Drawing boundary on the mitigating effect of unintentional ignorance

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Abstract

While violating prescriptive norms draws unfavorable judgments from observers, *unknowingly* doing so attenuates them, especially if ignorance is not willful. We test boundary conditions on this effect for legal violations. Using the Anglo-American reasonable person standard, Experiment 1 shows that ignorance of law substantially reduces blame for reasonable actions but provides little excuse for unreasonable ones. Experiment 2 examined whether regulatory expectations explain this asymmetry. Indeed, unreasonable actions generated stronger expectations that an average individual should know such action is prohibited, diminishing the exculpation conferred by being ignorant of the law. Reasonable actions, by contrast, were associated with lower regulatory expectations, making ignorance a more acceptable excuse. Counterfactual reasoning revealed parallel asymmetry: for unreasonable action, participants emphasized changes in the agent's behavior for preventing the violation; for reasonable actions, primary locus of change was external factors.

Keywords: ignorance effect; norm violation; blame; punishment; counterfactual reasoning

Introduction

When judging whether a norm violation warrants sanctions, the epistemic state of the agent is of central concern. Someone who unknowingly collects seashells from a protected beach or fixes a plumbing leak without realizing a permit is required might be viewed leniently—especially when not knowing the norm is perceived to be unintentional or unavoidable.

However, the epistemic states of norm violators can take many forms and have been theorized in different ways, depending on whether ignorance is intentional or lies within the agent's capacity to consider (see, Peels, 2023). These distinctions are crucial to how observers ascribe moral ascriptions. Recent empirical studies demonstrate that intentionally or willfully remaining ignorant of a prescriptive norm receives more blame than when the agent could not have known about it (Kirfel et al., 2025). Legal scholarship reflects a similar sensitivity to the source of ignorance: a blanket dictum like "ignorance of the law is no excuse" remains controversial, and rightfully so, as legal codes grow ever thicker and more complex, expecting citizens to know every rule becomes increasingly untenable (Burton Crawford, 2024; van Rooij, 2021). This has led some scholars to defend a more restricted version of this principle, arguing for limiting liability to cases of willful or intentional ignorance (Husak, 2016).

In contrast, unintentional ignorance of prescriptive norms is often thought to afford broad attenuation in judgments (Kirfel & Phillips, 2023; Kirfel et al., 2023). We examine the extent of this mitigating effect in legal norm violations, comparing agents who knowingly break regulations with those who unintentionally and unknowingly do so. We begin our investigation by hypothesizing that being ignorant of an action being prohibited would do little to reduce blame or punishment when the action is perceived to be unreasonable, compared to when it is perceived as reasonable.

The paper proceeds as follows. We first motivate the use of perceived reasonableness as an organizing intuition for assessing when ignorance of law mitigates blame and punishment. Experiment 1 tests this moderation effect directly, establishing reasonableness as a boundary condition on the exculpatory force of ignorance of legal norms. We then turn to the question of how such judgments are formed, introducing observers' regulatory expectations—whether an average person should have anticipated the action to be regulated—as a potential account of the moderating role of reasonableness. Experiment 2 tests this proposal, before we conclude with a general discussion.

The reasonable person standard

Suppose Jack fixes a small leak in his house, only to later discover that doing so without a permit is prohibited by law. Should this violation be excused? Jack's ignorance seems more likely to at least partially excuse the violation given the commonplace nature of the action. By contrast, if Jack did a poor job and caused damage that affected his neighbors, we may be less inclined to be accommodating. Likewise, if there is a reason to believe that Jack should have known about the regulation (perhaps because there were notices posted in his building), it would likely factor into our judgment too.

Judgments about violations of prescriptive norms, like in the example above, are sensitive to a constellation of factors, including the agent's causal role (Gerstenberg et al., 2015), the harmfulness of the outcome (Alicke, 2000), and attributing mental states such as intent and foreseeability to the violator (Lagnado & Channon, 2008). In Anglo-American law, such complexity is often managed through appeal to the reasonable person standard, which serves as a way of determining whether a non-compliant agent's behavior falls within acceptable bounds, where "reasonableness" is understood as a composite evaluative judgment rather than a single factor

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(Alicke & Weigel, 2021; Gardner, 2015; Tobia et al., 2025).

