It is all in the name: Toward a typology of public relations professionals' ethical dilemmas

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Abstract: Although scholarship discussing public relations professionals' ethical dilemmas has been abundant, there is no overarching framework for such dilemmas and their origin remains unclear. We address this lacuna by utilizing role theory to elucidate the origin of public relations professionals' ethical dilemmas. We also employ a deductive approach to develop a theoretically-informed typological classification of ethical dilemmas derived from the name "public relations professional." Specifically, we extricate ethical dilemmas within each part of the name by portraying *public* as the midpoint on a continuum, with the organization at one end and society at the other; *relations* as the midpoint between transactions and bonds; and *professional* as the midpoint between employee and citizen. This gives rise to a multidimensional typology encompassing six categories of ethical dilemmas: demarcation, doublespeak, dual agency, deterrence, diminution, and double-dealing. We advance extant scholarship by explaining the origin of PR professionals' ethical dilemmas and unifying such dilemmas in an exclusive-inclusive typology.

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Background

Research shows that public relations (henceforth, PR) professionals encounter many ethical dilemmas. An ethical dilemma reflects a choice between two mutually exclusive values that lead to prioritizing one value in favor of another (Hannah et al., 2011). For example, while the organization expects corporate *privacy*, publics anticipate impartial *transparency* (Bowen, 2009; Chen et al., 2020; Starck, 2003). Similarly, *advocacy* of corporate interests (Berger et al., 2007) opposes *objectivity* in corporate performance assessment (Berger, 2005; Bowen, 2015; L'Etang, 2003; Zerfass et al., 2016). This is a complex phenomenon since the scope of ethical dilemmas facing PR professionals transcends the organization-public context. For instance, expectations for corporate *compliance* conflict with, let alone undermine, PR professionals' moral *autonomy* (Bowen, 2006; Toledano et al., 2017). Also, giving *precedence* to demands of "strategic" publics compromises society's expectations for social *equality* (Jeong, 2011; Verčič et al., 2015).

Research Problem

Despite the conceptual and empirical attention to PR professionals' ethical dilemmas, an overarching framework explaining their origin is lacking. And it is not clear whether such dilemmas emerge from enacting multiple roles. Although some studies (e.g., Von den Driesch & Van der Wurff, 2016) offered insightful classifications of PR professionals' roles, they did not explicitly discuss ethical dilemmas arising *from* these roles. And when ethical dilemmas remain implicit, it is hard to systematically scrutinize them, which may lead PR professionals into "wicked problems" (See Willis, 2016, p. 306). Particularly as their roles extend to various contexts such as politics (Erzikova & Bowen, 2019), public policy (Myers, 2018), journalism (Tsetsura, 2015; Zerfass et al., 2016b), and media relations (Macnamara et al., 2016). Overall, the lack of an

2

overarching framework explaining the origin of PR professionals' ethical dilemmas is surprising since scholarship recognizes the PR field as plagued with ethical dilemmas (Bowen, 2004; Place, 2019).

Relevance of the Research Problem

Developing a theoretically derived typology of PR professionals is imperative for many reasons. First, it harnesses dispersed knowledge by categorizing dilemmas into distinct explanatory profiles. And by so doing, we make ethical dilemmas more recognizable to practice, particularly as "decision-makers may not always recognize that they are facing a moral issue" (Treviño et al., 2004, p. 70). Second, it reveals possible interrelations and interactions amongst dilemmas. To illustrate, although extant literature acknowledges the tension between corporate privacy and public transparency (Chen et al., 2020), corporate privacy may simultaneously conflict with corporate activism (Holzhausen & Voto, 2002), leading to an ethical *trilemma*. Third, it enables systematic scrutiny of ethical dilemmas, which is critical for PR professionals as they enact roles such as corporate conscience (Hill, 1963; Men & Bowen, 2017), ethics policymakers (Grunig, 1992), and ethics counselors (Bowen, 2008; Ryan & Martinson, 1983).

Theoretical Approach

This paper aims to develop a theoretically derived typology of PR professionals' ethical dilemmas by categorizing them into coherent and distinct sets of theoretical profiles. Utilizing the name "public relations professional" in building our typology not only reflects a logical source for identifying ethical dilemmas, but also fosters a systematic typology that ensures the *specificity* of dilemmas to PR professionals. In so doing, we draw on role theory (Biddle, 1979; 1986; Katz & Kahn, 1978) and employ a deductive approach to extricating ethical dilemmas from within each part of the name. Specifically, we portray *public* as the midpoint on a continuum, with the

organization at one end and society at the other; *relations* as the midpoint between transactions and bonds; and *professional* as the midpoint between employee and citizen. This gives rise to a multidimensional typology (see Figure 1) that reveals six distinct clusters of ethical dilemmas: demarcation, doublespeak, dual agency, deterrence, diminution, and double-dealing.

