Full Length Article

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

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ARTICLE INFO

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.

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

perfection either in deception and/or its detection. The same is true for humans as Trivers (1991, p. 176) points out, since there is a "widespread pervasive feature of communication within many social species". Thus, the benefits of deception – gaining resources at the expense of others, detecting deception, and avoiding the loss of resources – are apparent.

Complex definitions of deception and lying refer to multiple conditions and specify the terms to fairly narrow meanings (Fallis, 2010; Mahon, 2008). We adopt a broad view of deception as an action, by which a person uses untruthful indications to intentionally cause another person to have a false belief (Thummes, 2013; p. 104). According to this understanding, deception does not necessarily involve untrue information, but information that is believed to be false by the deceiver (Carson, 2010; p. 48; Mahon, 2008). Moreover, a false belief can also be evoked by half-truths, like exaggerations, omissions, and obscured information, because these can be used to hinder the affected person to fully comprehend a situation and to make informed choices (Bok, 1999; p. 13; Lynch, 2009; p. 191). Following this understanding, deception is a generic term that includes verbal forms, like lying, and non-verbal forms, like secrecy and pretense (Thummes, 2013; p. 104).

Self-deception, however, is a much more disputed and puzzled matter (Mele, 1997). Generally, self-deception can be understood as holding two beliefs simultaneously; e.g., to believe p and $\sim p$, while p is false (Mele, 2001; pp. 50–51). According to Mele, this state of mind is acquired through biased information processing (Mele, 2001). The consequence is that people "convince themselves that a deception is true or that their motives are beyond reproach" (Hippel and von Trivers, 2011, p. 4). Hence, the mind is potentially able to either change the truth of a fact – 'I am not lying, because I believe this to be true' – or to legitimize the act of lying for oneself – 'What I am saying might not be 100% true, but I am doing this for the sake of the good'.

The existence of the phenomenon is well established in theory (Davidson, 2004; Gur & Sackheim, 1979; Haight, 1980; Hippel & von Trivers, 2011; Kurzban, 2010; Pears, 1998; Quattrone & Tversky, 1984; Trivers, 1985), with only a "minor stream (. . .) [that] tends to deny that self-deception is possible" (Kipp, 1980, p. 305)[1] or being sceptical about the idea (Haight, 1980). The academic discussion on the details of the phenomenon, e.g., if it is intentional (e.g., Davidson, 1985; Talbott, 1995) or non-intentional (McLaughlin, 1996; Mele, 2001), or whether or not it requires a divided self is vast (Davidson, 1985; Kurzban, 2010; Mele, 2001; Talbott, 1995). However, the details of the mode of operation are not important at this point. For our purposes, it is sufficient to deem such questions open "whether [for example] self-deception requires intentionally deceiving oneself, getting oneself to believe something one earlier knew or believed to be false, simultaneously possessing conflicting beliefs, and the like" (Mele, 1997; p. 92). Thus, we understand self-deception as an intentional and/or unintentional state of mind, which is presumably the result of motivational bias (Mele, 2009; p. 267). For commencing our argument, it is thus very plausible to assume that there is such a thing as self-deception and that it has a purposeful function in communicative relationships.

So far, numerous studies have presented empirical proof for the existence of self-deception (Farrow, Burgess, Wilkinson, & Hunter, 2015; Rustichini & Villeval, 2014; Sloman, Fernbach, & Hagmayer, 2010), even though how much it is intertwined with concepts such as moral hypocrisy (Lönnqvist, Irlenbusch, & Walkowitz, 2014) or impression management (Farrow et al., 2015) remains an open question. The core question now is the following: Why would self-deception be useful for the conduct of public relations at all? To answer that question, we have to briefly consider the phenomenon of moral hypocrisy. Therefore, consider the following statements taken from Volkswagen's sustainability reports in 2013 and 2014:

– "[W]e need to better protect the environment and further reduce carbon dioxide emissions in the future" (Volkswagen, 2015, p. 84).
– "[B]y 2018, the aim is to reduce the environmental impact per vehicle and component by 25% compared with 2010 levels" (Volkswagen, 2014, p. 14).
– "As one of the world's biggest automakers we bear a special responsibility for the environment" (Volkswagen, 2014, p. 16).