Following this, we adopt perceived reasonableness as a first-pass boundary condition for examining whether unintentional ignorance uniformly affords mitigation. Specifically, we test whether perceived reasonableness of an action which violates a regulation moderates the effect of epistemic state on blame and punishment: ignorance should provide little mitigation when a regulation-violating action is perceived as unreasonable, but substantially attenuate these judgments when the action is perceived as reasonable (**H1**). Experiment 1 below tests this hypothesis.

Experiment 1

Participants

We recruited two U.S.-based samples via Prolific: one for pretesting (N = 51; 24 female; M_{age} [SD] = 43.92 [14.7]) and one for the main experiment. Of 120 recruited participants for the main experiment, 114 remained after exclusions (55 female; M_{age} [SD] = 39.3 [14.2]). The main experiment was preregistered (tinyurl.com/csc-rea1).

Method

We pretested our stimuli by having an independent set of participants read 24 scenarios, each describing an agent violating a law, and rate the reasonableness of the agent's action on a 100-point scale. Based on these ratings, we selected four actions for the main experiment: two rated as highly reasonable (fixing a leaking pipe; harvesting rainwater; $M_{reasonable}$ [SD] = 94.3 [12.1]) and two as highly unreasonable (parking in a fire lane; taking others' belongings from gym lockers; $M_{reasonable}$ [SD] = 17.51 [19.8]).

The main experiment employed a 2×2 within-subjects factorial design: action of the norm violating agent (reasonable vs. unreasonable, based on pretest ratings) × agent's epistemic state (ignorant vs. aware of the regulation). Each participant completed four trials, one per condition, with vignette assignment and presentation order fully randomized. Vignettes briefly described a regulation and its purpose, followed by the agent violating it either knowingly or unknowingly. Example of a reasonable scenario read as follows:

> The law prohibits collecting rainwater because doing so can interfere with underground water replenishment. Elena installed gutters and barrels to collect rainwater from her roof for watering her garden during summer droughts, [not] knowing that the law prohibited this.

After reading each scenario, participants rated perceived reasonableness, blameworthiness and punishment desert on 100-point scales:

> *Perceived reasonableness:* How reasonable is [Agent's] action in this scenario? (1 = not at all reasonable, 100 = completely reasonable)
> *Blameworthiness:* How blameworthy is [Agent] in this scenario? (1 = not at all blameworthy, 100 = completely blameworthy)

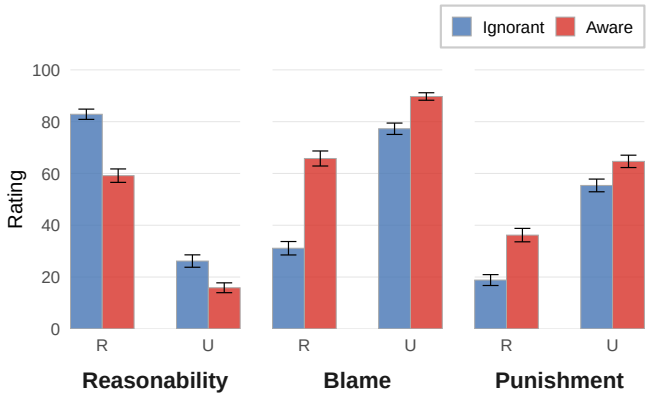

Figure 1: Average ratings (95% CI) for perceived reasonableness, blameworthiness, and punishment by action-type and agent knowledge in Experiment 1. R = reasonable; U = unreasonable.

> *Punishment:* How much punishment does [Agent] deserve in this scenario? (1 = not at all, 100 = very much)

Results

We analyzed each dependent variable (perceived reasonableness, blame, and punishment) using linear mixed-effects models. The models included action-type (reasonable vs. unreasonable) and agent-knowledge (ignorant vs. aware) as contrast-coded predictors and their interaction, with random intercepts for participants.[1]

For perceived reasonableness ratings, we found significant main effects of both action-type (β = −50.00, 95%CI = [-54.18, -45.80], $p < .001$) and agent-knowledge (β = −17.01, 95%CI = [-21.20, -12.82], $p < .001$). The interaction was also significant (β = 13.58, 95%CI = [4.5, 22.67], $p = .004$). Blameworthiness ratings showed a similar pattern. Main effects emerged for action-type (β = 35.04, 95%CI = [30.90, 39.16], $p < .001$) and agent-knowledge (β = 23.56, 95%CI = [19.43, 27.68], $p < .001$), and the interaction was significant (β = −21.51, 95%CI =[-30.97, -12.05], $p < .001$). For reasonable actions, ignorant agents were rated approximately 34 points (95% CI = [-40.6, -27.98]) lower on blameworthiness than aware agents, but for unreasonable actions this difference shrank to approximately 13 points (95% CI = [-19.1, -6.47]).

