

Comparative Ignorance and Curiosity: Are people more curious when others already possess the relevant information?

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Abstract

We test whether comparative ignorance increases curiosity. That is, are people more curious about an item of information when other individuals already possess that information?

Background

- Curiosity is active when individuals become aware their current knowledge is inadequate to resolve a question.
- This awareness of missing information is often aversive.
- Comparative ignorance (comparing one's own knowledge to others' superior knowledge) increases awareness of uncertainty, and so should also increase feelings of curiosity.

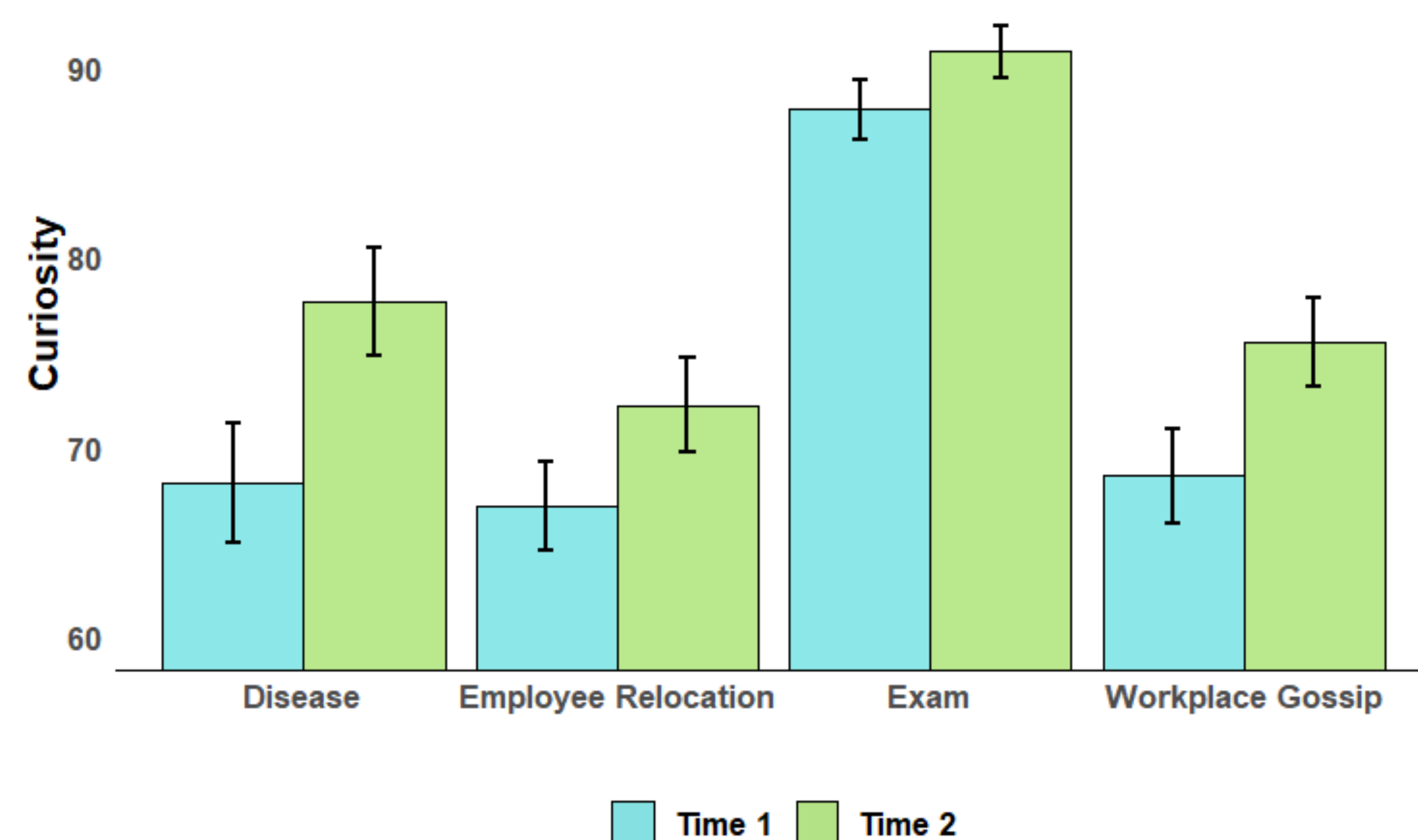
Study 01 (N=1005)

Method: Participants responded to a scenario where they imagined being ignorant about some piece of information and rated their curiosity (Time 1). They were then told that the information was already known by someone else and again rated their level of curiosity (Time 2).

Example scenario

Time 1: "You know there is a 50% chance you have a genetic disease that reduces life expectancy by 10-20 years. Unfortunately, there is no cure for this disease. However there is a simple, inexpensive test that is completely accurate and is available to you upon request from your healthcare provider. How curious are you to learn if you have the genetic disease?"

Time 2: "At your next visit, the doctor tells you that based on past lab work (done for a different purpose), they now know if you have the disease or not. Now how curious are you to learn if you have the genetic disease?"