Category one: Demarcation

The first category reflects *conflicts of interest* arising from opposing expectations between publics and the organization. For example, PR professionals protect publics welfare (Place, 2010) by ensuring impartial *transparency* (Bowen, 2009). However, the organization expects PR professionals to ensure *privacy*, particularly as they counsel senior management on issues management, crisis mitigation, and policy reforms (Bowen, 2015; Jin et al., 2018; Zerfass et al., 2016a). Similarly, while the organization expects PR professionals to promote its interests through *advocacy* (Berg, 2012), publics expect balancing interests through *mediation* (see Koch & Schulz-Knappe, 2021). And while Zerfass and Viertmann (2017) empirically showed that PR professionals use *publicity* to boost the organization's financial interests, it opposes publics' anticipation of *veracity* (Bowen, 2016). We labeled these dilemmas *demarcation* as they enforce a borderline between corporate gatekeeping and public conscience expectations.

Category two: Doublespeak

We build the second category of dilemmas by portraying the conflict of interest between *publics* and *society*. For example, PR professionals often embrace *precedence* in representing the interests of "strategic" publics to achieve organizational goals (Berger et al., 2007; Bolton et al., 2018; Swerling et al., 2014). Such precedence contradicts societal expectations for *equality*. Simply put, precedence amplifies inequality by downplaying the interests of marginalized groups like minorities (Koy et al., 2021). Likewise, responding to strategic publics'

pressure to adopt particular ideologies (Bolton et al., 2018) may lead to *nativism.* In this context*, nativism* feeds into polarization, conflicting with societal expectations for *pluralism* (Heath & Bowen, 2002; Bowen & Heath, 2005). Such dilemmas reflect the conflict between responsiveness and responsibility, and we have labeled them *doublespeak* since they reflect obscurity of meanings and ambivalence.

Category three: Duplicity

The third category encompasses dilemmas arising from competing relational expectations between adopting a *transactional* versus *relational* view. The "relations" role suggests symmetry by ensuring a balanced treatment of all parties. Conversely, a transactional view promotes opportunism and goal achievements (Koya et al., 2021). For example, *persuasion,* which embraces a transactional view, promotes words that *influence* public perception to gain corporate benefits (Grunig et al., 1992). By contrast, *dialogue* embraces a relational view and encourages building public perception (Kent & Taylor, 2002). Other dilemmas in this category arise from gaining power *over* publics by facilitating political support to achieve corporate goals (Black & Boutilier, 2019; Koya et al., 2021) instead of gaining power *with* publics through interaction and cooperation (Grunig et al., 2001). Taken together, we used the term *duplicity* for these dilemmas as they often lead PR professionals into propaganda and deceitfulness.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Category four: Deterrence

The fourth category reflects a tension between developing *relations* versus forging *bonds*. Relations reflect a masculine two-way symmetrical worldview (Grunig & Hunt, 1984), which

promotes rationality, neutrality, and detached collaboration for mutual benefits (Kruckeberg, 2000; Choi & Choi, 2009). By contrast, forging *bonds* emphasize a "cognitive, attitudinal and behavioral attachment" (Yang & Kang, 2009, p. 323), mirroring a dialogic engagement approach that puts "the good of the relationship above the good of the self." Forging bonds embrace a dialogic engagement approach that prompts mutuality, propinquity, empathy, risk, and commitment (Kent & Taylor, 2002, p. 29). Ethical dilemmas in this category become evident, particularly in crisis and digital communication contexts (see Bowen, 2013; Kiesenbauer & Zerfass, 2015; Verčič et al., 2015). Expectations for forging bonds *deter* PR professionals from relationship-building efforts to avert inherent risks (see Kiesenbauer & Zerfass, 2015; Lane, 2018). As such, we used the term *deterrence* to refer to such dilemmas.

Category five: Diminution

The fifth category reflects dilemmas arising from tensions between expectations of serving in an *employee* versus *a professional* capacity. For example, although serving in an employee capacity denotes *compliance* with corporate policies (Reber et al., 2003), a professional capacity implies *autonomy* (i.e., independent judgment of conscience) (Bowen, 2004; 2016). Similarly, expectations for serving in an employee capacity imply *conformity*, which may conflict with expectations of *proactivity*. For instance, Kaptein (2019) suggested that moral entrepreneurship is integral to ethical leadership, where *proactivity* is crucial for developing new ethical norms. In this context, however, expectations for *conformity* conflict with those of *proactivity*. Also, *inclusion* in the dominant coalition team (see Zerfass et al., 2016b) may facilitate integrating publics' voice in managerial decision-making. However, senior management membership undermines the PR professional's *objectivity* (Bowen, 2006), mainly because inclusion implies *loyalty* to senior

management members. Overall, we used the label diminution since such dilemmas *dim* the professional capacity of PR professionals.