For punishment, main effects of action-type (β = −32.50, 95%CI = [28.83, 36.18], $p < .001$) and agent-knowledge (β = 13.33, 95%CI = [9.66, 17.00], $p < .001$) were significant, but the interaction was not (β = −4.66, 95%CI = [-13.67, 4.35], $p = .31$), with the difference in punishment ratings between ignorant and aware agent in reasonable (M = −15.7, 95%CI =[-21.5, -9.79]) and unreasonable conditions being comparable (M = −11.0, 95%CI =[-16.9, -5.14]).

[1]For all models, categorical predictors were contrast coded as (-0.5, 0.5), calculated using packages 'lme4', 'lmerTest', and 'stats' in R (Bates et al., 2015; Kuznetsova et al., 2017; R Core Team, 2013).

Discussion

These results support our central hypothesis (**H1**) for blame judgments: ignorance mitigated blame asymmetrically depending on action reasonableness, with a much smaller reduction for unreasonable than reasonable actions. Additionally, perceived reasonableness ratings were influenced not only by whether the action was categorized as reasonable but also by the agent's epistemic state. For punishment, however, the difference between ignorant and aware agents in reasonable and unreasonable conditions was comparable; we examine whether this null effect persists in Experiment 2.

Why did ignorance attenuate blame more for reasonable than unreasonable actions? While action reasonableness provided an initial boundary on the mitigating effect of ignorance, it did not explain the mechanisms underlying this moderation. One possibility is that reasonable and unreasonable actions shaped participants' expectations about whether an action is commonly understood to be prohibited. Alternatively, unreasonable actions may have been perceived as more likely to cause harm, and greater outcome-sensitivity may therefore limit the extent to which ignorance mitigates blame. We outline these competing accounts below before testing regulatory expectations as a mechanism in Experiment 2.

Regulatory expectations

When evaluating non-compliant behavior, people commonly assess not only what the agent knew, but also whether the agent could have been expected to know that the action was regulated. Recent work supports the latter claim in two ways. Willfully ignorant agents are assigned greater knowledge about the norms they violate, suggesting that observers hold people accountable for knowledge they could have obtained (Kirfel & Hannikainen, 2023). Similarly, judgments about whether a regulation is commonplace influence how observers judge its violations, indicating that the perceived accessibility of the rule matters (Bystranowski, 2024; Scheall & Crutchfield, 2021).

These findings suggest a possible explanation for why reasonableness moderated the effect of ignorance in Experiment 1: reasonable and unreasonable actions created different expectations about whether these actions are likely to be regulated. Unreasonable actions might signal that they are likely to be legally prohibited, reducing the exculpatory force of ignorance, whereas reasonable actions might seem less likely to be regulated, making ignorance less blameworthy.

However, the regulatory expectations account is not the only viable explanation. Unreasonable actions may also be perceived as more likely to cause harm, resulting in lesser mitigation of blame. This type of outcome bias has been shown to influence blame judgments even when other aspects of the decision context, including actions, are held constant (see, famously, Baron & Hershey, 1988). Thus, outcome bias could confound our investigation independently of any effects of regulatory expectations.

In Experiment 1, participants were not given information about the outcomes of the agent's actions. Moreover, reasonable and unreasonable actions could not foreseeably lead to the same outcome, making it impossible to rule out perceived harm differences as a driver of our results. To address this confound, Experiment 2 held outcomes constant across reasonable and unreasonable actions. This allowed us to directly test whether these action types create different regulatory expectations and whether such expectations explain the asymmetry in ignorance mitigation for normative judgments (**H2**).

Secondary measures

Beyond blame and punishment, we examined counterfactual reasoning and inferences about the agent's mental state as additional measures to assess how regulatory expectations shape moral cognition and the role of epistemic states in these judgments.

