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Authors

Kovacevic, Katarina

Bystranowski, Piotr

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You should have known: Epistemic Norms in Judgments of Legal Ignorance

Katarina M. Kovacevic¹ (kovacevic.katarina@phd.ceu.edu) & Piotr Bystranowski²
(piotr.bystranowski@uj.edu.pl)

¹Department of Cognitive Science, Central European University, Vienna, Austria

²Interdisciplinary Centre for Ethics, Jagiellonian University, Krakow, Poland

Abstract

An influential legal maxim holds that ignorance of the law is no excuse. While legal theorists have long debated this principle, less is known about laypeople's judgments of ignorant legal violations and the cognitive factors driving them. Across two preregistered vignette studies, we examine how perceived public knowledge of a law shapes blame and punishment judgments toward ignorant agents. Study 1 shows that the exculpatory force of legal ignorance depends strongly on how widely known the law is perceived. The perceived moral wrongness of the prohibited action somewhat moderates this effect. Study 2 shows that ignorance is less excusable when a law is perceived as publicly known, regardless of agents' informational access or whether they are citizens or foreign visitors. Together, the findings suggest that legal ignorance is evaluated under robust epistemic norms centred on what agents are expected to know, rather than on individual differences in access to information.

Keywords: legal ignorance; epistemic norms; experimental jurisprudence; moral judgments

Introduction

An ancient legal maxim says that ignorance of the law is no excuse (“ignorantia iuris non excusat”). The often-cited reason for this principle is that knowledge of the law is a crucial aspect of compliance (Van Rooij, 2021), so the state should never reward individuals who choose not to educate themselves about the law (Austin, 1885). However, legal philosophers question the moral acceptability of this maxim and criticize its inconsistency with the principles of imposing legal responsibility (Husak, 2016; Yochum, 1998). In addition, across jurisdictions, the harsh principle is moderated by numerous exceptions (Dunn, 2016; Grace, 1986).

However, less is known about how laypeople cognitively evaluate transgressors who lack legal knowledge. One of the rare studies shows that laypeople hold others responsible for not knowing the law (Bystranowski, 2024). On the other hand, many studies show that people are judged less harshly when they do not know the relevant *facts* (e.g., Kirfel & Hannikainen, 2023), especially if their ignorance was not intentional (Kovacevic et al., 2024). What features of legal rules lead people to represent ignorance of *law* as non-exculpatory?

Bystranowski (2024) suggests that what drives the lack of exculpation for ignorance of law is the perception of public knowledge regarding the rule, understood as a second-order belief that ‘everyone knows the law’, rendering individual ignorance cognitively marked and blameworthy. Empirical evidence, however, suggests that ignorance of the law is a rule rather than an exception (Pleasence et al., 2017; Van

Rooij, 2021). Why do people maintain high epistemic expectations about others’ legal knowledge despite widespread empirical evidence of legal ignorance?

Law and morality

People may not expect others to be aware of the exact wording of a legal regulation. Still, they often expect them to act in accordance with moral norms that guide behavior independently of legal knowledge.

Indeed, studies in experimental jurisprudence show a tight intuitive connection between law and morality. For instance, people find it hard to accept the application of laws they consider immoral (Engelman, 2024; Flanagan & Hannikainen, 2020). In addition, some accounts propose that criminal law is inherently intuitive (Yochum, 1998) and based on universal justice intuitions (Sznycer & Patrick, 2020). For example, intentionally harming others is seen as immoral, and it is hence intuitive that those inflicting harm should face legal consequences, even if they did not know the legal rule aimed at preventing this specific kind of harm. You do not need to know that stealing is illegal to avoid it; moral evaluation alone is sufficient to guide behavior. Perhaps, the laws perceived as publicly well-known are the ones well aligned with common moral intuitions.