In light of the 2015 emission scandal, these statements seem to be mere attempts of deceit. It appears that "'clean diesel,' 'green car', and apparently also 'corporate responsibility' – are just a contradiction in terms" (Conniff, 2015; p. 5). Volkswagen's efforts expressed in its sustainability reports do perfectly mirror what is termed as moral hypocrisy: "What may look like motivation to be moral (moral integrity) often is not. It is instead motivation to appear moral, yet, if possible, avoid the cost of actually being moral (moral hypocrisy)" (Batson, Thompson, & Chen, 2002; p. 339). Volkswagen's fraud, by disguising the true emission values of its diesel engines, is exactly that. The company appears to be fighting for the protection of the environment while avoiding the costs of actually doing so. As journalists like Conniff (2015) point out, the communicative efforts of Volkswagen were convincing. The general public and stakeholder groups, such as many customers, obviously believed the claims of green technology to be true. The public relations division plays a crucial part in this process because it has to reflect and explain the untruthful or conflicting self-perception and decision making of the management to the public. Presuming that public relations practitioners are fully informed about management decisions, they are essentially involved in the process of deception: either the management charges them to execute deception or they independently decide to apply deceptive strategies as the only option to satisfy management and public interests at the same time. Of

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[1] Kipp considers himself a part of that minor stream.

course, Volkswagen is just one example from a much longer list of moral hypocrisy, which includes companies such as Enron, Goldman Sachs, or Citigroup (Stoker & Stoker, 2012). Instead of suspecting a criminal collusion behind every case of moral hypocrisy (though there could be, of course), we suggest to view self-deception as a likely reason for its emergence.

In our view, two major drivers are responsible for the emergence of self-deception on an individual level. The first is rooted in the stress caused by states of (cognitive) dissonance (Festinger, 1957; Stone & Cooper, 2001). Whenever people act contradictory to their own principles they are forced "to modify their beliefs or actions to eliminate inconsistencies" (McConnell and Brown, 2010, p. 361; see also Stone & Fernandez, 2008). Self-deception is one possible way to achieve this. Thus, we hypothesize that self-deception helps in coping with cognitive dissonance. For professionals working in the field of public relations, conflicts of interest between the needs of the employer and the demands of stakeholder groups occur regularly (DeKay, 2011; Kang, 2010; Koch & Obermaier, 2014). The inconsistent norms and perceptions with which organizations are confronted (Brunsson, 2002) – from within and without their environment – are reflected in the communicative efforts individual communicators undertake every day. Selling as many cars as possible and protecting the environment are conflicting goals, after all. Likewise, from the economic perspective of a company, it might be inevitable to lay off workers in order to cut costs. From a public point of view, eliminating jobs to raise a company's profits is not always reasonable and might thus create negative headlines and sentiments. If public relations are successful in negotiating a compromise that satisfies both interests, these conflicts can be solved within the win-win-zone of symmetrical communication. But such scenarios can also take on the characteristics of win-lose-situations, when the conflict can only be solved to the disadvantage of one of the involved parties. In a win-lose-scenario, a dialogic approach, by which practitioners openly and honestly defend corporate interests, would either lead to reputational damage caused by critical stakeholder reactions or to financial loss caused by costly organizational adaptions to stakeholder interests. Therefore, we assume that PR professionals learn to cope with the different kinds and shades of truth they face, without having to act according to all of them simultaneously. Yet, if a practitioner personally disagrees with the view of his organization, he will find himself in a state of strong cognitive dissonance. If he agrees with the organizational objectives, he still has to convince stakeholders of opposing interests and perceptions of reality by pretending in a credible way that the organizational interests meet stakeholder interests even though they don't.

Considering these scenarios of conflicting interests, we argue that self-deception occurs among practitioners in the field of public relations in order to reduce the mental stress from facing two (or more) truthful claims, or differing perceptions "of how people and organizations ought to function (...) [compared to] how people and organizations do function" (Speck, 1993; p. 34). Self-deception then has a positive side effect for the individual practitioner. According to Lopez and Fuxinger (2012, p. 323) self-deception engenders positive beliefs on oneself, i.e. it fosters a positive self-perception. This in turn can trigger for example a winner effect (Lopez & Fuxjager, 2012), where every prior success increases the probability of further success.

The occurrence of self-deception on the individual level is strongly influenced by the relationship between public relations practitioners and the dominant coalition. If practitioners are well informed and involved in management decision making, they are in a position to influence the perception of truth inherited by the dominant coalition, which constitutes the position of the organization. In this case discrepancies between the practitioner's perception and the organization's position are less likely, so that the probability for self-deception decreases. But if public relations practitioners are not involved in management decisions, such discrepancies and consequently self-deception on the individual level are much more likely. Survey results indicate that this assumption applies to many practitioners because modest levels of advisory and executive influence are frequently reported (Zerfass, Verčič, Verhoeven, Moreno, & Tench, 2015). Moreover, self-deception might also affect the dominant coalition itself – yet we cannot elaborate on that case as the focus of our argument is on public relations practitioners.