Counterfactual thinking—identifying what could have been different to prevent an outcome—plays a central role in blame judgments, with people often selecting atypical elements of the causal chain as candidates for change (Kominsky & Phillips, 2019; Kovacevic et al., 2024). We reasoned that if regulatory expectations moderate when ignorance attenuates blame, they might also shape which counterfactuals are cited. Specifically, when regulatory expectations are high (unreasonable actions), participants would focus on the agent, reasoning that they should have acted differently. When regulatory expectations are low (reasonable actions), participants may shift responsibility outward by citing the regulation itself or its dissemination, particularly when the agent is ignorant (**H3**).

With outcomes held constant, we could also test whether moral judgments like blame and punishment are retrospectively mediated through outcome-sensitive mental states such as foreseeability of resultant harmful outcome and intention to cause it. Previous research suggests that people often make such inferences about norm-violating agents, especially when the agent is expected to know about the norm (Kirfel & Lagnado, 2021; Lagnado & Channon, 2008). From this, we argued that these mental states will be attributed to agents who violate a regulation knowingly, rather than those who do so unknowingly (**H4**).

Experiment 2 was designed to test these hypotheses along with H1.

Experiment 2

Participants

We recruited 320 U.S.-based participants via Prolific, following the pre-registered sample size (tinyurl.com/csc-reas2). After excluding participants who failed a comprehension check, 254 remained (142 females, 105 males, and 7 other/undisclosed; M_{age} [SD] = 41.60 [11.86]).

Method and procedure

We employed a between-subjects 2×2 factorial design with action-type (reasonable vs. unreasonable) and agent-knowledge (ignorant vs. aware of the regulation). Two vignettes ('Plumbing' and 'Parking') were each instantiated in all four conditions, and each participant was randomly assigned to view one scenario (see, Table 1).

Each vignette was presented in stages. First, participants read about an agent (Alex) performing either a reasonable or unreasonable action. In 'Plumbing', Alex either fixed a leaking faucet himself (reasonable) or poured leftover cement down a drain (unreasonable). In 'Parking', Alex either parked a delivery truck in a side alley to avoid blocking traffic (reasonable) or parked in a fire lane for convenience (unreasonable). Participants then provided the *Perceived Reasonableness* rating of the agent's action (same as Experiment 1), serving as a manipulation check for the action-type.

Next, participants learned that Alex's action violated a legal regulation and caused harm. Importantly, reasonable and unreasonable actions within each vignette led to identical outcomes (blocked pipes in 'Plumbing'; blocked fire truck access in 'Parking'; see 1), deconfounding reasonableness from outcome severity. Participants then rated:

> *Regulation expectation:* Should an average person know that [doing the action] is prohibited? (1 = definitely not, 100 = definitely yes)

Finally, participants read whether Alex knew about the prohibition when he acted. They then re-read the vignette in its entirety before rating the following questions along with *Blameworthiness* and *Punishment* questions from Experiment 1:

> *Foreseeability:* How much do you agree with the following statement: "Alex should have foreseen that [doing the action] could [bring about the outcome]." (1 = strongly disagree, 100 = strongly agree)
>
> *Intent to harm:* To what degree did Alex intend to [bring about the outcome]? (1 = not at all, 100 = completely)
>
> *Counterfactual:* What would have had to change for Alex not to have violated the law? (choose among: Alex should have thought or acted differently, The law should have been written differently or should not have been applied in this situation, Nothing - it was unavoidable)

Except for the counterfactual question, all were answered on a 100-point continuous scale.

Results

As a manipulation check, perceived reasonableness was rated before participants learned about the regulation, outcome, or agent's knowledge. Unreasonable actions were rated approximately 80 points lower than reasonable ones ($\beta = -79.50$ [−83.50, −73.49], $p < .001$), validating the action-type manipulation. Below, we present the statistical models testing each hypothesis.

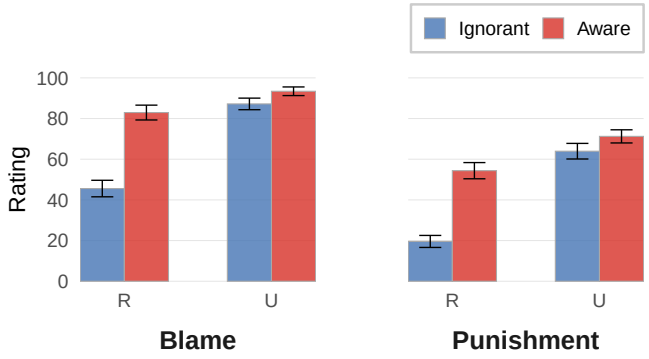

Figure 2: Average ratings with 95% CI for blameworthiness, and punishment in Experiment 2. R = reasonable; U = unreasonable.

