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# Competing goals in the construction and perception of moral narratives

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## Abstract

Narratives can communicate moral character by describing one's past actions and motivations. When telling moral narratives, people might twist the truth to appear better than they are, while concealing this goal. We show that audiences evaluate a narrator's moral character by inferring weights on three goals: providing accurate information, appearing morally good, and projecting an image of informativeness. Participants judged how narrators explained their choice during a "claim" task. Narrators could claim a raise at the risk of causing a co-worker to lose money. They could then lie or tell the truth and be direct or indirect about their motivations (e.g., "I'm not selfish" vs. "It was better for the co-worker"). Our results suggest that to be perceived as morally good, narrators must find a balance: trying too hard to appear generous is costly. We introduce a model for how narratives are constructed through recursive inference of audience perception.