The second driver of self-deception on the individual level is the potential benefit from deceiving others through self-deception as self-deception reduces the risk of deceptive communication being discovered by the public. Hence, self-deception represents an advantage in the struggle between the public and public relations practitioners representing organizational interests. According to Bateson et al., the value of self-deception is apparent: "If one can convince oneself that serving one's own interests does not violate one's principles, then one can honestly appear moral and so avoid detection without paying the price of actually upholding the principles. In the moral masquerade, self-deception may be an asset, making it easier to deceive others" (Batson, Kobrynowicz, Dinnerstein, Kampf, & Wilson, 1997; p. 1336).

Deception, to begin with, is connected to a wide range of cues (DePaulo et al., 2003) that can help to detect attempts of deceit, such as "nervousness, suppression, cognitive load, and idiosyncratic sources" (Hippel & von Trivers, 2011, 2; for nervousness and suppression see DePaulo et al., 2003; for cognitive load see Vrij, Fisher, Mann, & Leal, 2006). Admittedly, cues that point to deception could be indicators for non-deceptive processes and states as well (DePaulo et al., 2003) and thus behaviour signs are connected to deception only probabilistically (DePaulo et al., p. 106).

Whatever risk there might be of being detected by emitting cues of deception, self-deception would eliminate this threat. Hence, the proposition of Hippel and von Trivers (2011, p. 4) is "that by deceiving themselves, people can better deceive others, because they no longer emit the cues of consciously mediated deception that could reveal their deceptive intent". Thus, a communicator who would convince herself/himself of the righteousness of the primal cause of the organization, despite existing internal doubts, would not need to lie. Even disagreements the individual might hold on lower levels of principles would not cause a conflict that could result in deception, since it all happens for the greater good. We do not propose that being in public relations necessarily requires individual self-deception. Presumably, many, if not most, practitioners

are honest in their communicative efforts, since many parts of practical routines are ethically unproblematic. However, we suggest the larger an organization and the more complex its relations to internal and external publics, the more benefits emerge from self-deception in public relations and/or strategic communication because situations of conflicting interests are more likely to occur.

How self-deception is actually achieved by the individual remains an open question. Depending on the specific situation, self-deception could emerge as a pseudo-rational regulation of belief (Michel, 2014; Michel & Newen, 2010) as a reaction to strong counter evidence with regard to personal beliefs. Possibly, it could also arise as a form of belief or preference adaptation (Talbott, 1995), where the inner state of mind is adjusted towards inconsistent information. Furthermore, self-deception could even be a product of emotional (not cognitive) coherence directed towards or away from individual goals (Sahdra & Thagard, 2003). In any case, we argue that self-deception might account for the phenomenon of hypocrisy in public relations, since it enables individuals to cope with its psychological consequences while simultaneously remaining undetected, thus securing a competitive advantage over potential rivals. However, beyond the individual and psychological level self-deception also succumbs to social conditions as the following chapter shows.

2.2. The external approach: self-deception as a social phenomenon

After discussing the internal perspective on self-deception, i.e. what function it serves with regard to individual psyche and behavior, we now turn to the social conditions, prerequisites, and implications of self-deception. As mentioned above, self-deception usually occurs in situations of conflicting expectations. More precisely, two types of conflicting situations must be distinguished. First, people turn to self-deception to defend their own false perception of reality (or the position of others to whom they owe loyalty) against conflicting outside information, as discussed in the previous chapter. Second, people use self-deception to convince themselves (and others) of the legitimacy of their own actions even though these do not conform to social norms. Accordingly, Valdesolo and DeSteno (2008) revealed in experimental studies that subjects assess their own rather unfair behavior as more fair than the same behavior by a different person. In these cases, self-deception helps to overcome conflicting perceptions of legitimacy as opposed to conflicting perceptions of truth in the first scenario. So self-deception not only creates a fake conformity between internal perceptions of truth and external cues, but also between individual or organizational actions and external normative expectations. At this point, it becomes obvious that "self-deception, like deception, is a dynamic social phenomenon" (Solomon, 2009; p. 24) that occurs as people strive for conformity with social expectations. Thus, the social presuppositions, under which self-deception emerges, require further scrutiny.