H1: We ran linear regression models predicting blame and punishment judgments with action-type and agent knowledge as predictors (see Figure 2 for average ratings). Both main effects and interaction between the predictors were significant for the blame model, providing evidence in favor of H1: ignorance reduced blame more for reasonable actions than for unreasonable ones ($\beta_{Action} = 26.01$, 95%CI = [21.39, 30.63], $p < .001$; $\beta_{Knowledge} = 21.76$, 95%$CI$ = [17.14, 26.38], $p < .001$; $\beta_{Int.} = -30.97$, 95%CI =[-40.21, -21.73], $p < .001$). Similar pattern was observed for punishment as well ($\beta_{Action} = 30.59$, 95%CI = [25.60, 35.58], $p < .001$; $\beta_{Knowledge} = 21.01$, 95%$CI$ = [16.02, 26.01], $p < .001$; $\beta_{Int.} = -27.36$, 95%CI = [-37.34, -17.37], $p < .001$).

H2: We tested whether regulation expectations accounted for why action reasonableness moderated the effect of ignorance on blame using a mediated moderation framework. This allowed us to examine whether action-type's moderating role operates through its effect on regulation expectations, which in turn moderate the ignorance excuse. The index of mediated moderation with 5000 stratified samples was significant (index =−20.85, 95%CI =[-28.58, -13.24]). Unreasonable actions increased regulation expectations ($\beta = 44.82$, $p < .001$),

Table 1: Overview of Experiment 2: Two vignettes ('Plumbing' and 'Parking') were presented in a 2×2 between-subjects design. Actions within vignettes differed in reasonableness but led to identical outcomes, with measures collected sequentially following action, outcome, and knowledge stages.

Plumbing		**Parking**	
Reasonable	**Unreasonable**	**Reasonable**	**Unreasonable**
Doing plumbing on your own	Disposing of cement down a drain	Parking in a side alley	Parking in a fire lane
Alex clogs pipes		*Alex blocks a fire vehicle*	
Alex knew or did not know about the regulation.			

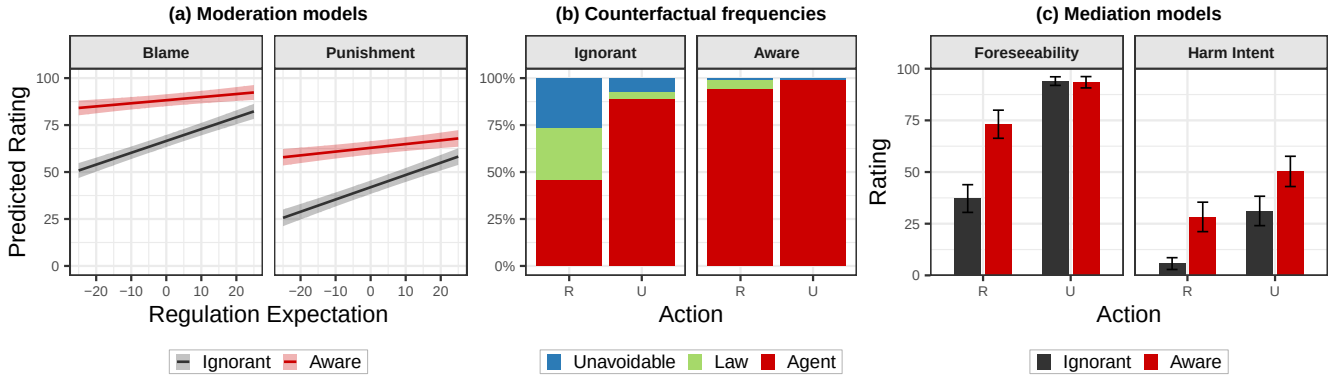

Figure 3: Results from Experiment 2. (a) Predicted blame and punishment ratings by standardized regulation expectations (95% CI). (b) Proportion of counterfactual responses to: "What would have to happen for the agent not to have violated the law?" (c) Mean foreseeability and intent ratings by condition (95% CI). R = reasonable, U = unreasonable.

which in turn reduced the effectiveness of the ignorance excuse on blame ($\beta = -0.47$, $p < .001$). When controlling for the moderating role of regulation expectations, the interaction between action and knowledge was reduced by approximately 48% (from $b = -30.97$ to $b = -16.06$) but remained significant ($p = .008$), suggesting that regulation expectations partially explained how action-type moderated the ignorance excuse.