However, laws of the modern administrative state have become too complex, and their correspondence with preexisting moral norms is no longer universal (Crawford 2024; Fletcher, 1978; Grace, 1986), exceeding what can be inferred from intuitive moral reasoning alone. Our informal moral and social sense cannot help us understand our rights in social welfare or tax law. Critically, people are often confused about law precisely because they overgeneralize from their own moral intuitions to legal content (Darley et al., 1996; Darley et al, 2001).

If a transgression had been avoided by simply acting in accordance with moral norms, people may attribute the violation to disregard rather than ignorance and thus be less inclined to excuse it. Indeed, people hold others to high standards when it comes to knowing and adhering to moral norms (Theisen & Andow, 2026). Are epistemic expectations different in the case of laws for which there are no obvious moral intuitions that would inform behavior?

We conducted **Study 1** to investigate this potential moderating effect of the law’s perceived moral status (if it corresponds to a moral norm functioning in a given society) on the exculpating effect of legal ignorance.

Study 1: Moderating effect of perceived morality of law

In this study, we explored the effect of the perceived moral status of a law on blame ascription and whether perceived public knowledge of a law remains a good predictor of blame when morality is considered. Moreover, we explored the moderating effect of perceived moral status on the exculpatory effects of ignorance.

We predicted that participants would be less likely to ascribe blame and punishment when the transgressor was ignorant of the relevant law (P1).

We also expected the exculpating effect of ignorance on blame and punishment to be stronger the less morally wrong the action is perceived to be (P2).

Lastly, we predicted that adding the perceived public knowledge measure to the model would not diminish the moderating effect of moral status on the exculpatory effect of ignorance on blame and punishment (P3).

Methods

Study 1 predictions, sample size, method, and analyses were preregistered (<https://osf.io/wkamj>). Deviations from preregistration are explained in the text.

Participants: We collected data from 300 participants via the Prolific platform and compensated them at a rate of 9 GBP per hour of participation, which Prolific rated as a good payment. All participants were UK residents speaking English as their first language. After excluding participants who failed to give correct answers to one or both attention checks, we were left with 262 participants.

Materials and design To select items for the main study, we drafted description of 88 behaviors (both legal and illegal under U.K. law) and conducted a pilot study ($N = 60$) in which we asked participants to indicate how immoral each of these behaviors were (0 - “Not morally bad at all” to 4 - “Very morally bad”), as well as their guess as to the legal status of each behavior (“Definitely legal” to “Definitely illegal”)¹.

To select items for the main study, the first criterion was that the action is indeed illegal under UK law. Next, since two variables of interest for the main study were the perceived moral status of the action and public knowledge of the law, we wanted to ensure variance in both measures and to avoid multicollinearity. We selected items to cover all four quadrants: moral/immoral and known to be illegal/not known to be illegal. Finally, we selected 20 actions to draft vignettes for the main study. We didn’t observe a strong correlation between morality and knowledge of legality in this final sample ($r = 0.345$, $p = .136$). Dividing items into two groups of moral status, with a cut-off point set at 3, showed that there was no major difference in legality assessment in immoral ($M = 3.37$, $SD = 0.94$) and moral ($M = 3.50$, $SD = 1.05$) items.

The main study was vignette-based. A very brief scenario presented an agent breaking a law. One participant saw 5 vignettes randomly selected from the set of 20, all in the same experimental condition.

In the *Ignorance of the law* condition, the agent violates the law without being aware that it exists. In the *Knowledge* condition, the agent violates the law while being aware of its existence and content.

Example of a scenario across both conditions:

Olivia carried pepper spray in her purse when going out at night.

Olivia *didn’t know/knew* that carrying pepper spray is prohibited by law.

Variables and procedure We implemented our stimuli using the Qualtrics software (2022). All dependent and moderator variables were continuous, and participants provided responses on a 7-point Likert scale or a slider ranging from 0 to 100.

We employed two dependent measures: *Blameworthiness for violating the law* (“To what extent do you agree with the statement: [Olivia] is to be blamed for breaking the law) and *Desert for legal consequences* (“To what extent do you agree with the statement: [Olivia] should face legal consequences for [carrying pepper spray in her bag]”). Both measures varied from “I strongly disagree” to “I strongly agree”.