From a social perspective, self-deception becomes particularly relevant when a person not only deceives herself about a certain truth, but when self-deceptive information is passed on to another person or even a broader public. As in the case of Volkswagen, PR professionals put a lot of effort in convincing stakeholders of the responsible conduct of the company. Three scenarios can explain this strategy: (1) the PR professionals actually believed Volkswagen to be a thoroughly responsible company assuming they were not informed about the illegal actions; (2) they knew about the manipulations and consciously deceived the public; or (3) they knew about the manipulations and convinced themselves of Volkswagen's responsible conduct through self-deception. In the latter case the PR professionals would not have anticipated their communication as deceptive even though they had deceived the public based on their self-deception. However, does this scenario actually apply to the case of Volkswagen? To understand under which circumstances self-deception is likely to evolve we must turn back to the social settings of deception.

Through the evolution of men the arms race of deceit and its detection has reached a new level as humans are the first species to consciously apply deception in social settings for altruistic and collaborative reasons (Bok, 1999; Goffman, 1959; Simmel, 1906). According to social theory, four protective functions of deception can be identified: deception in cases of emergency, deception in the context of privacy protection, altruistic deception in terms of social care to protect persons in need, and collaborative deception to maintain social cohesion (Dietz, 2002; Goffman, 1959; Thummes, 2013). These protective forms of deception mostly involve half-truths and secrecy rather than blatant lies because the deceiver seeks to benefit himself and/or others without causing harmful consequences. For instance, somebody might conceal his disrespect for another guest at a dinner party to avoid conflict, to prevent the embarrassment of the host, and to allow for the continuation of communication, which benefits all involved parties. To banish malicious deception within social settings, normative rules for the application of legitimate types of deception – so called 'white lies' – have been incorporated in social expectation structures (Zupancic, 2007). Of course the detailed moral expectations regarding acceptable and illicit types of deception vary across cultures. Yet recent approaches in moral psychology point towards the existence of universal moral foundations, like fairness, in-group loyalty and respect (Haidt & Kesebir, 2010). These also apply to the general sanctioning of malicious deception and the acceptance of protective deception for instance as part of the fulfillment of role-based duties. In his theory of role-play, Goffman (1959) elaborates on the use of protective deception, specifically secrecy, half-truths, and pretense, as part of everyday impression management. He (Goffman 1959, pp. 242–243) points out that deception in the name of privacy protection and the satisfaction of role-related expectations contributes to the maintenance of social interactions. Since the violation of expectations causes uncertainty, the audience benefits from and supports protective deception (Goffman, 1959; pp. 229–233). In contrast, malicious deception like fraud threatens social cohesion because it causes material or immaterial harm (Goffman, 1974; p. 103). It is therefore strictly prohibited within formal and informal expectation structures. While malicious deception originates in the battle of deception and its detection between enemies,

protective deception benefits all members within a social group in their collective struggle for survival and is therefore perceived as legitimate.

Due to the negative general perception of deception, scholars observe a very close link between protective deception and self-deception. Rorty (2009, p. 254), for instance, assumes that deception in the context of role play and compliance with social expectations almost always takes on the form of self-deception to convince oneself and others of the whole-heartedness of our actions without displaying ambivalent emotions. Furthermore, protective deception is a fruitful ground for self-deception because it mostly builds on half-truths like opacity, vagueness, and over-determination, and it implies convincing justifications. This puts the deceiver in a position to easily downplay the extent of his potential moral wrongdoing (Rorty, 2009; pp. 251–252). Self-deception corresponds to protective deception as it "typically [. . .] works through sustaining social support" (Rorty, 2009; p. 248). In this sense, protective types of deception reinforce self-deception because they are incorporated in social expectation structures – this supports the belief not to deceive somebody in an outright manner but to merely comply with social norms. Given the structural links between protective deception and self-deception, we assume that the two phenomena often occur simultaneously.

In the practice of public relations, protective as well as malicious types of deception occur (Englehardt & Evans, 1994; Holiday, 2013). The protective functions mentioned above can be transferred to public relations under specific circumstances: deception in cases of emergencies applies to crisis communication, privacy protection corresponds to the concealment of internal information, and collaborative deception can help maintain stakeholder relationships (Thummes, 2013). The concept of decoupling introduced in organizational institutionalism (Meyer & Rowan, 1977) supports the necessity of protective deception in public relations as it illustrates how organizations reinforce rationalized institutional myths through impression management to comply with external expectations that they cannot immediately incorporate in their formal structures (Thummes, 2013). Yet in contrast to interpersonal communication, protective functions of deception are not incorporated in social expectation structures of the field of public relations, which is generally characterized by rather weak regulations (Zerfass, 2008; p. 86). Even professional codes of ethics, which prohibit deception on the one hand, but emphasize loyalty towards the client on the other, do not provide unmistakable guidance (Code of Brussels, 2009; Code of Athens, 2009). Consequently, PR practitioners cannot apply protective deception without threatening organizational reputation even though the structural conditions in the field require them to do so regularly.