H3: We coded counterfactuals as agent-focused or external-focused (which included options the law should differ and the violation was unavoidable; see Figure 3(b)). Logistic regression revealed that participants were more likely to cite agent-focused counterfactuals when the action was unreasonable (OR = 7.09, 95%CI =[2.22, 22.62]) and when the agent knew about the regulation (OR = 13.48, 95%CI =[4.22, 43.01]). The interaction was not significant (OR = 0.57, 95%CI =[0.06, 5.76]).

H4: Finally, we tested whether foreseeability and harm intent mediated the effect of agent knowledge on blame and punishment. We tested H4 only for reasonable actions, as blame for unreasonable actions was at ceiling ($M_{ignorant}[SD]$ = 87.2[17.9]; $M_{aware}[SD]$ = 93.5[13.9]), leaving little variance for mediation to detect. Foreseeability significantly mediated both blame (indirect effect = 17.33, 95%CI = [10.93, 26.40], 47% mediated) and punishment (indirect effect = 9.66, 95%CI = [4.52, 16.83], 27% mediated). Harm intent mediated blame to a lesser degree (indirect effect = 4.42, 95%CI = [1.94, 7.80], 11% mediated) but did not mediate punishment desert (indirect effect = 3.83, 95%CI = [-0.37, 7.88]).

Discussion

Experiment 2 replicated the moderating role of action reasonableness on blame and also extended it to punishment desert. More importantly, Experiment 2 also sought to explain whether the mitigating effect of ignorance operates through expectations about regulations. We hypothesized that when an action is expected to be regulated, not knowing about the regulation would not mitigate moral judgments. Our results supported this hunch: when an action was expected to be prohibited—such as parking in a fire lane or dumping cement down a drain—the epistemic state of the violator was of little concern, because one expected such actions to be regulated in the first place. Crucially, these expectations reflect genuine prior beliefs rather than post-hoc rationalizations, as they were measured *before* the agent's epistemic state was revealed to participants.

Participants' counterfactual choices also reflected this pattern. When the agent's action was unreasonable, they were identified as the locus of change for what could have been different to prevent the violation. However, when the agent's action was reasonable but happened to be prohibited, participants pointed to factors external to the agent, including inadequacies in the law and its application or simply conceding that the violation was inevitable.

But regulation expectations only partially explained why action reasonableness moderated the effect of ignorance. The moderation persisted even after controlling for them, suggesting other factors might be at play. One such factor is outcome valence. In Experiment 2, we controlled for this by having all actions lead to the same harmful outcome in addition to breaking the law. Yet even with outcome held constant, knowing about the prohibition increased outcome-related attributions of malintent to the violator, particularly attributions of foreseeability of the outcome, which in turn increased blame and punishment. These results suggest that when an agent knows their action breaks a norm, observers infer that the agent more likely foresaw the harmful outcomes it brought about, even when the action itself was ordinary or reasonable (see, Kirfel & Lagnado, 2021).

General discussion

In this paper, we proposed an expectation-based account of normative judgments about legal violations, suggesting that ignorance of law is more likely to attenuate blame when agents

are not expected to know the regulation. Across two experiments, we show that the ignorance reduces blame depending on the perceived reasonableness of the regulation-violating action. Being ignorant of a regulation substantially reduced blame when actions were reasonable, but provided little excuse when actions were unreasonable. Experiment 2 revealed that regulatory expectations, i.e. whether an average person should anticipate the action to be prohibited, partially explained this asymmetry. Unreasonable actions generated stronger regulatory expectations, which in turn diminished the exculpatory power of ignorance. Counterfactual reasoning followed a parallel pattern: for reasonable actions, participants emphasized external changes (e.g., the law should have been different, the violation was unavoidable), whereas for unreasonable actions, they emphasized changes in the agent's behavior.