The moderator variables we employed were *Perceived moral wrongness* of the violation (“How moral was it to [carry pepper spray in the bag]?”, scale ranging from “Very immoral” to “Very moral”), and *Perception of public knowledge* (“Imagine we recruited a sample of 100 participants representative of British society. Give us your estimate of how many people out of those 100 would be aware that [carrying pepper spray] is illegal under the UK law”, slider ranging from 0 to 100). We also included a few additional questions for exploratory purposes, such as assessing an agent’s moral character and the perceived severity of the consequences.

After they provided informed consent, participants answered a simple attention-check question and received instructions. Then, they read one of the vignettes. After reading the vignette, participants were presented with the two sets of questions, depending on the condition. In the first set that was presented on the same page as the vignette, participants answered blame and desert questions in a random order. In the second set, on a separate page but with the vignette being present, they answered questions on public knowledge, morality, the severity of the harm, and moral character in a randomized order. Having completed all the trials, participants answered an attention-check question asking whether the agents in all vignettes knew they were violating the law.

¹Interactive display of the plot with labels for each action at: https://bystranowski.github.io/ignorance/interactive_plot.html

Results

We first tested the correlation between moral status and perceived public knowledge. Two variables showed a weak negative correlation ($r = -0.29, p < .001$), indicating that the assumption of two distinct characteristics was satisfied.

Exculpatory effect of ignorance Moral status and perceived public knowledge measures were first standardized. To test whether ignorance of law has an exculpatory effect on the assessment of blame and desert (P1), we employed linear mixed-effects models in R, using the lme4 package (Bates et al., 2015). The tested model included the main effect of the condition and the random effects of the scenario and participant (random effects were included in all models). The results show the significant effect of condition – more blame ($b = 0.73, SE = 0.13, t(258.2) = 5.81, p < .001$) and desert ($b = 0.56, SE = 0.13, t(258.6) = 4.42, p < .001$) was ascribed to knowledgeable agents than to ignorant ones.

Moderating effect of moral status The moderating effect of moral status ratings on the effect of condition (P2) was tested by comparing a model including main effects of condition and moral status with a model that included the interaction term.² The latter model did not provide a better fit to the data, neither for blame ($\chi^2(1) = 0.53, p = .47$) nor for desert ($\chi^2(1) = 1.74, p = .19$). Hence, we did not observe a moderating effect of moral status.

Effect of perceived public knowledge Because of the lack of significant interaction between moral status and condition, an exact test of P3 was not possible. Instead, we proceeded with the closest substitute: a test of the moderating effect of perceived public knowledge and whether it persists when controlling for moral status. We first compared the model with the main effects of condition and perceived public knowledge, with the model including their interaction. Models with interaction showed better fit to the data when predicting blame ($\chi^2(1) = 12.32, p < .001$) and desert ($\chi^2(1) = 6.82, p = .009$). Next, we added the main effect of moral status to the interaction model to test whether the effect of perceived public knowledge on condition remains significant. While this model showed better fit to the data, both for blame ($\chi^2(1) = 158.27, p < .001$) and desert ($\chi^2(1) = 247.12, p < .001$), interaction between perceived public knowledge and condition remained significant both for blame ($b = -0.27, SE = 0.07, t(1212.31) = -3.84, p < .001$) and desert ($b = -0.19, SE = 0.07, t(1201.43) = -2.85, p = .004$).

Interaction between moral status and perceived public knowledge To test whether there was a three-way interaction³ between condition, perceived public knowledge, and moral status, we compared the model including the three-

way interaction with the one including three two-way interactions. This model showed a better fit than the model without the three-way interaction, both for blame ($\chi^2(1) = 12.76, p < .001$) and desert ($\chi^2(1) = 21.03, p < .001$). All fixed effects were significant (Table 1).

