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Self-deception in public relations. A psychological and sociological approach to the challenge of conflicting expectations

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ABSTRACT

The paper enquires into the role of self-deception in public relations struggling with discrepancies between heterogeneous stakeholder expectations and organizational interests and particularly between normative expectations of truthfulness and practical temptations of deception. Drawing on theoretical foundations of evolutionary psychology and sociology, we propose a framework for the origins, drivers, and functions of self-deception in public relations. The analysis reveals that under specific conditions self-deception can be an essential mechanism in public relations because it relieves practitioners from tensions driven by conflicting perceptions of truth and legitimacy. Self-deception is most likely to occur in situations of cognitive dissonance for practitioners to balance internal information processing and in situations of normative pressure when practitioners seek to comply with external expectations.

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1. Introduction

Professionals and academics in the fields of public relations and strategic communication have long struggled with deception (Dulek & Campbell, 2015; Eisenberg, 1984; Englehardt & Evans, 1994; Fitzpatrick & Palenchar, 2006; Hiebert, 2003; Holiday, 2013). A large majority of practitioners condemn deceptive practices and acknowledge the necessity of a general code of ethics in the field, when surveyed on the topic (Berg, 2012; Zerfass, Verčič, Verhoeven, Moreno, & Tench, 2012). However, public relations have always been and remain to be perceived as biased, unethical and deceptive in nature by the public and especially by journalists (Callison, Merle, & Seltzer, 2014; Callison, 2004). The public perception of the profession might be distorted by a relatively small number of actual cases of misconduct. Nevertheless, it is plausible to assume that public scandals that involved deception and/or unethical practices of public relations reinforced uncertainty and skepticism towards the profession.

Reasons for the association of the public relations profession with bias or even deception can be found in the highly contradictive conditions of its practice. Conflicting interests particularly arise from heterogeneous stakeholder expectations and from management objections against stakeholder interests (Christensen, Morsing & Thyssen, 2013; Christensen & Langer, 2009; Lane, 2014). Public relations as a discipline also struggles with the diverging concepts of public relations either as a

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strategic management function (Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2002; Zerfass, 2008) or as an ethical practice of mutually beneficial relationship building and engagement with stakeholders (Devin & Lane, 2014; Taylor & Kent, 2014). While the first approach acknowledges the need to balance strategic and social interests, but values client loyalty over other interests in situations of conflict (Edgett, 2002; p.10), the second approach expects public relations practitioners to generally subordinate strategic objectives to dialogic principles (Taylor & Kent, 2014; p. 389). This struggle strongly affects practitioners in their daily routines, as they have to solve conflicts between management and stakeholder expectations. It is obvious that being faithful to and honest about the goals of an organization is not necessarily rewarded by all stakeholders, let alone the public – especially when it comes to the social or environmental impact of organizations, societal stakeholders are likely to disagree with short-term profit-oriented organizational objectives (e.g. Devin). Surely, organizational goals and the public interest are complementary or even congruent in the vast majority of cases. However, in win-lose-situations the divide between organizational goals and public interests cannot be bridged by dialogic or two-way-symmetric communication without either risking reputational damage from stakeholder protest/dissent or economic losses caused by costly organizational adaptions to public interests. From a strategic perspective, in these critical situations deceptive practices can be assessed as a viable strategy to handle conflicts in the interest of the organization (Bradley, 2004, p. 7; Dulek & Kim, 2015), and under specific conditions corporate deception can serve protective functions (Thummes, 2013). Yet, corporate deception comes at a price: most of the time deceptive practices are unethical and damage a corporation's reputation on the long run. The very existence of a public impression to act deceptively comes at high reputational, and sometimes economical, costs for an organization.

Our hypothesis is that in order to deal with conflicting situations, public relations practitioners operate in a state of self-deception, to satisfy antipodal positions while avoiding reputational harm at the same time. Self-deception is a process in which "people can convince themselves that a deception is true or that their motives are beyond reproach" (Hippel and von Trivers, 2011, p. 4). The advantage of self-deception is that "people can better deceive others, because they no longer emit the cues of consciously mediated deception that could reveal their deceptive intent" (Hippel and von Trivers, 2011, p. 4). Self-deception applies to all parts of social life, but particularly to situations, in which humans struggle with discrepancies between different perceptions of truth and legitimacy. As a boundary-spanning function (White & Dozier, 1992) public relations are regularly confronted with conflicting interests as part of their primary task to create understanding between organizational and stakeholder expectations. Therefore we assume that self-deception affects public relations under specific conditions of conflict, which we will outline in this paper.

Drawing on evolutionary psychology and sociology, we understand the relationship between the public, stakeholder groups, and public relations not only as a system of collaboration for the cause of mutual benefit, but in part also as a social and psychological arms race of deceit and its detection, of ethically proper and unethical strategies that compete in win-lose-situations. Sometimes, given the corresponding circumstances, the latter might prevail over the former by employing self-deception. However, self-deception is only one potential outcome in such situations. We do not propose that all public relations communication is deceptive in nature – perhaps only a small part is – but we argue that deception and self-deception are nonetheless a part of the game that should be considered and researched. In this conceptual paper we introduce a framework that explains the origins, drivers and functions of self-deception in public relations to build grounds for future research on the topic.

To develop our argument we will proceed in three steps: First, we clarify the concept of self-deception by discussing internal and external approaches (Solomon, 2009; p. 33). We will focus on the psychological aspects of internal approaches to analyze self-deception with respect to the structure of the self (the mind) and bias in information processing. External approaches explain self-deception as a reaction to social influences. They scrutinize the social functions of deception and the influence of socialization on self-deception. Second, we integrate both perspectives, introducing a theoretical framework that models the origins, drivers, and functions of self-deception in public relations. Finally, we draw conclusions with regard to ethical and practical consequences of self-deception, as well as future research.

2. Theory

2.1. The internal approach: self-deception as a state of mind

Before we consider self-deception, we would like to elaborate on deception in order to draw a distinction between both concepts. Deception is a fundamental element of the human condition, actually of life in general, because it is one available strategy for organisms to secure vital resources (Hippel & von Trivers, 2011). According to DePaulo and Kashy (1998, p.63), deceptions like lying, are "a fact of daily life". According to evolutionary biology, the evolvement of deception and deception-detection emerged out of a co-evolutionary arms race between the deceiver and the deceived (Dawkins, 1999; Hippel & von Trivers, 2011; Krebs & Dawkins, 1997; Maynard Smith, 1982). This kind of arms race should not be confused with its military equivalent, where two or more parties compete for the best weaponry. Military arms races usually involve hawks on each side, who try to outperform the other party with regard to the same strategy. In contrast, arms races between deceivers and deception-detectors resembles competitions between hawks and doves, opponents who apply different strategies. Deception, as well as camouflage, mimicry, or concealment, as pointed out by many evolutionary biologists (cf. Dawkins, 1976; Maynard Smith, 1982), is a key variable in the struggle for survival in nature. The ability to deceive and the ability to detect deception fuel a spiraling process in which constantly improving organisms struggle to survive by striving for