As soon as PR practitioners apply protective deception in the interest of the organization and its stakeholder relations, they create a conflict of legitimacy because deceptive actions, which are perceived as legitimate internally, may be disapproved by external stakeholders. Facing this conflict, we assume that PR practitioners turn to self-deception: thus, they convince themselves of protective deception as not being deceptive to credibly create the impression of compliance with external expectations. For instance, when concealing internal information they insist on following standard procedures of information selection instead of implementing purposeful secrecy. We further assume that self-deception is more likely to occur in cases of protective deception because the underlying motives can easily be justified; for instance, with respect to organizational privacy protection. In contrast, malicious deception requires a very high cognitive effort to cover up the bias of legitimacy.

Examples for links between deception and self-deception in public relations can be found with respect to the different protective functions of deception. During crises organizations regularly apply the strategy of ascribing the crisis responsibility to one employee who then resigns from his position. This allows organizations to present a presumably effective crisis solution to the public even though the crisis originated from broader structural deficiencies. False framing of responsibilities – or so-called parasitism (Seiffert-Brockmann, 2015) – is very likely to involve self-deception because it provides seemingly easy and legitimate explanations to complex issues, as opposed to the prospect of long-term investigations, which uncover several culprits and entail major structural changes. Giving in to the external and internal pressures of quick crisis solutions, self-deception allows PR practitioners to credibly ascribe the guilt to one employee as a means to avoid further harm to the organization (Ortmann, 2010).

With respect to organizational privacy protection, self-deceptive actions can be assumed in the frequent claims of transparency in PR messages, even though strategies of integrated communication increasingly reinforce the control of information flows (Christensen & Langer, 2009). Accordingly, the overemphasis of dialogic principles in public relations practice can be assessed as an indicator for self-deception because it interferes with empirical results on social media communication that reveal weak and rather asymmetrical dialogic engagement (Huang & Yang, 2015). In these cases, it seems likely that PR practitioners seek to comply with external expectations, like quick crisis solutions, transparency, and dialogue, even though fully accomplishing these expectations is beyond reach of the organization. Since the half-truths they apply can be justified with protective functions, we assume that practitioners do not perceive their messages as deceptive, which at the same time enhances their credibility.

Stressing the example of Volkswagen, the protective function of maintaining stakeholder relationships by exaggerating Volkswagen's environmental engagement can hardly outweigh the harm to consumers believing they bought highly sustainable cars. Bridging this gap in a self-deceptive manner would require a very high cognitive effort to justify the malicious intent. Therefore, it seems rather unlikely that self-deception driven by the desire to act legitimately influenced the PR practices of Volkswagen. If Volkswagen had only slightly exaggerated the amount of its environmental engagement in PR messages while actually promoting sustainability projects, socially driven self-deception would have been more likely to occur. Yet, reconsidering the drivers of self-deception on the individual level it can be argued that – presuming PR practitioners were informed about the manipulations – they practiced psychologically driven self-deception to suppress or downplay the truth of manipulation that highly conflicts with their daily efforts of linking Volkswagen's reputation to values of respon-

sibility and sustainability. So, instead of misperceiving their deceptive strategy as legitimate, they might deny the occurrence of the deceptive act in the first place. This type of self-deception appears particularly relevant in the aftermath of the crisis as recent events indicate that the conflict between different interpretations of truth still prevails. In a radio interview on Jan 11th 2016, VW-CEO Matthias Mueller labeled the whole affair "a technical problem" and pretended that VW did not lie over the course of the scandal (Glinton, 2016). Following a storm of protest in US and international media, Mueller apologized only one day later, this time admitting the wrong-doing of VW (Glinton, 2016). At the same time he described the circumstances of the first interview as follows: "(. . .) the situation was a little bit difficult for me to handle in front of all these colleagues of yours and everybody shouting." (Glinton, 2016) Apparently Mueller was under a condition of cognitive load while giving the interview. Thus, it is likely that he really believed the whole affair to be a technical problem and that VW did not lie at all – an indication that self-deception was indeed involved.