Table 1. *Fixed effects coefficients for blame.*

Predictor	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Condition	0.74	0.28	6.62	<.001
Moral status	-0.53	0.06	-9.40	<.001
PPK	0.50	0.05	9.24	<.001
Condition*M	-0.16	0.07	-2.18	.003
Condition*PPK	-0.34	0.07	-4.69	<.001
Moral status*PPK	-0.21	0.04	-4.64	<.001
C*M*PPK	0.23	0.06	3.59	<.001

*C = condition; M = moral status; PPK = perceived public knowledge

The effect of perceived public knowledge on blame depended on the perceived moral status of the action (Figure 1). The more moral the action is, the less of an effect perceived public knowledge has on blame, especially in the ignorance condition. When the law is perceived as very publicly known, the difference between knowledgeable and ignorant agents is minimal, independent of the action's moral status.

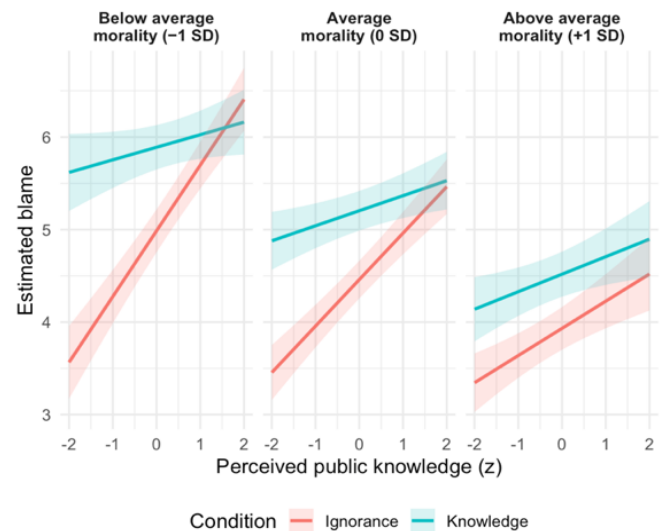


Figure 1. *Three-way interaction plot. Standardized measure of perceived public knowledge is on the x-axis, Blame predicted in the model is on the y-axis (95% CI), two levels of condition are displayed by two colors, and three sections divide three levels of actions' morality. Average perceived moral status of the action was below scale's midpoint ($M = 2.96, SD = 1.29$; Scale 1-7).*

²We initially preregistered comparison of the model including interaction with the one including only the main effect of condition. Since this would mean adding two additional parameters at the same time, we added an intermediate step and compared the model

including both condition and moral status with the one including their interaction.

³This analysis was preregistered as exploratory in the "other" section.

Discussion

Study 1 provided evidence that, in laypeople's judgment, ignorance of the law can function as a *partial* excuse, depending on the contextual factors. We show that how people perceive the action – as moral or immoral – shapes the role that perceived public knowledge plays in blame judgments. When a law is perceived as proscribing relatively moral conduct, such as carrying pepper spray for self-defense, people are more likely to excuse ignorant agents, even if the law is well known. Conversely, when a law is perceived as very obscure, people tend not to blame ignorant transgressors even when the prohibited conduct is judged highly immoral.

Across conditions, people are consistently sensitive to perceived public knowledge: the less a law is perceived as publicly known, the more likely ignorance of the law is to serve as an excuse. One possible explanation emphasizes *access to legal knowledge*. When a legal norm is widely known, people may believe that the agent had more opportunities to learn about the law, e.g. by watching others comply with it (*Accessibility View*). On this view, public knowledge matters primarily because it affects judgments about the ease of learning.

A competing explanation emphasizes *epistemic norms*. Widely known laws may generate expectations about what competent agents *ought* to know, independently of whether ignorance claims are sincere (*Epistemic Norm View*). On this account, public knowledge matters because it shapes standards of epistemic responsibility rather than assessments of credibility.

Importantly, not everyone has equal access to legal information. This raises the question of whether epistemic expectations track *objective public knowledge* or instead *subjective access to legal information*. To adjudicate between these two competing explanations, we conducted Study 2.