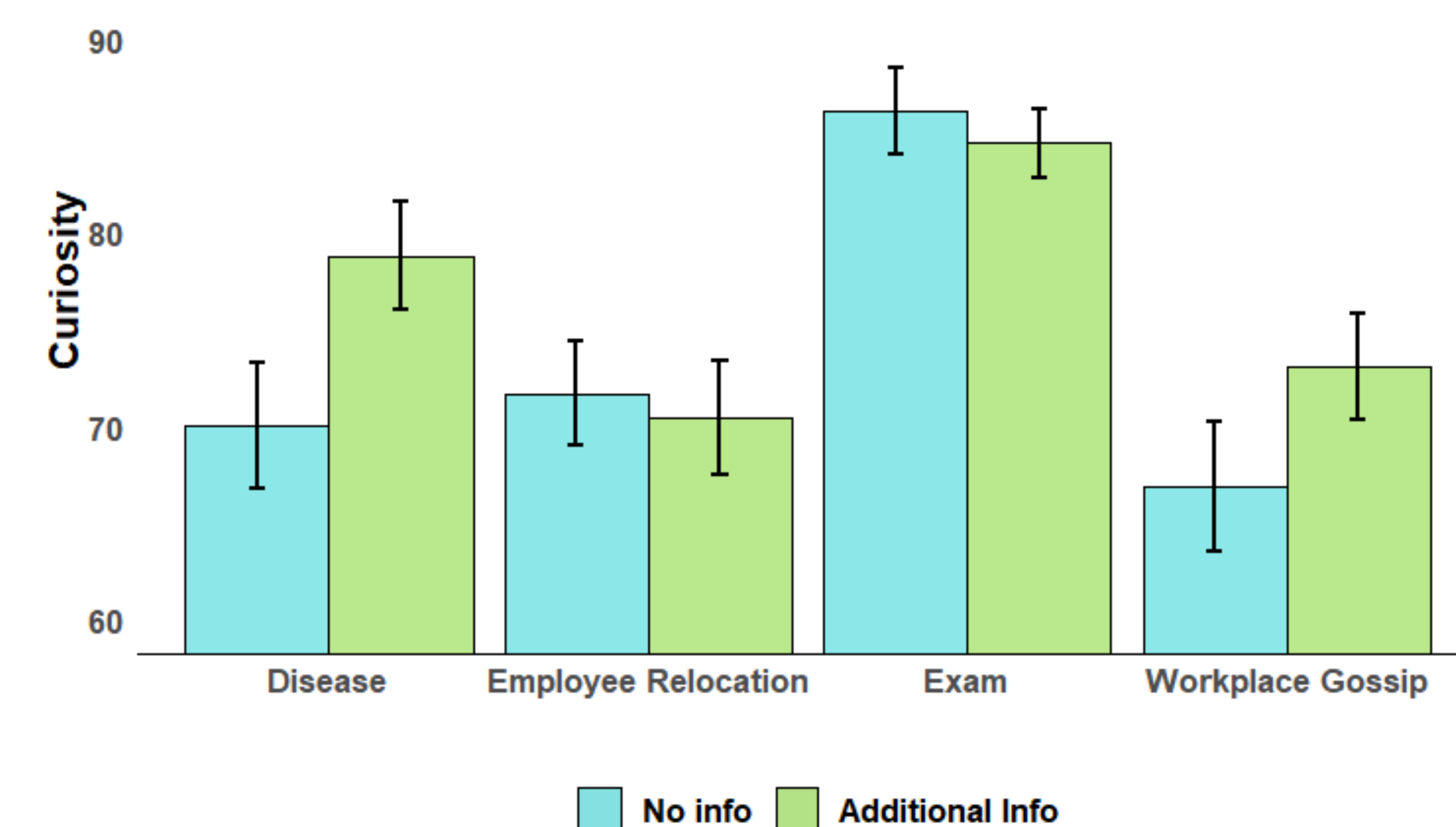
Results: Participants reported significantly higher levels of curiosity when comparatively ignorant (at time 2) than when merely ignorant (at time 1), ($b = 3.94$, $SE = .99$, $p < .001$).

Study 02 (N=603)

Method: Participants responded to one of four scenarios. Participants in the control conditions imagined being ignorant about some piece of information. Participants in the treatment conditions imagined being ignorant about some piece of information that was already known by someone else. All participants then rated their curiosity.

Example scenario [Treatment condition in brackets]

"You receive an email from the human resources department reminding employees that workplace relationships are strictly forbidden by company policy. [At lunch, your friend Derek mentions he knows what happened that prompted HR to send the email.] How curious are you to know what happened that prompted HR to send the email?"



Results: Across scenarios, comparative ignorance did not reliably increase curiosity relative to the control condition ($b = 3.16$, $p = .12$).

Conclusion: In a within-subjects design, people responded to knowledge that other people knew the relevant missing information by increasing their curiosity. However, in a between-subjects design, knowing that others had information only increased curiosity in certain contexts, such as social gossip or disease diagnosis.

Policy Application: There is potential to use the relationship between curiosity and comparative ignorance as a policy nudge. For example, individuals may seek out the results of medical testing if they are informed their healthcare provider already possesses the results.