The shared responsibility model of deception
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Philosophers, scholars, and clergy have asserted that deception is immoral [1]. Despite the prevalence of absolute prohibitions against deception, most laypeople are not absolutists. They make distinctions about the ethicality of deception based on factors such as the motive of deception, the context, and the tactics employed [2]. For example, people judge prosocial lies intended to help targets as significantly more moral than selfish lies [3], and judge indirect forms of deception, such as omission or paltering, to be more moral than blatant lies of commission [4,5].

Notably, most extant work has focused on how communicators’ (i.e., deceivers’) motives and tactics shape observers’ evaluations of and reactions to deception. This work often implicitly conceptualized targets of deception as passive recipients (see Refs. [6,7] for exceptions). The broad focus on the communicators’ perspective is consistent with the dominant mental model people hold when evaluating unethical behavior: People typically encode unethical acts as occurring between active agents (who are responsible for the act) and passive targets (who experience the harm associated with the act [8]). However, several articles in this special issue highlight the role that targets play in either promoting or curbing deception; for example, targets can curb their likelihood of being deceived by asking questions, listening carefully, and signaling their receptivity to the truth [9–11]. In this article, we integrate these findings to develop predictions about when and why observers perceive targets as active participants in deception rather than passive recipients.

We introduce the Shared Responsibility Model of deception (SR Model) to explain when observers think communicators and targets share responsibility for acts of deception. We present our conceptual framework in Figure 1. We conceptualize deception as a social process, and we illuminate how judgments of deception are influenced by both communicators’ and targets’ actions and intentions, and the context in which deception occurs. In this article, we focus on deception, consistent with the focus of this special issue. However, the SR Model can be extended to a broader set of phenomena, including any unethical or harmful behavior.
This SR Model makes two main contributions to our understanding of deception. First, we challenge the implicit assumption that targets of deception are passive participants. Instead, we consider targets’ obligations to detect and to reject falsehoods. Informed by legal scholarship (e.g. Ref. [12]) and psychology (e.g. Ref. [6]), we build a framework to understand the factors that shape observers’ evaluation of both parties’ responsibility for deception.1

Second, we conceptualize parties’ responsibility for deception as non-zero-sum. We assert that as observers judge one party to be more responsible for deception, observers do not automatically judge the other party to be less responsible. That is, factors that increase perceptions of the communicators’ responsibility may not commensurately diminish perceptions of the targets’ responsibility, and vice versa. This non-zero-sum conceptualization has important implications for how observers might punish and assign responsibility to both parties when deception occurs.

The SR Model also sheds light on a broad range of social phenomena and points to new avenues of research. For example, the SR Model can help to answer questions such as, when do observers assume that people who benefit from deception are responsible for the deception? Why do observers blame people who stay with partners who continuously lie to them? When do observers blame people who believe fake news? By considering the factors that influence observers’ attributions of the targets’ responsibility for deception in addition to the factors that affect attributions of the communicators’ responsibility, we build a generative foundation to investigate these questions.

Factors that influence communicators’ responsibility for deception

An important literature has identified factors that affect how likely people are to deceive others [e.g. Refs. [13–18]] and factors that influence how observers evaluate deceivers [5,19–27]. For example, men are often more likely to lie than women [28], people are more likely to misrepresent ambiguous, elastic information than more concrete information [13], and more likely to lie when they are angry [29] or sleep deprived [14]; people are less likely to lie when they receive moral reminders [15] or are concerned about their reputation and self-image [16].

In our investigation, we focus on observers’ perceptions of deceivers. Prior work has found, for example, that judgments of deception are influenced by aspects related to communicators, such as the deceptive tactics communicators employ (e.g. Refs. [5,19,20]), their inferred motives (e.g. Refs. [20–22]), the communicators’ relationship with the targets (e.g. Refs. [23,24]), and the communicators’ past behavior or reputation (e.g. Refs. [25–27]). For example, as Jordan and Sommers assert [25], people who engage in ethical actions that are costly for themselves are less likely to be penalized for subsequent unethical behavior. Taken together, prior work has largely focused on judgments of the communicators’ unethicality or morality, and we highlight three key findings that we believe are particularly relevant to attributions of the communicators’ responsibility.

First, moral judgments of deception are sensitive to the content of the deceptive statement. Deception is judged to be more unethical when communicators lie by commission and tell blatant lies than when they use

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1 In this article, we adopt the perspective of an impartial observer, but recognize that many observers and the conversational partners themselves (e.g., see Section 3) are unlikely to be impartial.
indirect tactics such as lying by omission, paltering, or deflection [4,5,30]. Deception is also perceived to be more unethical when it involves the misrepresentation of objective facts, than when it involves subjective opinions, uncertain information, or emotion [19,23,31–33].