Study 2: Differential exculpation for legal ignorance

Ignorance of the law can arise for different reasons. An agent may fail to acquire legal knowledge due to a lack of effort or motivation, may remain intentionally ignorant, or may face reduced access to relevant information compared to the average citizen. A good example of someone with limited access to legal information is a visitor travelling to a foreign country.

Legal knowledge is often acquired indirectly, as a by-product of socialization into a normative environment rather than through deliberate study. As Engel (2008) argues, individuals learn how to navigate legal rules largely by internalizing social norms and practices prevalent in their community. By contrast, a foreign visitor navigating an unfamiliar normative landscape and unexposed to these indirect channels may have a disadvantage in their intuitive understanding of certain legal rules in a country different from their own.

In Study 1, we show that people expect you to know the laws that are perceived as very public, and that this effect

cannot be reduced to following moral intuitions. This raises a further question about the *source* of epistemic expectations. If excusing ignorance is not simply a matter of acting morally, why does perceived public knowledge exert such a strong influence on blame judgments? Crucially, do people consider whether this widely shared knowledge was realistically *accessible* to a particular agent?

The two explanatory accounts introduced earlier generate different expectations about how ignorance should be evaluated when access to legal information varies. In the Accessibility View, reduced access to information – such as that faced by foreign visitors – should make ignorance more exculpatory, even if citizens' knowledge of law is high. By contrast, in the Epistemic Norm View, widely known laws impose epistemic obligations that apply regardless of individual circumstances, thereby imposing similar obligations on ignorant citizens and foreign visitors.

Study 2 was designed to test whether epistemic expectations are sensitive to such differences in informational access. We therefore examined whether ignorance of the law is treated as more exculpatory when the agent is a foreign visitor rather than a citizen. In principle, both citizens and foreigners can take steps to inform themselves about the law; the critical question is whether people take differences in access into account when assigning blame.

We predicted that both blame and desert to face legal consequences would be less likely ascribed to ignorant than to knowledgeable agents (**P4**).

We predicted that ignorance would excuse more in the case of foreigners than in the case of citizens (**P5**).

We also predicted that perceived public knowledge would moderate this effect. The effect of perceived public knowledge on exculpatory effects of ignorance would be stronger for citizens than for foreigners (**P6**).

Methods

Study 2 predictions, sample size, method, and all presented analyses were preregistered (<https://osf.io/fw9mg>).

Participants We collected the data from 545 UK residents, with English as their first language, via the Prolific platform and compensated them at a rate of 9 GBP per hour of participation. After excluding participants who failed to answer correctly to either or both attention checks (as in Study 1), we were left with 470 participants.

Materials and design Out of the original 20 vignettes used in Study 1, we selected 12 vignettes for Study 2. Selection was based on the plausibility that a given legal regulation might differ in another country, as well as the likelihood that a foreigner would engage in a given activity.

In a 2x2 design, we employed two independent categorical variables: 1) *Epistemic state*, with two levels: a) knowledge and b) ignorance; 2) *Agent type*, with two levels: a) citizen and b) foreigner. The agent in the story is either described as a UK citizen or a foreigner currently visiting the UK.

Example of one scenario across two levels of Epistemic state and Agent type:

Nina is a *UK citizen/a foreign citizen currently visiting the UK*. She carried pepper spray in her purse when going out at night.

Nina *knew/didn't know* that carrying pepper spray is prohibited by law in the UK.

Each participant saw 4 randomly selected vignettes in a single condition, in a random order, except in the citizen ignorance condition, where participants were mistakenly presented with 3 vignettes.

Variables and procedure We presented stimuli using the Qualtrics software (2022). Dependent variables were the same as in Study 1 - *Blameworthiness for violating the law* and *Desert for legal consequences*. Moderating variables were again *Perceived public knowledge of the law* and *Perceived moral wrongness*.

