or post-conflict contexts, the policy logic is one that is strategically forward-looking, and therefore, inconvenient statistics do not fit such policy aims. In a similar vein, Paul and Haddad (2023) show how statistical data in the context of COVID-19 was, in fact, deleted in Brazil; in several countries, varying decisions were made on the extent to which data on numbers of infections or death rates were collected and published; inconsistent data has also been collected on vaccinations and disaggregation of statistics by various ethnic and religious groups, those with disabilities, gender, etc. They argue that this non-knowledge enables a 'high degree of uncertainty' which is not accidental but, in fact, strategic.

#### 6.1.1.3 Taboo Topics

At a fundamental level, interviewees talked of research that either they or others perceive as 'taboo'. One UK Senior Lecturer proposes a hierarchy of 'controversial' topics in the UK context:

> So the topics, just to be completely explicit, the topics that I'm talking about, probably three things primarily – one is Israel, the other is masculinity and men more generally and the other is Whiteness as an institution. I think Israel is more controversial than the other two. And I feel those are three things which I feel personally very, very critical of. They're three things that worry me greatly. And I do not hold back from criticising them, I do criticise them, but I am cautious when I do in a way that I'm generally not cautious about other things. (p. 5)

The intellectual history of research on race and cognitive difference, characterised as 'pseudoscience', was also raised by a number of interviewees: 'Well, I mean I suppose we are getting into the whole thing about supposed links between race and intelligence' (Professor of Education, University of Birmingham, UK, p. 7). One of the most significant works in this field by Herrnstein and Murray is their book, *The Bell Curve*, arguably underpinned

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by a eugenics logic both methodologically and in terms of its policy applications, where they argued that race and intelligence are correlated with Black Americans being the lowest performers on IQ tests (Kiwan, 2022). Contemporary academic efforts to decolonise knowledge are predicated in modern theories of race that are situated in the history of European justifications for colonisation in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries based on notions of differential intellect. The rise of eugenics in this context provided a pseudo-scientific rationale for creating not only raced but also classed and disabled 'others'. The intersection between race, class, and disability has also played an important role in US immigration discourses and policies (Kiwan, 2022).

Research philosophically exploring arguments about the comparative fluidity of constructs of gender and race was also mentioned:

> The case of . . . the woman who wrote the article was raising questions about why if it was OK to change your gender, to identify as a gender that was not your biological sex, wasn't it OK to identify as a member of a race that wasn't your biological heritage, if we don't think of race as a biological concept? So she got a lot of flak for that. So that's one example and I was in touch with her and she was certainly somewhat intimidated by what happened. (Peter Singer, Professor of Bioethics, Princeton University, US, p. 4)

This case refers to Professor Rachel Tuvel, who wrote an article entitled 'In Defense of Transracialism' in 2017, published in the feminist philosophical peer-refereed journal, *Hypatia*. In the article, she considers whether one can select one's race, as is accepted for gender. This article provoked strong criticism, accusing Tuvel of transphobia and racism and engaging in 'epistemic violence', with an open letter calling for its retraction and members of the journal's editorial board apologising for its publication and the editor resigning.

In addition, a number of interviewees talked of the ethics of conducting certain topics of research, often in certain scientific fields:

> I think that when we have restrictions in the United States on some research involving subjects, and particularly children, or preborn, you know, foetuses and the like, I do think that's an issue. And obviously the question of surrogacy comes up and the use of biology, of testing to try to create three parent children and try to get around biological norms in the United States. Those are all issues that are a concern. So yeah I do think there are some that should not be conducted. (Emeritus Professor, Law, US, p. 8)

In the following section of this chapter, four key areas of 'forbidden knowledge' are examined arising from interviewees' own experiences of working on

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topics considered controversial and the challenges they have faced in producing this 'forbidden knowledge'.

## 6.1.2 Areas of Forbidden Knowledge

### 6.1.2.1 Bioethics, Psychology, and 'Controversial' Science

As highlighted in the section above on areas interviewees consider research should not be conducted, interviewees working in the areas of bioethics, psychology, and genetics provide personal accounts of their first-hand experiences. For example, Peter Singer, Professor of Bioethics at Princeton University in the United States, has worked on the issues of abortion, euthanasia, and infanticide with positions considered to be controversial. He has argued that the right to life is linked to the ability to hold preferences and a capacity to feel pain. Based on these assumptions, he has argued that foetuses and newborns do not have the characteristics of personhood (Singer, 1993). His work has been criticised from religious perspectives and also those working in the field of disability rights. In his interview, Singer traces the development of his research interests:

> That was partly as a result of the birth of the first in-vitro fertilisation baby back in 1978 and the fact that the first one who was born in Britain was rapidly followed by the second one who was born – no, the third one I think actually – was born in Australia. So it became a big issue in Australia and that's why I got involved in bio-ethics and that led me to some controversial topics, to some extent including in-vitro fertilisation although what I have to say on that topic is no longer controversial. But issues about euthanasia and especially about euthanasia for severely disabled newborns which clearly were, and still are, controversial and those are questions which simply arose from the fact that I was working in bio-ethics so I'd founded Australia's first university-based bio-ethics centre. (Peter Singer, Professor of Bioethics, Princeton University, US, p. 1)

Similarly, Robert Plomin, Professor of Behavioural Genetics at King's College, London, locates the intellectual development of his research interests in historical perspective and in relation to the norms of the discipline which have changed over time:

> This was in the early 70s – and back then in psychology in America at least, probably in the rest of the world too, psychology just did not consider the possibility of biological genetic influences. Psychology was dominated by

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> environmentalism. The view that you are what you learn. And so it was kind of dangerous professionally, and sometimes even personally, to even talk about genetic influence. And the psychology textbooks did not say anything about genetics. There's been a mountain of data from different sources: twin adoption studies, and now DNA, that often verge on the conclusion that genetics is important. So I think there is increasing acceptance of it. But when my book came out in October of last year, I was still quite worried about what the reaction would be. Some friends of mine, academic friends, thought it was like a suicide note in a way, in that I could become a pariah, because for the first time I did not pull any punches on it. You know, I just said as the title suggests, that DNA is the major systematic influence making us who we are. You know, the environment's important, but it does not work in that systematic way we always thought it worked when we used the word nurture. I was asked to write this book 30 years ago, and I did not want to do it then because I thought we needed more evidence, more research. But really, as I say in the book, the main reason was cowardice. I knew at that time that it was still politically incorrect in psychology – and maybe the behavioural sciences at large – to talk about genetic influence. (Robert Plomin, King's College, London, UK; formerly Penn State, and University of Colorado, US, p. 2)

He discusses the reception of his work and the unwelcome knowledge that 'genetics could affect behaviour' and that 'parents do not have as much control as they think'. In addition, he perceives the hostility in the reception of his work, in part arising from a lack of understanding in how to interpret the findings, stating:

> I was just amazed to find that inherited DNA differences account for so much of psychological traits, when it had been ignored for a century. So I found that very exciting and it led to lots of new ways of thinking about individual differences in psychology. It does not lead to a determinism, which is what some people worry about. (p. 9)

Noting that whilst the environment is important, Plomin explains that it does not work in a systematic way, but rather in terms of chance events. In addition, he clarifies that the findings of genetic influence are descriptive rather than making a normative claim that:

> no necessary policy implications [arise] from that – you can have a right-wing view or a left-wing view. The left-wing view is like the Finnish model where you say OK kids differ genetically, but what we are gonna do is put all the resources into that lower end to make sure that no kids are left behind, in terms of literacy

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> and numeracy. And a right-wing position could be oh well, just educate the best, forget the rest, which does not seem very wise because it's the intellectual capital of the society that's important. (p. 6)

He notes how this is also reflected in the priority of some funders, commenting on the ESRC: 'I think there's still quite a bit of resistance there to genetics' (p. 7).

#### 6.1.2.2 Palestine

A number of academics interviewed commented on the challenges of conducting research on Palestine, both in the US and UK contexts. These observations were made by both academics who themselves work or have worked in the field, as well as those outside the field. Matthew Abraham, Professor of English, University of Arizona, USA, and author of *Out of Bounds: Academic Freedom and the Question of Palestine*, reflects on his career journey through academia:

> So my dissertation focused on ... issues around critical speech on the Israel-Palestine conflict asking if within the American Academy there's even academic freedom when it comes to Israel-Palestine, and my resounding answer is no, there is not really academic freedom when it comes to this issue. And really everything I've said in the last fifteen years has proven that to be true. I have faced obstacles in various points in my career, as a graduate student, as an assistant professor, where I was given subtle warnings, even veiled threats to stop writing on these issues and that I would not get a job or would be denied tenure, or would not be able to get key grants to support my research. I've lost grants before, after they were guaranteed to me in writing under the cover of bureaucratic error. At DePaul I went through various type of exclusions because of my support of Finkelstein and because of this focus on Israel-Palestine. I never was able to become Chair of my department even though I tried several times and people would say 'Oh he's too much of a lightning rod' and 'He's too political' and 'His criticism of Israel is not something we can tolerate.' (p. 2)

For some scholars, the precarity of doing this work is too great:

> I think if you are on tenure for example, it can be very hazardous to engage in certain types of research, particularly about, you know, Israel-Palestine's conflict if you are being critical of Zionism, if you are being critical of the Zionist lobby, if you are looking at the conditions of the public sphere that are constraining debate about Palestine. Sure, if you are visible enough, you are probably going to get on somebody's radar and you are going to be attacked and you could very well face

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> calls for your firing or being denied tenure. And within the university there are all kinds of people monitoring scholarship on Israel-Palestine . . . I've really drifted away from doing this work in the last five, six years, just because it's just too much, you know, it takes emotionally and just from the standpoint of energy, it's just too draining and it just, it makes far more sense from the standpoint of one's energy and mental health to just stick to more conventional things. (Matthew Abraham, Professor of English, University of Arizona, US, p. 4)

The constraints of working in the field are illustrated in similar accounts:

> I led a field school into the West Bank of Palestine – it was the Israel-Palestine Field School, that I co-taught with an anthropologist here. And when people found out that we were leading this class, there were hysterical emails about how we were anti-Semitic and the university should not support this kind of work. And then lastly I would say that when we host pro-Palestinian or Palestinian speakers on campus, we get criticism from Jewish organisations in our state saying that the speaker should not be supported by the university, that university funds should not be used and on and on. (Alex Lubin, Professor of African American Studies, Penn State, US, p. 3)

The case of Professor Miller, sociologist at the University of Bristol in the United Kingdom, acts as a 'cautionary tale' (Kempner et al., 2011) in the field with his sacking in 2021 following a formal investigation of a complaint of anti-Semitism made in 2018, which was unsuccessful. It was reopened for an appeal in 2020. In an interview after being fired, Miller says that there was a reactivation of the complaint under new rules introduced in 2019 based on the International Holocaust Remembrance Association's definition of anti-Semitism (Politics Today, 2021). Although his speech was ruled lawful, it was concluded that he 'did not meet the standards of behaviour we expect from our staff' (The Guardian, 2021). At the same time, a university statement said that it regards the 'principle of academic freedom as fundamental' and would like to 'reiterate that we take any risk to stifle that freedom seriously' (BBC, 2021).

#### 6.1.2.3 Gender and Sexuality

Research on increasing youth identification with transgender identities has been a controversial domain. In 2018, Professor Lisa Littman at Brown University in Rhode Island, United States, coined the term 'rapid-onset gender dysphoria' to describe the increased incidence of gender dysphoria in young people (Littman, 2018). Littman proposed that this phenomenon

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could be explained by peer influence and that identifying as transgender is a social coping mechanism. On publishing her paper, Littman faced a number of criticisms on the methodology and conclusions from academics as well as transgender activists, and it was also critiqued by sociologists as a moral panic. The publication agreed to a post-publication review, and it was subsequently framed more clearly as a study of targeted parents' views predominantly from anti-transgender websites. It was also made clear that the medicalised term coined by Littman did not have diagnostic standing. The case also attracted a lot of controversy in the mainstream media. In a subsequent response from Littman in 2022, she addressed assumptions behind her motivations for the study stating her research had been a 'very good-faith attempt' to 'find out what's going on' and that 'As a person I am liberal; I'm pro-LGBT. I saw a phenomenon with my own eyes and I investigated, found that it was different than what was in the scientific literature' (Kessien, 2022). Commenting on this case, a UK Professor expresses concern in such research being 'shut down':

> There's been a massive increase in the number of, particularly girls, presenting with various forms of gender dysphoria, a huge increase, like a kind of five hundred-fold increase. And it seems to me that any good social scientist or anyone concerned with ensuring that children you know, vulnerable children or children presenting with whatever kind of problem get the most appropriate therapeutic or medical interventions, that you need to understand what the underlying cause is for what's being presented. But anyone trying to do research that suggests that there might be a broader cultural or social reason for these phenomena is blocked from doing so. And that's just, you know we know that. And this seems to me deeply worrying. So there's a famous example that you are probably aware of, of Lisa Lippman at Brown University in the States who's developed the idea that based on quite a lot of qualitative data that there is an element of social contagion amongst girls presenting for gender reassignment. And this is seen as hugely problematic by the trans activist community, [who] have tried to get the research shut down, tried to discredit it. And I think well you know, maybe they are right, maybe the research is flawed, but this is such a new area and this is such an important area to get right. I mean we are dealing with children's development, we are dealing with people making potentially irreversible decisions to undergo medical transition and take puberty blockers and all sorts of things. We need to make sure we are getting it right. And I just think in a climate like that, the more research you have the better, you know provided the research itself is not doing anything unethical and if it turns out that that hypothesis is not borne out by the

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> research then do more research and show it. But I just do not think we should be shutting down research into particular attempts to, in a particular attempt to understand what's going on in a case like this. So I do think there's some worrying things going on at the moment. And this seems to be an area that a lot of people just will not get involved in. (pp. 7–8)

Subsequent large-scale research analysing data from 2017 to 2019 in the United States has not replicated Littman's claim that there is a trend of increase in transgender identification (Turban et al., 2022). Kempner (2017) proposes that such controversial cases of 'horror stories of academic persecution' act as 'cautionary tales' to make public and share the boundaries of forbidden knowledge – often cited well-known cases such as Milgram's (1974) obedience to authority studies, Humphrey's tearoom trade study, and Herrnstein and Murray's *The Bell Curve* (1996). Kempner also found that academics self-censored on the basis of disciplinary norms.