Second, moral judgments of deception reflect perceptions of communicators’ motives. In addition to deceiving others to advance their own self-interest, communicators lie for other reasons. For example, physicians may lie to patients to provide them with comfort and hope [34], parents may lie to children to shield them from upsetting or confusing information [35], and employees may lie to customers to benefit their organization [17]. When deception benefits others, observers may infer that communicators had benevolent or prosocial intent. Prosocial lies are perceived to be more ethical than harmful or self-interested lies [3], and as Bailey and Iyengar suggest [36], communicators may also feel authentic when telling prosocial lies. Therefore, communicators may be seen as less responsible for these lies.

Third, the relationship between communicators and targets affects judgments of deception. When targets and communicators have a long-term, positive, and trusting relationship, observers are more likely to expect communicators to exhibit trustworthy behavior. For example, people are more likely to honestly share and keep secrets within positive long-term relationships [37]. This expectation influences assessments of responsibility, both psychologically and legally [23]. For instance, communicators are judged to be more responsible when they break a verbal contract with a long-term business partner than when they break a verbal contract with a new acquaintance. When evaluating the communicator’s responsibility for deception, we expect observers to consider these three factors: (1) the content of the deceptive statements, (2) the communicator’s motives, and (3) the relationship between the communicator and the target.

Figure 1

The Shared Responsibility Model of deception

*Note.* The Shared Responsibility Model of deception (SR Model) reflects the joint attribution of responsibility to both communicators and targets of deception. We challenge the implicit assumption that targets are passive victims and assert that targets share responsibility for deception. Observers judge the targets’ responsibility based on factors such as (1) whether targets should have expected deception, (2) whether targets took preventive actions to curtail deception, (3) the targets’ inferred motives, and (4) target characteristics. At the same time, observers judge the communicators’ responsibility based on factors such as the deceptive tactics they employ, their inferred motives, and their relationship with the targets.
Factors that influence the targets’ responsibility for deception

Most existing work that considers judgments of deception has focused on evaluations of communicators (e.g. Ref. [38]), implicitly assuming that communicators are solely responsible for acts of deception. We assert that targets of deception often share responsibility for being deceived. Consider the case of Ann Freedman, a target of deception in one of the greatest art frauds in history. Ann Freedman was the director of New York’s famous Knoedler Gallery. She sold more than 60 pieces of fake art for a total of over $80 million from 1994 to 2009. When accused of selling fake art, Freedman claimed that she was a victim who had been deceived by Glafir Rosales, who had brought Freedman all of the fake paintings for her to sell. To many observers, however, Freedman was also culpable for this deception.

What causes observers to judge Freedman, and targets in general, to be responsible for deception? We postulate that observers evaluate targets’ responsibility according to four key factors: (1) whether targets should have expected deception, (2) whether targets took actions to prevent deception or to curtail their likelihood of being deceived, (3) targets’ inferred motives, and (4) target characteristics, such as their experience and reputation.

Expectations

Observers are likely to assign responsibility to targets who “should have known better; ” that is, targets who should have expected that deception could occur [39,40]. For instance, observers may believe that Freedman, a highly experienced art dealer, should have expected deception when Rosales, a woman unknown in the art world, claimed to have several valuable Rothko and Pollock paintings for sale on behalf of an anonymous client. The more likely observers are to believe that Freedman should have expected deception, the more likely they are to judge Freedman as responsible for the deception. We propose that expectations of deception depend on the context, communicators’ characteristics, and the relationship between communicators and targets.

Context

In some contexts, deception is far more likely than it is in others (see Levine’s Truth-default theory [41]). For example, in negotiations, sales, and marketing, actors are expected to advance their self-interest through persuasion. In these contexts, deception is often normative [42–47], and thus, targets should anticipate it. In addition, features such as the technology used to mediate interactions can influence the likelihood of deception [48,49]. For example, people are more likely to lie on the phone than they are to lie in person [50]. Correspondingly, the context and medium in which communication occurs should affect targets’ expectations of deception.

The likelihood of future interactions between targets and communicators and the value of maintaining a positive relationship should also influence expectations about deception. When repeated interactions are unlikely (e.g., purchasing second-hand furniture from an online seller), when reputation systems are weak, and when relational concerns are low (e.g., the context is characterized by low economic relevance of relational outcomes (ERRO [51])), maintaining a positive relationship is likely to be a low priority for communicators. In these contexts, we postulate that observers expect targets to be wary of deception—and hold targets more responsible for being deceived.