In the foreigner's ignorance condition, we also assessed how plausible it was that the foreigner had difficulty understanding the specific UK rule. To test that, we asked: "When approached by the police, [Agent] claimed that carrying pepper spray is not illegal in her country of origin and she didn't suspect it might be illegal in the UK. How plausible do you find this claim?" (0-100). Another variable measured participants' general epistemic expectations from visitors ("To what extent do you agree with the following statement: We can demand that visitors from abroad know and respect the rules and norms we live by in this country").

After providing informed consent, participants answered a simple attention-check question and received instructions. Then, they read one of the vignettes. After reading the vignette, participants were presented with the two or three sets of questions, depending on the Epistemic state condition; each set was presented on a separate screen. In the first set, participants answered blame and desert questions in a random order. In the second set, they answered questions on perceptions of public knowledge and morality in a randomized order. In both Epistemic state conditions, participants also answered the counterfactual question after these two sets, while in the visitor ignorance condition, they also answered the plausibility of ignorance question. Finally, participants answered one more attention-check question, in which they were asked whether the agents in all vignettes knew they were violating the law.

Results

Correlations and descriptives The measure of plausibility showed moderate negative correlations with blame ($r = -0.49$, $p < .001$), desert ($r = -0.55$, $p < .001$), and perceived public knowledge of law ($r = -0.56$, $p < .001$). The less participants believe other countries could regulate the same action differently, the more harshly they judge transgressors. Attitude regarding foreigners knowing the rules of the country they visit was weakly correlated with blame ($r =$

0.28 , $p < .001$) and desert ($r = 0.23$, $p < .001$). The perceived likelihood that other countries have different regulations depended on the scenario and ranged from 25.2 to 78 out of 100, with an average of $M = 56.30$, $SD = 29.10$. The attitude measure showed high epistemic expectations toward foreigners ($M = 5.21$, $SD = 1.23$).

Effect of the epistemic state – exculpatory effect of ignorance. To test whether ignorance of the law has an exculpatory effect on the assessment of blame and desert (P4), we employed linear mixed-effect model analysis in R using the lme4 package. The tested model included the main effect of the condition and the random effects of scenario and participant. The results showed the significant effect of condition – more blame ($b = 0.73$, $SE = 0.10$, $t(463.7) = 7.04$, $p < .001$) and desert ($b = 0.46$, $SE = 0.11$, $t(465.7) = 4.28$, $p < .001$) was ascribed to knowledgeable agents than to ignorant ones.

Effect of agent type: To test whether the agent type factor predicts the blame and desert ascribed to the agent (P5), we added this variable to the previously tested model, which included only random effects and the main effect of epistemic state. Results have shown that adding agent type to the model did not improve fit, neither for predicting blame ($\chi^2(1) = 1.02$, $p = .31$), nor for desert ($\chi^2(1) = 0.71$, $p = .40$).

Moderating effect of perceived public knowledge To test our main prediction that perception of public knowledge has a different effect on blame and desert assigned to citizens and foreigners (P6), we compared a model containing a three-way interaction between epistemic state, agent type, and perception of public knowledge with a model including three two-way interactions. Adding the three-way interaction improved the fit neither for blame ($\chi^2(1) = 0.54$, $p = .46$) nor for desert ($\chi^2(1) = 1.51$, $p = .22$). When all predictors are taken together, only epistemic state and perception of public knowledge show significance in predicting both blame and desert, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. *Fixed effects coefficients for blame.*

Predictor	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Epistemic state	0.71	0.15	4.77	<.001
Agent type	0.09	0.14	0.64	.52
PPK	0.66	0.08	8.20	<.001
ES*AT	0.00	0.20	0.00	.99
ES*PPK	-0.11	0.10	-1.11	.27
AT*PPK	0.05	0.09	0.54	.59
ES*AT*PPK	-0.10	0.13	-0.73	.46

*ES = epistemic state; AT = agent type; PPK = perceived public knowledge

Discussion

Study 2 provided no evidence for differential ascription of blame or desert for legal consequences to citizens and foreign

visitors. Instead, blame and desert were mitigated by the agent's ignorance and by low perceived public knowledge of the regulation, replicating the pattern observed in Study 1. Citizens and foreign visitors were judged the same, whether ignorant or knowledgeable.