The experience of infringement of academic freedom as a result of an ensuing bullying environment and the ensuing culture of self-censorship is also highlighted as a means of securing the boundaries of forbidden knowledge:

> In the last year, when I started to speak out about the current debates around transgender rights and feminist issues . . . that's when I really came up against what in my mind is a very, very worrying culture of actually a lot of sort of self-censorship of people who are scared to speak up on things that are seen as controversial, because of the amount of harassment and bullying that's taken place really about people speaking up on this. So it's really in the last year that this has become an issue for me. It's never been an issue before . . . People speaking at those events have been bullied, physically bullied, targeted with threats. Meetings have been shut down. I mean any meeting that I've attempted to go to has had last minute venue changes because of bomb threats to the venue. Quite aggressive people demonstrating outside and shouting targeted abuse and harassment at people. I personally know people who have had death and rape threats on social media, from activists who are aware of the stance they are taking . . . I have had student activists tweeting about me on their accounts, warning students to stay away from my classes because I'm apparently a dangerous transphobe so my classes are not safe spaces for trans students which is very upsetting to me as a lecturer, as someone who's worked really hard to make my classes as inclusive as possible, and would never you know, say anything that I thought would offend or make students uncomfortable. (UK Professor, UK, pp. 3–4)

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The importance of the complexity of power dynamics within transgender pressure groups, calling for attention to the intersectionality of class, sex, and gender/sexuality identity, is raised to nuance the understanding in situating certain forms of research as taboo and threatening to transgender identities:

> Because historically male body persons – and I include in that group trans women and gay men and bisexual men – have always had power. That's historically true. Particularly white upper-class persons in those groups. Unlike women and unlike racial minorities, LGBT people have always had a segment – and I want to stress, a segment of people within them, who have always had significant power. And they have oppressed not just other groups but they have oppressed, not just other vulnerable minorities but they have oppressed other LGBT people. And so it should not shock anybody that they have corporate ties, they have university ties. I do not think the behaviour of those groups is the majority but they have the power to shut down other groups. And I think it ties right into our discussion of academic freedom. They have the economic power to shut down other groups. So that's what's been happening. (Emeritus Professor of Law, US, p. 6)

Forbidden knowledge is also evident – not only in terms of research but also in terms of what is 'forbidden' knowledge in the curriculum. The perception of topics from the main university campus that may be considered to be controversial on branch campuses tends to result in a cautious approach from senior management with regard to what is taught in the curriculum. In the case of Curtin University, Australia, and its branch campus in Dubai, the perception of topics from the main university campus that may be considered to be controversial on branch campuses, tending to result in a cautious approach from senior management with regard to what is taught in the curriculum, is detailed in the previous chapter.

A concern was expressed that staff may publicise dissatisfaction around any perceived restrictions on their academic freedoms, especially in the humanities and social sciences:

> So I think part of the reason of them focusing them kind of more technical and vocational subjections is because they probably know it's not very viable to take certain things to Dubai, because the staff will not do it, you'd have to change the syllabus so much, and that creates controversy in and of itself. And then people can go public with that and leak things as well which they really do not like. So I think that definitely must have been part of the logic I presume … The university have a process where they review anything that's going to go to Dubai. So they are appointing people working with Directors of Education and then

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> down within the schools to review and check that they are compliant with Dubai's laws. (UCU Branch officer, UK, p. 5)

The concern to control curriculum on branch campuses from the main campus in perceived controversial topic areas differs from the situated experiences of lecturers teaching on branch campuses. Accounts from lecturers express their perceived sense of relative freedom to teach in this field, although being aware of 'boundaries': 'It wasn't as if you could not deal with some of those issues about gender inequality or whatever, you know, it was just a question of framing more than anything else' (former Lecturer, UAE, p. 7). UAE lecturers report relative autonomy in developing their courses, whilst also taking personal responsibility for content:

> Well I mean to be honest no, everything was left to me in terms of, you know, delivering and teaching the courses, but you are kind of expected just to use basic textbooks and teach from that, you know what I mean? So I did not really kind of stray too far on this. I mean one of my colleagues who was teaching a course on like – it was Clinical Sociology. I would have like a debate each week and one of them was a debate about gender equality and like a bunch of the women students were really into it and arguing for gender equality. Another bunch of students just walked out. So you know, I found the boundaries out – I did not get into trouble or anything like that but I think in terms of self-censorship, you know, obviously Judith Butler and LGBTQ stuff, you know. I mean I do not think the students would have been angry or anything like that; they would have just kind of sat there thinking 'why are we being told this?' (p. 7)

Academic freedom and the production of knowledge relating to gender and sexuality at the American University of Beirut (AUB) in Lebanon has been perceived to be increasingly restricted within a certain construction of gender studies. Commenting on the Gender Studies faculty search at AUB in 2015, a US professor commented on the dominance of a more conservative conception of gender studies, excluding possibilities of knowledge production in alternative framings of gender that intersectionally incorporated sexuality.

#### 6.1.2.4 Race, Religion, Security, and Extremism

Previous chapters have highlighted that whilst 'race' work goes on in UK universities, this takes the form of institutional objectives on equality and diversity, such as the Race Equality Charter. Academics working in the field do not perceive their research and teaching to be directly constrained but cite

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lack of funding as the most significant indirect form of restricting the production of knowledge:

> So I've never felt that a University or the requirements of the role stop me from speaking out directly. I'm never told 'you cannot say that'. But funding is probably the most powerful, single mechanism that restricts critical anti-racist research because you simply cannot raise lots of money to do research looking at how white supremacy saturates the economy, the education system and society at large. (Professor of Education, UK, pp. 6–7)

On being asked if there is some research that should not be conducted, a number of academics commented on 'racist pseudo-scientific' research in particular, where there was institutional support and external funding for this research. There were mixed views on whether such research should be done, ranging from arguments that such work is not responsible research to arguments that academics have the freedom to choose their research. As mentioned in the previous chapters, views were expressed on the case of Noah Carl, who was awarded a Fellowship at the University of Cambridge but was then dismissed after over 500 academics signed a public letter calling the research racist pseudoscience being legitimated through the University of Cambridge. It is argued that hosting such research at elite universities accords it with credibility and legitimacy, that such research should not be conducted and is a misuse of academic freedom: 'There is no legitimate science around the argument race and intelligence are genetically linked, because race is a social construction, it varies from one time to another and from one society to another . . . I think it's a hangover from the scientific racism of the 19th Century' (Professor of Education, University of Birmingham, UK, p. 7).

In contrast, a UK sociologist expressed the view that racist research will continue and would not take the position that such research should be 'forbidden':

> I cannot just simply say that they should not do their research. They're going to do their research whether I like it or not. So I'm not empowered in this debate. They will get huge funding and they will continue. The racist pseudoscience has been for millennia, you know, it's been the foundation of the Empire, it's been, it's used to explain everything from gun crime in the inner cities to single mothers. It's a whole gamut of race science that's been there and yeah, there might, you know the highbrow research centres doing it but there's also a lot of low brow everyday racism of that ilk of pseudoscience . . . As far as I'm concerned it gives me meat to my grist. I can argue against it. I can do my alternative thinking and my alternative ideological stances and I guess you know, I would not have written the work

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> I've written and influenced the students that I have and produced the body of work that I have been privileged enough to do, if I wasn't counteracting these bastards, if I wasn't saying you know, Charles Murray is pseudoscience – I mean that was my inaugural lecture, you know, looking at The Bell Curve and looking at how it pervades everyday common sense thinking about races being fundamentally different and the right of some people to dominate others. (Professor Emeritus, Sociology, UK, p. 6)

The different institutional contexts within the United Kingdom are also perceived to have differential restrictions on the production of knowledge, as reflected on by another academic researching on education and extremism, comparing the experience at the School of Oriental and African Studies with other universities:

> In fact I became quite naïve because I was under the impression that I could say and do whatever I wanted and it was only when I started taking my research outside of the university, whether it was quote, unquote in the community, or it was in some other universities. And the kind of questions, the sort of questions that I got, that I started realising well maybe some of what I'm saying is not going down so well with people. Maybe I have to be careful how I present my ideas. So at SOAS I did not have an issue. (UK Senior Lecturer, p. 2)

The constraints on researching security, in particular, in relation to the Middle East take the form of perceived limited funding opportunities:

> I think that certainly with the ESRC in the past, although I have not done it for a while, but in the past when I've put in applications – and I think they have been strong applications … for example there's a project that I wanted to look at regarding peace narratives between Israeli and Palestinian youth, and we did not get funding for that. And actually, I thought it was a very, very strong bid. A couple of years later I put another bid in, a similar kind of thing, from the ESRC. We did not get that again. And looking at the feedback that we were getting, it seemed to me that the ESRC – and again I have no, and I'm saying this in a very subjective sense, so make of that what you will – but it seemed to me that the ESRC does not seem to want to fund projects that relate to Israel. (Professor of Regional Security, UK, p. 9)