Category six: Double-dealing

The sixth category includes dilemmas arising from conflicts between the role of *professional* and *citizen*, which we depict as a tension between *duty* and *self*. For example, the professional role entails keeping communicative supremacy across communication channels to control content and avert reputational threats (Berger & Meng, 2014; Thurlow et al., 2018). However, ensuring information speed, mainly as messages transpire in multiple mediums across diverse geographic spheres, conflicts with PR professionals' entitlement to private time. Like any citizen, PR professionals enjoy the right to *privacy*. However, serving in the ethics public conscience role (L'Etang, 2003) mandates *disclosure* of private matters (e.g., personal finances, dating a public figure) to maintain public confidence. Similarly, counseling the senior management on issues (Bowen, 2008; Bowen, 2015; Jin et al., 2018; Ryan & Martinson, 1983) also requires disclosure of personal matters such as dating a competitor or a journalist (Bolton et al., 2018). We have labeled these dilemmas *double-dealing* since they create situations that reflect hypocrisy and betrayal to avert them.

Key Contributions

Our study offers theoretical and practical contributions. The theoretical contributions are twofold. First, our typology does not only spur novel theoretical insights about the origin of PR professionals' ethical dilemmas, but also elucidates possible interactions among them. Second, the typology reflects exclusive-inclusive taxonomic categorization—depicting ethical dilemmas *specific* to the PR profession, yet *generic* in being applicable to various contexts. The practical contributions are threefold. First, the typology helps PR professionals, including members of the

c-suite, understand the origin of the underlying ethical dilemmas. Second, it promotes ethical awareness and enables PR professionals to recognize more complex situations where multiple moral issues could arise simultaneously. Third, it contributes to ethics management by assigning ethical accountability and explicating situations where typical rationalizations may arise.

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Figure 1. Types of ethical dilemmas confronting public relations professionals
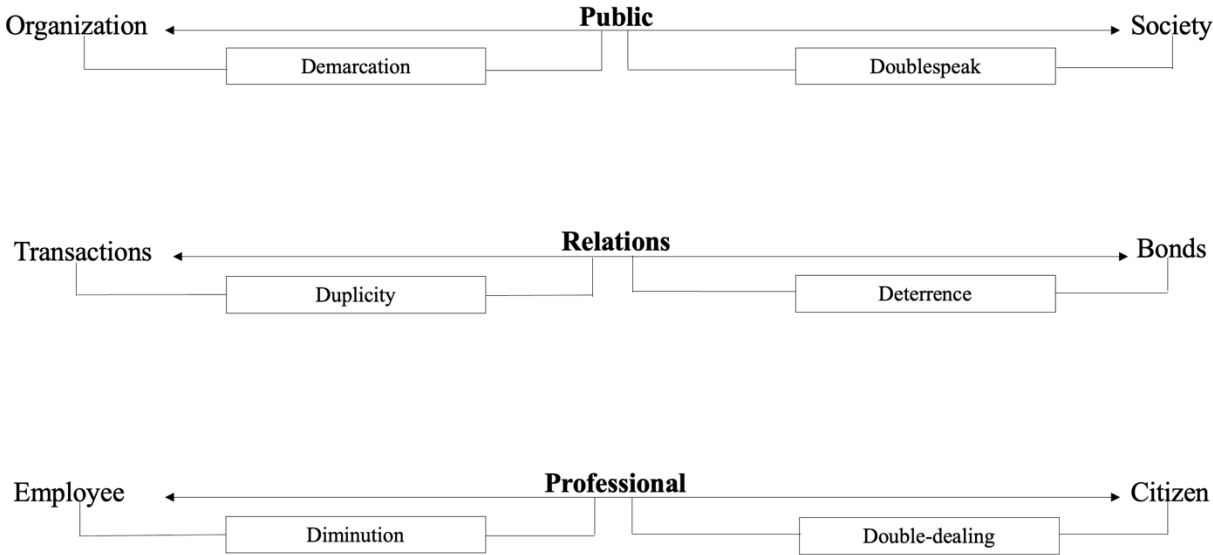
Note: Each part of the name is depicted on a continuum where ethical dilemmas emerge around the midpoint.