

Review

A framework for blaming willful ignorance

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Willful ignorance—the deliberate avoidance of knowledge—has profound implications for moral responsibility. Avoiding information about the consequences of one's actions challenges philosophical accounts of responsibility and legal culpability, raising questions about whether it should be treated like ordinary ignorance. Willful ignorance has recently attracted attention from psychology, particularly concerning how people attribute blame in such cases. In this paper, we review how people blame willfully ignorant agents and provide a theoretical framework that outlines several routes along which willful ignorance impacts blame. We propose three explanatory mechanisms for blame attributions to willful ignorance—epistemic, counterfactual, and personal inferences—review supporting evidence for these factors, and identify avenues for future research.

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Introduction

In 2018, it was revealed that Cambridge Analytica (CA) had improperly obtained Facebook user data, sparking scrutiny over privacy and oversight as Facebook claimed unawareness. In his testament to Congress on April 10, 2018, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg admitted that Facebook should have been aware of the breach. Senator Richard Blumenthal responded that “what happened here was in effect willful blindness. It was heedless and reckless” [1].

This example highlights two major factors in assigning blame to agents: causality and epistemic state. Agents are to blame for a negative outcome if they could have averted it by having acted differently [2–4]. In addition, agents who are knowledgeable about the consequences of their decisions bear more blame than ignorant agents [5–7]. To be held responsible, both a *causal* and an *epistemic* criterion need to be met: the agent must have caused the outcome and have had some awareness of the consequences of their action [8]. In the example, Facebook could have guaranteed compliance with its privacy terms, satisfying the causal criterion. Facebook executives, however, claimed not to have known about the privacy breach, mitigating responsibility.

Nonetheless, Senator Blumenthal blamed Facebook for its lack of awareness, possibly implying that such “willful blindness” was the reason for the privacy breach itself. Recent research shows that, when assigning blame, people take into account not only the epistemic state of the target agent, but also how that state came about [9–15]. Willfully ignorant agents who could have become informed but chose not to, receive more blame than unintentionally ignorant agents [16–19]. These findings complicate the idea that ignorant agents generally receive less blame—it also depends on how the agent came to be ignorant.

In this paper, we lay out a theoretical framework for how and why people attribute blame and responsibility to agents who are willfully ignorant compared to unintentionally ignorant. We discuss three possible mechanisms underlying blame to willful ignorance: inferences about i) whether deliberately ignorant agents knew more (“epistemic inference”), whether they might have acted differently had they acquired knowledge (“counterfactual inference”), and iii) what kind of person they are (“personality inferences”) (Figure 1). We review the corresponding empirical evidence and suggest directions for future research.

Theoretical framework

Willful ignorance can affect outcome-blame attributions through three channels (see Figure 1). It leads to inferences regarding the agent's epistemic state, counterfactual actions within the situation, and person inferences regarding character, motivations, and values. We expand on each of these channels below.

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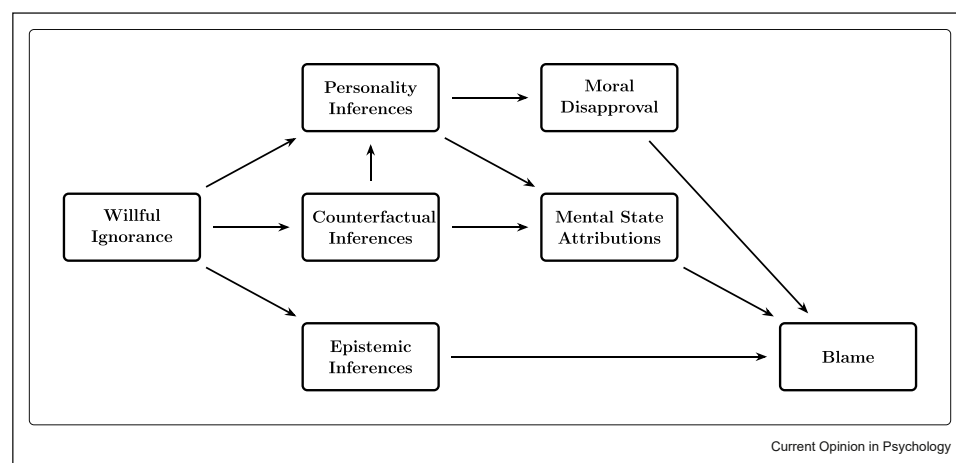
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Figure 1



Theoretical framework.