In addition, it is noted how funding calls present certain framings of security, thus indirectly shaping the development of disciplines and fields of study:

> If you look at it purely in hard security terms, the honest answer's probably no. I think if you are looking at security in terms of soft security, so that could include

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> things like environmental security, human security, societal security, I think there's more of a sympathy towards those constructs of security. And by the way, that's not a bad thing. I think these projects, if they are good enough, should be funded. (Professor of Regional Security, UK, p. 9)

Research on religion in contemporary everyday life is highlighted as 'forbidden' knowledge from a range of different disciplinary perspectives and contexts. For example, critically examining religious claims-making in politics is seen as a neglected and taboo area of knowledge:

> If you think about for example the deployment of religion and religious claims that are made in religion and politics and so on, so forth, these are areas that should be researched and there should be serious soul searching and thoughtful reflection on these areas, because they are affecting everything, they are affecting the present and the future. (former Professor, AUB, Lebanon, p. 12)

The reception of historical research on the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt is an example of the misconstrued politicisation of Professor Baron's work:

> There were reviews that interpreted my book as I supported the Muslim Brotherhood. I mean I was writing about the, the founding of the Muslim Brotherhood in the early nineteen thirties, so I'm not talking about the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt or anywhere else today. The book takes, argues that the Brotherhood arose in response to, in part, in response to, and in the image of the missionaries, that it learnt from missionaries certain tactics about forming certain kinds of institutions. So for example if the missionaries had educational institutions, the early Muslim Brotherhood, some of the first things they did was start schools, to draw kids out of missionary institutions. So the argument was really built on things that were going on on the ground in certain small towns and cities throughout the delta region and canal zone of Egypt. But in this kind of superficial reading there was this sort of sense that if you are researching the Brotherhood you are obviously of a certain position. (Beth Baron, Professor of Middle East History, US, p. 8)

Research considered taboo in the UAE made reference to research on the politics of ethnicity and national identity:

> No, they [interviewees] were just saying that 'By the way, we were never asked these questions because as you know these are taboo here, treated as taboo' and you know if you think about the questions that I was asking, it was just whether their ethnic or tribal background sort of had any impact on the way they experienced their national identity on an everyday basis. So there's a total concealment

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> of diversity within the . . . national narrative [which] is on homogeneity and being Arab and being tribal. (UK Lecturer, and former Lecturer, UAE, p. 5)

In the final section, I examine what I refer to as 'agentic boundary work', where academics talked of their personal experiences of publishing and disseminating 'forbidden' knowledge.

### 6.1.3 Agentic Boundary Work: Publishing and Disseminating 'Forbidden' Knowledge

Academics spoke of their varied experiences and repercussions of publishing or disseminating forbidden knowledge. One initiative is the *Journal of Controversial Ideas*, cofounded and edited by Peter Singer, Francesca Minerva, and Jeff McMahan, a multi-disciplinary peer-refereed journal, where academics can publish under pseudonyms, with the first issue published in 2021. It describes itself as 'the first open access, peer-reviewed, interdisciplinary journal specifically created to promote free inquiry on controversial topics', where controversial is understood in terms of 'certain views about them might be regarded by many people as morally, socially, or ideologically objectionable or offensive' (Journal of Controversial Ideas website, 2022). Singer explained the role of a hostile context in the development of the idea:

> The original idea of it is not mine, it's Francesca Minerva's idea, my co-editor and probably you should talk to her about it if you are interested in that. But she's somebody who did publish an article defending infanticide and she and her husband actually co-authored it. They got death threats that frightened them and a lot of hate mail as well and I think she also feels that it has actually made it more difficult for her to get a tenured position, or a tenured track position. So she approached me and Jeff McMahan as well with the idea of providing a venue whereby people could publish anonymously or under a pseudonym, but still be subject to the usual academic scrutiny and then they could, if they wished under specific circumstances, the Journal could tell, let us say, a selection committee that they were going before that they were the author of this article if they wanted it to be known that they were. (Peter Singer, Professor of Bioethics, Princeton University, US, p. 4)

The journal's first two issues have covered topics including transgender, race, freedom of speech, queer theory, paedophilia, Nazi education, and 'wokeness', with four out of fourteen articles using pseudonyms. All articles are from the Global North, except for one substantively different article by

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authors in Saudi Arabia on Saudi Arabian universities' rapid rise up the academic rankings, not evidently 'controversial'. The journal states that its remit includes considering articles 'that discuss issues or policies in non-Western cultures that may not be controversial in the West but are sufficiently controversial elsewhere that critically discussing them could endanger authors (Journal of Controversial Ideas, 2022). The Eurocentric/Global North bias is reflected not only in the knowledge production of the journal's contents but also in the language and framing used, where all knowledge from outside the Global North is designated as 'other' in the use of the term, '*non*-Western'. The journal is also presented as a 'safe haven' for knowledge production assumed to be curtailed by those countries curtailing academic freedom; the remit does not include, for example, ideas from the Global South that are controversial in the West.