Resuming the case of socially driven deception, we assume that one external driver of self-deception in public relations is the urge to act legitimately and comply with expectations of openness and veracity in spite of the necessity to apply protective deception regularly. Consequently, practitioners are less likely to perceive protective deception as deceptive, whereas malicious deception is more likely to be applied in full cognitive awareness – if not the truth of the deceptive incident itself is being denied. Socially driven self-deception can reach beyond the fallacious legitimization of organizational interests because it can actually lead to a more legitimate organizational conduct, as proposed by the proteus effect in human psychology. This effect indicates that people "conform to the behaviour that they believe others would expect them to have" (Yee & Bailenson, 2007; p. 274 ; Yee, Bailenson, & Ducheneaut, 2009) based on the external impression they create. Thus, "we can sometimes succeed in internalizing an attitude that was initially only mimetically expressed" (Rorty, 2009). Combining approaches of reflective public relations (Hoffjann, 2011; Holmström, 2010) and organizational institutionalism (Meyer & Rowan, 1977) public relations not only contributes to organizational decoupling through impression management, but is also responsible for adjusting the organizational structures to external expectations through reflective self-governance (Thummes, 2013; Sandhu, 2012). In this sense, the state of self-deception can be assessed as a transitional period in which public relations pretend to satisfy external expectations while initiating a stepwise adaption to these expectations.

A second social driver for self-deception originates in the phenomenon of collective self-deception, which is particularly relevant within organizations. Self-deception can be reinforced through mutual confirmation within social groups: "Like the members of any sports team, the president's cabinet can collectively acquire grandiose attitudes that they could not sustain as individuals" (Rorty, 2009; p. 250). Collective self-deception emerges when self-deceptive perceptions are incorporated in formal or informal organizational rules and role expectations. Within the processes of membership negotiations, and socialization, organizational norms are introduced to new members and reinforced among incumbent members by conscious information and unconscious imitation of behavioral patterns (Scott & Meyers, 2010). A typical case of self-deception in corporations evolves from the anticipatory enactment of desired conditions, like economic success, sustainable practices, or high-ranked business partners (Gruss & Piotti, 2010). False beliefs about a corporation can not only be spread through internal impression management by leading managers, but also be reinforced through formal instructions to behave accordingly or through social pressures of group affiliation. In this sense, organizations function as "collective storytelling systems" (Boje, 1995; see also Brown & Jones, 2000), wherein the narratives of members are fused into a single collective story with the support of public relations as internal communication. The collective system thus works as a mutual endorsement, strengthening existing beliefs inside the organization and possible self-deceptions about them. Consequently, we argue that social pressures within organizations are a driver of self-deception: PR practitioners do not perceive deceptive practices, which are incorporated in organizational rules as deceptive because they are accepted or even taken for granted internally. With respect to the anticipated enactment of desired conditions, this type of self-deception can result in a collective winner effect because it fosters a positive self-perception of the organization by its members (Lopez & Fuxjager, 2012). On the individual level, collective self-deception with respect to the framing of deceptive organizational practices as non-deceptive can help employees to handle discrepancies between organizational rules and individual value systems.

3. Consequences

3.1. Synthesis: framework for self-deception in public relations

Dialogical public relations have long been regarded as superior vis-à-vis persuasion – unjustly as Theunissen and Wan Noordin (2012) point out (see also Porter, 2010). In our understanding, strategic communication evolves in a competitive environment, governed by the logic of media society, namely the selective pressure of the limited attention of the public sphere and the individual recipients. In this scenario dialogue and persuasion appear as competing (though sometimes combined) strategies, with persuasion regularly involving protective deceptive practices. This does not mean, that dialogue and persuasive practices are mutually exclusive. Following the two-way symmetrical model they are complementary in win–win-situations (Grunig, 2001). However, in win-lose-situations, where there is no common ground for a consensus or a beneficial solution to all participating parties, it can be promising for the organization to pursue asymmetrical strategies that involve deception and self-deception. Public relations always primarily acts on behalf of its organization and will therefore take practices into account that might be unethical but seem rewarding, if necessary. Therefore, in such situations, (unethical and asymmetric) strategic self-interest might well be preferred above (ethical and symmetrical) dialogic practice.
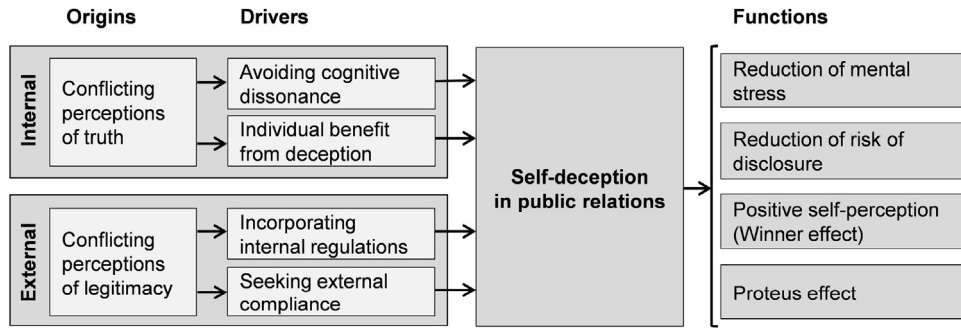
Fig. 1. Origins, drivers, and functions of self-deception in public relations.