Epistemic inferences

People make epistemic inferences about what others know based on what they do [20,21]. What does the fact that an agent chooses to remain ignorant reveal about their epistemic state? Intuitively, refraining from seeking further knowledge suggests that the person suspects that their action might be affecting others negatively [22,23]. Consequently, people may infer the agent's beliefs regarding the outcome from their active avoidance of information [20,24].

Recent research finds that willfully ignorant agents are perceived to have greater knowledge of their involvement in a crime compared to unintentionally ignorant agents [18] and to have higher expectation of their action resulting in a negative outcome [16]. Even children judge that an agent who rejects an opportunity to gain low-cost information must have already known [25,26]. To assign blame, it suffices that people take the intentionally ignorant agent to have a rough idea of their potential wrong-doing, rather than a concrete suspicion of what exactly they would be doing wrong [18]. Aboody, Davis, Dunham, and Jara-Ettinger [21] show that people have vague intuitions about how much someone knows, despite often being unable to point out what exactly they know. People's own assumptions about what is known also informs their epistemic inferences and blame judgments. Bystranowski [19] shows that the more law-like, public and "generally known" a rule is perceived, the less exculpatory power the agent's state of (deliberate) ignorance has when they violate this rule unknowingly. Thus, the mere act of avoiding information reveals something about an agent's epistemic state. The fact that someone refrained from acquiring information casts doubt on whether they were truly ignorant of the

consequences of their actions, and this affects how people blame them.

Counterfactual inferences

Legal theorists and philosophers argue that moral and legal responsibility depends not only on what an ignorant agent did, but also on what they would have done had they known about the harmful consequences of their actions. To establish equal culpability between a knowing and a willfully ignorant wrongdoer, one must show that the willfully ignorant agent still would have performed the harmful action, had they possessed the relevant knowledge [27–29]. A central question, then, is what people believe a willfully ignorant agent would have done if they had been informed [30].

People assume that agents who were ignorant about the harmful implications of their actions would have acted differently had they been informed [7,31,32]. What can one learn from an intentional decision to remain ignorant? From a normative rational point of view, people should seek information only when it has the potential of making a difference to their decision [33]. Although people often seek information for non-instrumental reasons, it is natural to infer that if a person avoided information, it may be because the information was not useful to them. That is, it would not have affected their decisions. Consistent with this reasoning, Kirfel, Bunk, Zultan, and Gerstenberg [16] found that participants assigned a higher likelihood that an ignorant CEO would have launched a harmful product even if they had known about its negative consequences if the CEO intentionally chose to remain ignorant. In turn, such counterfactual inferences—that a willfully ignorant agent would have been less likely to act differently if informed,

compared to an unintentionally informed agent—can give rise to further inferences about the agent. Indeed, explicitly manipulating what a person would have done had they known mitigates the effect of the willfulness of the agent's ignorance on blame attributions [16]. Similarly, high costs of acquiring information provide an alternative reason for remaining ignorant, weakening the scope for counterfactual inferences. Accordingly, high costs result in reduced blame assigned to willfully ignorant agents [17].

We identify two ways in which counterfactual inferences may inform blame attributions. First, the belief that an agent would have caused the harmful outcome even when aware of them leads to general inference regarding the agent's character, traits, motivations, or values. These *Personality inferences*, in turn, feed into blame attributions for the specific decision under scrutiny, as argued in the next section.

Second, counterfactual inferences may lead to *mental state attributions*. Doubt regarding whether the agent would have acted otherwise if informed may lead to assign the agent stronger intentions and desires to bring about the outcome [34]. Such inferences regarding intentionality consequently affect blame attributions [35–37].

Personality inferences

Inferred motive

A major factor driving responsibility attributions to willfully ignorant agents is the perceived motive behind their ignorance [38]. Research in decision-making suggests that people often remain willfully ignorant to pursue *self-serving motives*: For example, studies using the dictator game have shown that when individuals can avoid information about the recipient's payoff, the likelihood of making selfish choices increases [39–42]. Ignorance serves as an *excuse* for self-serving behavior in several ways [43,44]: On the one hand, avoiding knowledge serves as an excuse to the decision-maker themselves, that is, it helps to maintain a positive self-image when choosing the selfish option [45,46,44,47–49].

On the other hand, ignorance also serves as an excuse to others. Remaining ignorant reduces blame and responsibility attribution from others, thereby preserving the decision-maker's reputation [50]. Agents that make decisions with harmful outcomes while being willfully ignorant are seen as less blameworthy, and less responsible for the outcome than those who do so knowingly [16,18,45,17,19]. A decision-maker may deliberately avoid seeking information to have plausible deniability when facing third-party scrutiny [51–53]. People sense that deliberate ignorance serves the ignorant person, and at times sanction the act of willful ignorance as a norm violation in its own right [54].