Communicator characteristics

Some communicators are more or less likely to be honest than others [28,52–55]. For example, Fleeson and co-authors [53] and Hilbig [52] identify the Honesty-Humility personality trait (in the HEXACO) as particularly diagnostic of how likely people are to engage in unethical behavior, such as self-serving deception. As a result of individual differences, people can develop honest or dishonest reputations [55]. Targets should expect deception from communicators with dishonest reputations, communicators who have lied to them in the past, or communicators who appear selfish or aggressive [26,56]. If, even after knowing about a communicators’ reputation or likelihood of engaging in dishonesty, targets fail to anticipate the likelihood of being deceived, observers are likely to evaluate the targets as more responsible for being deceived.

Relationship between targets and communicators

As we noted in Section 1, characteristics of an existing relationship may influence perceptions of both communicators’ and targets’ responsibility. When communicators and targets have trusting relationships, targets are assumed to believe communicators rather than to expect deception [12]. Thus, in a trusting or cooperative relationship, observers are less likely to hold targets responsible when they are deceived by communicators. In contrast, in a competitive relationship [57,58] or when communicators actively dislike targets [59], observers are more likely to believe that targets should expect deception and will hold them more responsible for being deceived.

Taken together, we propose that observers expect targets to consider their likelihood of being deceived—based on the context, communicators’ characteristics, and their relationship. When more cues suggest that deception is likely, we postulate that observers will judge targets as more responsible for being deceived.

Preventive actions

In evaluating targets’ responsibility, we propose that observers also consider whether targets took actions to
prevent deception. Observers may expect targets to take actions before, during, and after communicating—to detect, curtail, or prevent deception.

Both before and after a conversation, targets are responsible for gathering information to deter and to detect deception [60,61]. For example, targets can obtain information before a meeting or verify claims after a meeting [61]. If targets fail to fulfill the responsibility of collecting relevant information, observers are likely to judge targets as more responsible for deception.

During a conversation, targets can listen both to what communicators say and to how they say it [10,56,62]. Though many communicators misrepresent how they feel (e.g., expressing more anger than they really feel [63]), the timing, effort, and the amount of emotion a communicator uses to convey their message can be important signals of authenticity [64]. For example, authentic communicators should be more likely to deliver important messages (e.g., “This is a serious problem!”) quickly (e.g., as soon as they noticed the problem, rather than after a prolonged delay) [62]. Similarly, authentic communicators should be willing to invest in their messages (e.g., to write a longer thank you note when they are genuinely thankful) [64].

To curtail their risk of being deceived, targets are also expected to signal that they are listening carefully. For instance, by asking key questions [9] and repeating back important pieces of information [10], targets can reduce the likelihood that communicators will engage in deception. Targets can also signal that they are willing to hear the truth [11]. Some types of questions are particularly effective for curbing deception. For instance, questions that presume a problem (e.g., “How noisy are the neighbors?”) are more likely to elicit truthful information than questions that do not (e.g., “The neighbors aren’t noisy, right?” [6]). We postulate that observers are likely to judge targets who fail to ask questions or listen attentively to be negligent, and consequently more responsible for deception.

Of course, in some contexts, targets may have access to very few deception cues. For example, when deceivers believe their own deception, they exhibit very few, if any, deceptive cues when they communicate [65]. We postulate that the greater access targets have to deception cues, the more responsible observers will hold them for deception.

**Targets’ inferred motive**

Most existing work investigating deception has assumed that targets are harmed by deception and do not want to be deceived. This is often true because communicators’ self-serving deception typically harms targets [66]. However, an emerging body of research reveals that in some cases targets are eager to be deceived—especially when they benefit from the deception [67–69]. We postulate that when targets can benefit from communicators’ deceptive acts, observers may judge targets to be complicit, and therefore responsible for deception. Consider again the example of Ann Freedman. Freedman received lucrative commissions (10–30% of the profit of each piece of sold art). Therefore, observers may believe that Freedman was motivated to overlook cues that could have revealed that the art was counterfeit. Even though she was not directly involved in the production of the counterfeit art or had initiated the lie herself, the fact that Freedman benefitted from being deceived is likely to increase perceptions that she is culpable for the deception. These dynamics influence attributions of responsibility in many different types of information exchanges. For example, feedback receivers (targets) who are unreceptive to negative but truthful feedback may be seen as responsible for the misleading feedback they receive [11]. Similarly, individuals who are not receptive to opposing viewpoints or who are motivated to support flawed viewpoints may be perceived as responsible for their inaccurate views [70,71].