Under the pressure of conflicting interests, the rationality of public relations practitioners might further be bound to short-term solutions of deception and self-deception because the urge to avoid conflict and dissent prevails over the consideration of long-term risks of deception. So far, predominant management approaches – which also happen to be the dominant approaches in the field (Cornelissen, 2011; Grunig et al., 2002; Zerfass, 2008) – define public relations and strategic communication as rational processes, which have to be controlled effectively in order to yield a maximum outcome. However, as authors like Wehmeier (2006) or Ortmann and Salzmann (2002) point out, rationality in organized communication is a myth rather than a reality. Arguably, rational management is a mean to acquire and maintain necessary resources. However, moral hypocrisy is another viable solution to achieve that goal (Brunsson, 2002). Drawing upon psychology and social theory, we propose a framework for self-deception in public relations that suggests pseudo-rational practices nonetheless fulfill relevant functions (see Fig. 1).

By integrating the internal and external perspectives we have shown that it is plausible to assume the existence of self-deception as an internal state of mind as well as a collective phenomenon incorporated in expectation structures. Self-deception, which originates in conflicting perceptions of truth or reality within complex and inconsistent organizational environments, enables individuals to avoid cognitive dissonance. It helps PR practitioners to cope with mental stress and to gain an advantage in attempts of deception, which enhances their contribution to the organization's legitimation in society – as long as deceptive practices remain covered. Moreover, individual self-deception can enhance the self-perception of PR practitioners.

Two social drivers explain self-deception that emerges from conflicting perceptions of legitimacy between the organization and its stakeholders: first, self-deception allows public relations to comply with external expectations of openness and veracity in spite of the necessity to apply protective deception. Second, self-deception is reinforced by collective self-deception within organizations that is adopted by PR professionals. The socially driven types of self-deception can result in a collective winner effect or even initiate a transformation of organizational structures in accordance with external expectations. Both effects contribute to organizational legitimation.

4. Discussion: limits of self-deception in public relations

Practitioners of public relations are certainly no homogenous mass who all adhere to the same ethical standards, let alone share a common understanding of their practice. And naturally, they have different views than public relations scholars, who themselves follow widely differing understandings of best practices. However, considering established codes of ethics, e.g. of the PRSA or the Global Alliance, we can state a convergence of principles, which practitioners are expected to share as a common agreement of the profession. So the conflict between adherence to ethical principles of truthfulness and client loyalty can be assumed as a common condition in situations of conflicting interests. Nevertheless, self-deception certainly does not apply to every PR practitioner in the field as its occurrence depends on various individual and situational variables. While some practitioners are very aware of deceptive practices in public relations and communicate them openly (Holiday, 2013), those practitioners whose individual moral standards oppose deception might instead turn to self-deception. Depending on situational conditions self-deception can pose severe psychological challenges to individuals if the gaps between conflicting perceptions of truth or legitimacy become too broad. Hence, in general it does not serve as a long-term solution to conflicts of interest.

Furthermore, the morality, benefits, and limits of self-deception can hardly be assessed (Rorty, 2009; p. 259). As Lieber points out, the ethical conduct in public relations "satisfies three distinct duties: duty to self, client, and society" (Lieber, 2008; p. 244; see also Wilcox & Cameron, 2012). Even without adding Seib and Fitzpatrick's (1995) expansion to include the profession and the employer, it is safe to assume that conflicts in the reality of the practice of PR are inevitable. Most ethical approaches to public relations inherently involve conflicts of value by addressing client loyalty as well as social responsibility, truthfulness, transparency etc. without offering clear advice on how to handle such conflicts (Edgett, 2002; Taylor & Kent, 2014). Different individual perspectives on appropriate moral behaviors can create further discrepancies which complicate public relations' attempts to solve conflicts of interest. On the one hand, self-deception can help handle such conflicts; on the

other hand, self-deception can create new conflicts by enhancing manipulative practices in public relations, further blurring the lines between protective and malicious types of deception. This may entail negative consequences for public discourse being invaded by powerful economic interests.