Character, care and sociality

People's blame attribution towards agents who refrain from acquiring knowledge is often rooted in general character or trait inferences [55,56]. The decision to avoid knowledge is typically seen as indicative of an agent's insufficient care for their duty to inform themselves [57,58], and/or a lack of concern for others [59,60,27,61,62]. Sarin and Cushman [11] find that negligent actors receive lesser punishments when they have taken reasonable precautions before the negligent action. They also demonstrate that when agents show care for the task they are engaged in and the people affected by it, people are less inclined to sanction negligent actions.

Kirfel and Hannikainen [18] and Kovacevic, Bonalumi, and Heintz [17] argue that people infer a certain degree of (anti-)sociality from an agent's epistemic actions. Kirfel and Hannikainen [18] find that people expect willfully ignorant defendants to steal, while unsuspecting defendants are expected to share equitably when given the opportunity to divide monetary rewards in a dictator game-style task. Willfully ignorant agents were perceived as more antisocial than unsuspecting agents, though less so than knowing agents. Kovacevic, Bonalumi, and Heintz [17] suggest that an agent's epistemic actions reveal their intentions and degree of concern for others. They find that ignorant agents who have still demonstrated a desire to know are judged less responsible for the negative outcomes of their ignorant actions than those who don't, with perceived care for others and responsibility ratings closely linked across epistemic conditions.

These general inferences about the agent's motive, their anti-social traits and attitudes give rise to *moral disapproval*, as well as to further *mental state attributions* of how much the agent desired or intended the outcome to happen, that underpin blame [63,64,24,65–67,37].

Future directions

In this paper, we outline three different pathways by which willful ignorance may affect blame attributions. Further research is required to evaluate the validity of the proposed pathways and elucidate the underlying cognitive mechanisms. We see several promising avenues for progress. The existing studies to date focusing on willful ignorance and blame attributions evaluated several interventions. Kirfel, Bunk, Zultan, and Gerstenberg [16] explicitly controlled manipulated epistemic and counterfactual inferences. Kovacevic, Bonalumi, and Heintz [17] similarly controlled epistemic inferences as well as manipulated the costs of the epistemic action. The psychological mechanisms outlined in this paper refer to distinct psychological constructs, including attributions of intentionality, causality, and morality. Incorporating measurements of

these attributions into established experimental paradigms will help elucidate the different pathways.

In our analysis, we considered willful ignorance about negative outcomes, and specifically harmful side effects. Further research should look at what role willful ignorance plays in scenarios with desirable outcomes or praiseworthy actions. For instance, the decision to remain ignorant may be evaluated positively when it serves the function to maintain impartiality or to avoid biased decision-making [68]. Examining different motivations for willful ignorance, along with its varied outcomes, may shed further light on the mechanisms we have proposed and potentially reveal new ones.

Conclusion

Our theoretical framework outlines three distinct psychological mechanisms by which willful ignorance may affect blame attributions: epistemic inferences about an agent's likely beliefs, counterfactual reasoning about how they would have acted if informed, and person inferences about their character and motives. The evidence suggests that people intuitively recognize the strategic nature of deliberate ignorance, treating it not merely as a knowledge deficit but as a morally relevant choice that reveals something about the agent's values, beliefs and intentions. While willfully ignorant agents receive less blame than those who act with full knowledge, they are held significantly more responsible than those who are unintentionally ignorant. This differentiation reflects people's sophisticated understanding that moral responsibility depends not only on what someone knows, but on their willingness to know. Future research should continue to disentangle these mechanisms and explore their implications across different domains, as understanding blame attributions to willful ignorance has important consequences for legal doctrine, organizational accountability, and everyday moral judgment.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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* of special interest

** of outstanding interest

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16. ** Experimentally manipulates epistemic and counterfactual inferences in willful ignorance scenarios. Shows that participants infer willfully ignorant agents would be more likely to proceed with harmful actions even if informed, and that controlling counterfactual manipulations reduces blame attributions.
17. ** The authors argue that people consider epistemic intentions when ascribing responsibility for a bad outcome. They show that when agents are ignorant, people ascribe responsibility depending on the reasons behind the agents' lack of knowledge. They propose that counterfactual thinking about willfully ignorant agents enables the identification of a lack of prosocial intentions.
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21. * Includes two experiments and a computational model designed to test people's inferences about how much someone knows or expects to learn without knowing the contents of their knowledge. Finds that people can make quantitative inferences about how much someone know and how much they expect to learn from minimal observable choices.
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