This expectation-based account of normative ascriptions aligns with and extends prior research on how norm violations are judged. For starters, knowingly breaking a norm leads to stricter normative judgments (Kirfel & Phillips, 2023; Malle et al., 2014; Shaver, 2012), even when the norm is considered 'silly' or 'non-pertinent' (Güver & Kneer, 2025). Next, remaining intentionally ignorant when there was an opportunity to inform oneself about the norm leads not only to harsher normative judgments but also for observers to infer that the agent knew more than they let on. But even willful ignorance does not always lead to such judgments. When acquiring information about the norm is costly, then willful ignorance attenuates these judgments (for a comprehensive review on willful ignorance, see, Kirfel et al., 2025). In line with this, the more publicly-known a regulation is, the less likely its ignorance is excused (Bystranowski, 2024). Taken together, these previous findings suggest that not knowing a norm reduces blame based on whether the agent is *supposed to know* the norm. Our study tests and provides support for this claim for legal violations stemming out of unintentional ignorance: as regulatory expectations for an action increase, people are less likely to exculpate its violations.

While the expectation-based account unites the influence of epistemic states and epistemic inferences, normative judgments are demonstrably shaped by other factors as well. Outcome severity, for instance, persistently influences blame and punishment judgments (Aiyer et al., 2024; Gino et al., 2009). Although we controlled for this in Experiment 2 by having all actions lead to the same harmful outcome, participants may still have inferred greater potential harms from unreasonable actions. Indeed, foreseeability attributions differed substantially between reasonable and unreasonable actions even when outcomes were held constant, suggesting that outcome-related inferences may still guide judgments.

Counterfactual reasoning also plays a role in how people judge norm violations. Kirfel et al. (2025) proposed a framework for blame attributions to willfully ignorant agents operating through (partially) independent attributions about what the agent knew (epistemic inferences), could have done (counterfactual inferences), and their character (mentalistic inferences). Our findings suggest these processes may be intertwined: whether an action appears prohibited shapes which counterfactuals people entertain. When actions were unreasonable, participants treated the agent as the locus of counterfactual change; when reasonable, they pointed to external factors. A similar entanglement may apply to mentalistic inferences such that such inferences may be closely tied to expectations about the norms that agents violate. Previous research suggests that actions expected to violate norms provide a basis for ascribing counternormative mental states to the agent (Kirfel & Lagnado, 2021; Uttich & Lombrozo, 2010). The extent to which these inferences are reducible to or distinct from epistemic expectations remains an open question.

For our investigation, we relied on perceived reasonableness as an organizing construct to examine how unintentional ignorance might mitigate blame. However, this standard is both theoretically and empirically multifaceted. Some scholars advocate a subjective interpretation of reasonableness (Alicke & Weigel, 2021), whereas recent empirical work suggests laypeople understand it as a composite of what is ideal, rational, or descriptively frequent (Tobia et al., 2025). While reasonableness served as a productive starting point, further work is needed to identify which specific features of "reasonable" versus "unreasonable" actions drive the moderating effects we observed, beyond their influence on regulatory expectations.

Another key question for future research concerns what shapes regulatory expectations in the first place. Some work suggests that the mere existence of a norm, even an arbitrary one, increases blame, punishment, and causal attributions for its violation, implying that rules serve as organizing influences on responsibility and causality judgments (Güver & Kneer, 2025; Hitchcock & Knobe, 2009). Descriptive cues may also matter: violations of obscure or less publicized regulations or those which are rarely followed may be judged more leniently, particularly when few people appear to know about them (Bystranowski, 2024; Kirfel & Lagnado, 2021; Wylie et al., 2026). Stakes may play a role as well; when potential harms are severe, agents may be expected to have informed themselves about relevant regulations (Schein & Gray, 2018). Systematically mapping these antecedents of regulatory expectations remains an important avenue for future work.

Our investigation was motivated by the legal dictum that "ignorance is no excuse." While this principle finds support in some cases of willful ignorance, our findings suggest it may not apply uniformly to unintentional ignorance as well. When judging legal violations, observers considered not only the agent's epistemic state but also the reasonableness of the action in her decision context and the expectations it generates about regulatory knowledge. Ignorance provided a more acceptable excuse when actions are reasonable and regulatory expectations are low; it provided little excuse when actions are unreasonable and agents are expected to have known better. The dictum, as applied by laypeople, seemingly admits exceptions tied to what we expect others to know.

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