Following the Accessibility View, we expected perceived public knowledge to shape judgments of citizens but to play a reduced or negligible role in judgments of foreign visitors, since their plea of ignorance may be plausible even for rules widely known in the visited country. Our findings instead suggest that people apply the same epistemic standards to residents and visitors alike: everybody is expected to know the law, especially rules perceived as generally well known.

These results are consistent with the Epistemic Norm View: When judging unknowing legal violations, people's judgments appear to be guided by a "You *should* have known" principle. Rather than focusing on the agent's informational access or situational circumstances, people focus on what the agent was epistemically expected to know.

This pattern contrasts with findings on factual ignorance, where the effort required to obtain relevant information influences responsibility judgments for negative outcomes (Kovacevic et al., 2024). We do not observe a comparable sensitivity to effort or access in judgments of legal ignorance.

This study had an important drawback that limits the strength of the presented conclusions. We used existing laws and a realistic context, which enabled participants to draw inferences informed by their own experiences. This led to the overestimation of visitors' access to UK laws, indicated by the rather low ratings of the plausibility of these laws being different in other countries. Since our assumption was that visitors and citizens differ significantly in their access to legal information, the low plausibility of visitors' ignorance turned out to be a confound.

General discussion

Both of our studies show a strong influence of perceived public knowledge on how ignorant agents are judged. Although the perceived moral status of the prohibited action moderates this effect to some extent, perceived public knowledge remains a central determinant of blame and punishment judgments. Our results align with previous findings on the importance of the rule's publicity (Bystranowski, 2024), but they leave open a further explanatory question: why does perceived public knowledge matter so much?

Building on the two explanatory views introduced earlier, we propose two corresponding cognitive mechanisms through which perceived public knowledge (PPK) may influence blame assigned to ignorant agents:

- 1) (Epistemic Norm View) PPK → setting epistemic expectations ("you should have known, no matter what")
- 2) (Accessibility View) PPK → elevated learning opportunities ("you could have easily known")

While both mechanisms can coexist, our studies provide stronger evidence for the epistemic-norm mechanism. Study 1 shows that the perception of public knowledge cannot be reduced to shared moral intuitions about the wrongness of disobeying a rule. Ignorant agents are not judged as blameworthy for doing something morally wrong if people perceive that no one would have known this action was illegal. Moreover, higher perceived public knowledge leads to more blame even when agents are knowledgeable, which indirectly implies that public knowledge emphasizes the importance of following certain rules -- or that more important rules are well known.

In Study 2, we observed no difference between ignorant citizens and foreigners, and perceived public knowledge affects both groups of ignorant agents in the same way. The more a law is perceived as publicly known in the UK, the less ignorance of that law is treated as an excuse for its violation, whether the agent is a citizen or a current visitor. High normative expectations toward foreign visitors further support the interpretation that judgments are driven by a "should have known" principle.

As we recognized that our manipulation of access to information in Study 2 was not as successful as predicted, since people overestimated visitors' (access to) knowledge, we plan to run a follow-up study to address this issue. To rule out the possibility that visitors could have easily learned the country's rules online or informally heard about them from their contacts, we will employ a new design that presents a hypothetical country whose rules are unknown to us. This design will enable us to control for the access visitors have to local laws and to isolate the potential influence of the perceived moral status of laws.

If people indeed treat all ignorant agents indiscriminately, independently of their subjective circumstances of being ignorant, that suggests that epistemic expectations are relatively insensitive to individual justifications for ignorance and the resulting non-compliance. Overall, our results indicate that ignorance of the law is evaluated under robust epistemic norms that prioritize shared expectations of knowledge over agents' individual access to information. Future research will put this proposal to further test.

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