In contrast, in Lebanon, the peer-refereed journal, *Kohl*, publishes academic and practitioner perspectives on gender and sexuality throughout the Global South, located as an independent initiative operating outside the more conservative constraints of academic institutions in the region. It describes itself as a progressive feminist journal on gender and sexuality in the Middle East, South West Asia, and North Africa regions and is a multilingual publication. It locates its mission of producing knowledge transnationally and as a corrective to orientalism and the exclusion of the region in the production of knowledge about itself: 'This journal hopes to trouble the hegemony of knowledge production and ensure that our regions and communities play a central role in redefining their own intersections and challenges when it comes to feminist and sexuality research' (https://kohljournal.press/about). Given the relative conservatism of gender studies within university contexts, *Kohl* is not embedded within any such university or institutional framework. According to one of the editors, a former academic at AUB, Lebanon, and currently a UK-based Lecturer: 'I mean, definitely there was no real positive appetite to be involved with any university. There would not have been a very clear home for it. Some of the stuff on sexuality in particular and sex within the journal has been I think beyond what either university would have been happy for us to be publishing under their name.' (p. 14)

Academics in the United States talked of subtle censures in the form of difficulties in publishing:

> I have had experiences as I've said you know, but they have not come from my university, they come from outside the university. They've come from the people

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> who control speech. I have a book – I did not mention this to you but I'm writing a series of books on LGBT people who are outed in newspapers going back to the seventeen hundreds. And there's a lot of information out there. And I have been writing it for some time. And finally now I have the time to try to finish it. But I sent out a couple of proposals of subsets of that work and I did not get any bites from publishers. And I was told by a friend of mine that they do not want to publish that because they think it will affect the litigation that is going on in the country. So I sent it out to academic publishers. Now this wasn't my institution that was blocking and it wasn't, you know these publishing companies are associated with institutions but they aren't actually directly run by them. But it's that kind of thing you know, the ability to have a platform infrastructure which I always stress is the key issue. (Professor Emeritus in Law, George Washington University, US, p. 14)

Preserving the intellectual history of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) in the United States, where such knowledge was historically controversial, is detailed in the account of a US Professor:

> *Lesbian Herstory*. It's a US thing, right. So it was started in 1974 as part of the gay liberation movement and an intentional effort to respond to the fact that research on gay and lesbian lives is not supported by regular libraries and out of the suspicion that no regular research library would ever house these materials in such a way that they were accessible to the whole of people who might call themselves lesbians, right, this is warnings from 1974 so warning sounds a little dated but the goal was to make these materials available to the whole of the lesbian community and therefore they should not be housed in an institution where you had to have credentials to get in, right. So it started in somebody's kitchen in 1974 and it has grown and is the largest collection in the entire world and they do have regular international contributors (p. 12)

Experiences of difficulties of publication and dissemination are evident across the different country contexts from Lebanon, the UAE, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Andrew Ross from NYU comments on the lack of visibility of research on labour conditions in the Gulf and the potential consequences of trying to conduct such work:

> We published a report of our field trips with the Gulf Labour Coalition. Subsequent to that, I have not really seen any field research of that kind published, and maybe it's undertaken, but it has not certainly been reported or published. I think, you know, people have either been scared off, or organisations with the resources like Human Rights Watch, are barred from entering. And my colleagues

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> at NYU Abu Dhabi, who are in a position to conduct research – as far as I know, they do not do it. (Andrew Ross, Professor of Social and Cultural Analysis, NYU, US, p. 7)

In the UK context, production of knowledge with alternative narratives is seemingly blocked both from public domains and in academic fora. A UK Professor of Sociology describes his difficulties in publishing on the highly publicised case of 2019 protests in Birmingham against the inclusion of LGBT (No Outsiders) in primary education curricula:

> But I think that's where I would see the big free speech issue, the position of Muslims on campus. I mean, I cannot get anything, I mean, do you know of the No Outsiders issue in Birmingham schools at the moment at Parkfield Primary School? So I've not been able to get anything published around the No Outsiders. Within newspapers, no letters to a newspaper, no offer to write something for a paper, article for *The Conversation*, which is like the house newspaper of universities, they were not interested in having anything on No Outsiders . . . They do not wish to publish on this topic with a view that is other than the mainstream view of a deficit in the attitudes of Muslim parents. (Professor of Sociology, UK, pp. 6–7)

