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I see where you are going: Perception of persuasion goals in moral narratives influences character impressions

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Abstract

Impressions of others' moral character are key to our social lives, but we rarely directly witness immoral acts, and rather rely on the stories we hear. This creates significant opportunities for narrators to distort their stories in an effort to appear more moral. How does the detection of such persuasion goals affect readers' impressions of the authors' character? Participants read autobiographical stories written by other participants about morally questionable actions they did – written once with no goal, and then again with the goal of appearing morally good or bad. Readers were very accurate in detecting the authors' goals, but these were nonetheless effective in modulating character impressions. Critically, this effect vanished when readers thought the author didn't care about communicating information accurately. This suggests that audiences sometimes fail to discount narrators' goals when evaluating their character, but only when goals don't come at the cost of communicating information accurately.