**Target characteristics**

Thus far, we have proposed that observers are likely to evaluate targets’ responsibility for deception based upon their judgments of targets’ expectations, preventive actions, and inferred motives. However, the targets’ characteristics, such as the targets’ perceived experience within a particular domain and how much they are perceived to be deserving of deception, also play a role in attributions of responsibility.

**Experience**

When targets are inexperienced, they may be less able to anticipate, detect, and curtail deception. For example, novice negotiators may fail to expect deception, may miss cues that more experienced negotiators would not, and may also ask fewer (or the wrong) questions. As a result, novices are likely to be held less responsible when they are deceived than experts.

**Target deservingness**

Whereas targets who are inexperienced are likely to be seen as less responsible for deception, targets who have transgressed in the past are likely to be seen as more deserving of, and therefore more responsible for, deception [72]. Targets are likely to be seen as particularly deserving of deception when they previously deceived the communicator. For example, observers may judge employees to be less responsible for lying to their manager if their manager had previously lied to them. Similarly, parents who lie to their children are often deceived later by their children [73]. When reciprocal deception occurs, observers may judge both parties as jointly responsible for the deception.
Observers’ judgments versus communicators’ and targets’ judgments

Non-zero-sum responsibility

The SR Model challenges the assumption that the factors that shift perceptions of responsibility do so in a compensatory (i.e., “zero-sum”) fashion. Instead, we assert that some factors may increase (or decrease) responsibility for both parties. Of course, some factors may only shift observers’ evaluations of one party’s responsibility (and hardly influence evaluations of the other party’s responsibility). For instance, observers may evaluate targets as more responsible when they are misled by communicators who have a reputation for deceit (see Section 2.1.2). However, even as observers hold targets to be more responsible, they may not absolve the persistently deceitful communicators of responsibility. In fact, observers may judge frequent liars as more culpable because their pattern of behavior suggests that their deception is intentional. Similarly, when communicators lie explicitly by commission, they are likely to be seen as more responsible than when they lie by omission—yet targets may still be judged as responsible for the deception if they appear to have been motivated to believe it.

Communicators’ and targets’ perspectives

In this article, we have considered the perspective of an impartial observer. Perspective, however, matters [74–76]. Communicators and targets are likely to evaluate their own responsibility very differently than observers would. We expect parties to make self-serving attributions and focus on factors that shift responsibility to their counterpart [77]. For example, targets may focus on factors that assign blame to communicators, and largely absolve themselves of responsibility. Consider the case of the Theranos fraud [78]. Many investors put millions of dollars into Elizabeth Holmes’ company, Theranos, which claimed to have the technology to conduct hundreds of tests from a single drop of blood. After evidence revealed that this claim was fraudulent, many investors sued Holmes and her company for deceiving them. These investors likely believe that Holmes should assume full responsibility for this deception. Yet, most of these investors never checked the company’s financial statements, consulted with outside scientists about the company’s technology, or investigated the company’s work with its partners. Thus, though the investors may view Holmes as fully responsible, observers may perceive them as negligent and therefore at least somewhat responsible for having been deceived.

In addition, we postulate that the communicators and targets themselves are more likely to engage in zero-sum thinking with respect to responsibility than observers are. That is, as each party identifies a factor that implicates the other side and perceives their counterpart to be more responsible for deception, they are likely to perceive themselves as less responsible.

Conclusion

We introduce the Shared Responsibility Model of deception (SR Model) and assert that both communicators and targets share responsibility for acts of deception. We consider how observers’ perceptions of targets’ responsibility depend on factors such as (1) whether targets should have expected deception, (2) whether targets took actions to prevent deception or to curtail their likelihood of being deceived, (3) targets’ inferred motives, and (4) target characteristics. We also assert that many factors that shift responsibility for deception are likely to do so in a non-compensatory way (i.e., non-zero-sum). The SR Model thus expands our understanding of how observers evaluate both parties involved in a conversation, and how the parties’ own judgments of responsibility are likely to differ from those of observers.

The SR Model also builds a generative foundation for future research by conceptualizing deception as a joint, co-produced outcome. That is, targets of deception often play an active part of the deception process. Understanding how responsibility is shared between targets and communicators can help answer important questions about deceptive behavior. Further, the SR Model can also be applied to the study of unethical behaviors beyond deception—to focus on the role of targets and victims as we develop our understanding of the causes and consequences of unethical behavior (e.g., judgments of morality, blame, punishment).

Conflict of interest statement

Nothing declared.

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