Other academics gave accounts of difficulties in either having invitations for visiting lectures on their work or even being banned. One US Professor researching on the Gulf recounts offering to give lectures at universities in the region and receiving no response:

> I reached out to all of my networks of colleagues that are in the Gulf, they all know the book is out, telling them that I'm already going to be in the region, invite me for a talk, you know? And, . . . people know who I am, you know, because there's not a lot of [disciplinary scholars] that work on the Gulf, so . . . it caught my attention that nobody answered me, you know! (p. 7)

Peter Singer, Professor of Bioethics at Princeton University, details his experiences on being banned to give lectures in parts of Europe. The socio-political and historical contexts of the reception of his work are also evident in the protests being in certain European contexts:

> No, those protests have been exclusively in Western countries. Yeah, as I said they started off in Germany and I think they had something to do with Germany's past and with the Nazi so-called Euthanasia Programme for disabled people which was not really a euthanasia programme at all of course. But then it spread to Austria and the German speaking part of Switzerland and there have been some

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> protests – well, one of the universities that refused to allow me to speak on campus was actually in Warsaw and also there was a protest – I wasn't even there – but at the Victoria University in British Colombia. (p. 6–7)

This is contrasted with the reception in other parts of the world and the widespread translation of Singer's work:

> Certainly my books have been translated into probably something like thirty languages at the moment and in terms of what you were talking about, developing countries, I've just recently signed a contract for Animal Liberation to be translated into Swahili. So that would be my first book in Swahili or I think in any African language, unless you count Arabic I guess working in North Africa. But anyway, any sub-Saharan language. But my books have certainly been translated quite a lot into Asian languages, particularly in Korea I have maybe eight or nine of my books have been translated into Korean. I get regularly, they are taught in Korean universities and high schools as well so I regularly get emails from Korean students asking me to basically answer their exam question for them. And some of my books are now in China and they have been for many years in Japan. So yes, certainly in Asian languages as well ... Yeah, I do not think that that kind of disability rights movement exists in Japan or China or Korea for example, as far as I'm aware. (pp. 6–7)

## 6.2 CONCLUSION

This chapter has identified four domains of 'forbidden' knowledge drawing on academics' accounts across all four contexts of Lebanon, the UAE, the United Kingdom, and the United States. What emerges is that the nature and content of forbidden knowledge is fluid over time – as illustrated, for example, by the *Lesbian Herstory* account of LGBT history and its archiving in the US context. It's fluidity is also geopolitically situated, with the accounts illustrating the differences in how forbidden knowledge is constructed and negotiated in both teaching and research in the domain of gender and sexuality in Lebanon, the UAE, United Kingdom, and the United States. Pedagogical approaches to mediating this forbidden knowledge in the classroom emphasise a direct engagement with the ideas in an open context:

> Academic freedom, you know, freedom of enquiry, freedom to make mistakes, freedom of trying to articulate ideas, freedom to get it wrong in the classroom is something that I support every day in my teaching, well a couple of days a week

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> anyway, in my teaching. And I'm pretty good at allowing unpopular ideas to be expressed, not hate speech, I have not had people say really hateful things in class but I do encourage people who make mistakes who get it wrong to try again and I tell them in advance at the beginning of the semester, look if something comes up that's provoking we are going to slow down and stop, and I might ask you to slow down, reiterate, ask where that idea comes from, what received wisdom are you repeating, what's the history of it, how do we want to dig into it in order to understand its effects, right. So I do that whole thing at the beginning and I've been wholly in support of people trying out ideas, even if they have racist impacts and effects or homophobic impacts and effects in a class where they are actually trying to engage with the ideas and we can handle that. (Professor of English and Women's Studies, US)

The empirical data collected in transnational perspective illustrates that rationales underpinning forbidden knowledge are socially constructed in several ways, including framing as 'taboo', concerns relating to perceived and actual applications, and the discovery of 'uncomfortable truths'. Forbidden knowledge is a *strategic* construction, shaped geographically, politically, and socially, in contrast to being gaps in knowledge or data that have not been collected. This reinforces understandings of knowledge and non-knowledge as constructed within an interpretivist lens, as opposed to constructions of knowledge as uncovering 'truth', as described in Chapter 4. For those working on controversial topics, the agentic boundary work that these academics engage in producing this forbidden knowledge is labour that takes its toll – emotionally, economically, and physically – through hostile environments, challenges to publishing, travel bans, and imprisonment.

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