Professional codes of ethics in public relations, which are designed to address such problems, might instead be part of the problem rather than the solution – not only because they involve conflicting values, but also because they shift ethical responsibility from the individual to the structural level, as Holtzhausen (2015) has recently pointed out. However, her call for a focus "on the moral responsibility of the individual" (Holtzhausen 2015, p. 4) practitioner is, in our view, also problematic. As Batson et al. (2002, p. 330) argued, "moral motivation can be deceptive". If our assumption holds true, that self-deception is a very likely escape in situations of conflicting values, practitioners would refrain from moral considerations in the first place because in a state of self-deception they might not even recognize the moral conflict. Self-deceiving practitioners could be fully convinced to make perfectly moral decisions, while in fact they might just do the opposite, with potentially the same consequences as under the government of a professional and universal code of ethics. Thus, obeying a code of ethics as well as following the "inner moral impulse" (Holtzhausen, 2015) might yield the same result: moral hypocrisy through self-deception. Following this argument our analysis points towards a possible barrier of ethical reasoning in public relations practice. Since a lack of ethical reasoning in public relations poses severe threats of manipulation to stakeholders and society further empirical research is needed to investigate the occurrence and effects of self-deception.

However, the consequences for the ethical debate are just one piece of the picture. Moreover, we argue that self-deception actually helps practitioners do a better job. By not giving away cues for deceptive behavior the individual appears more credible and will thus have a higher chance to succeed with the deceptive attempt. One could argue that such behavior is doomed to fail for two reasons. First, from an ethical perspective deception could be assessed as immoral per se. Yet the moral background of protective deception remains an object of discussion. Second, from a practical perspective every deceptive practice runs the risk of being detected, even if it is masked through self-deception. However, this is difficult to prove, since only failed attempts of deceit can be observed. A successful deceiver gets away unnoticed. Furthermore, even if a deceptive attempt is detected, a self-deceived individual could credibly claim that his intentions were just and his failures were committed in good faith. As Coombs and Holladay (1996) have suggested, the perception of intentionality is a key variable for an organization's image during a crisis. Thus, if an incident appears as an (unintentional) accident and not as an (intentional) transgression, consequences for the organization are likely to be less severe (Coombs & Holladay, 2010). Even a transgression committed for morally justifiable reasons should yield less severe consequences than actions done for immoral reasons.

More important, however, is the insight that self-deception is not necessarily immoral. If self-deception refers to protective deception it can either save the organization from severe harm in cases of emergencies and privacy threats or it can contribute to the maintenance of communication between an organization and its stakeholders through collaborative means. Deception can even serve altruistic purposes in the same way lies can when they are told to communicate caring (DePaulo & Kashy, 1998). Furthermore, self-deception fulfills relevant functions on individual and organizational levels as it reduces mental stress and the risk of disclosure and enables a positive self-perception and positive self-transformation. To draw sound distinctions between self-deception with a background in protective or malicious deception, the moral foundations of protective deception need further exploration.

The works of scholars like Fawkes (2010, 2014, 2015) point in the direction we suggest for further exploration in order to gain a more profound understanding of public relations practitioners, their organizations, and their ethics, as well as the relevance of self-deception. Without signing up to the idea of her Jungian approach, Fawkes' call for the acceptance of the imperfection of public relations points in the right direction. To move away from idealized professionals and to accept the central role of persuasion in the conduct of public relations, she rightly suggests shifting research to more psychology-based approaches that focus on the individual and its relation to the organization (Fawkes, 2015). Combining internal and external approaches appears to be much more promising in acquiring a better understanding of the conduct of public relations in society. Moreover, future research in the field must focus on empirical studies on the existence of self-deception, drivers, and functions – combining psychology and sociology.

5. Conclusions

We suggest that self-deception is a phenomenon that could partly account for the success of public relations because it provides a solution to situations of conflicting perceptions of truth and legitimacy in competitive environments. The dominating approaches in the field, such as the Excellence-Theory (Grunig et al., 2002), account for the conduct of public relations as it should be. However, in a competitive organizational environment shaped by the process of mediatization, in which resources such as attention, credibility, or trustworthiness are scarce, communication is not always a win-win-situation. Even if all organizations adopted the best ethical standards and managed public relations in an excellent way, there would still not be enough resources available to satisfy the objectives of them all at the same time. Organizations competing for the same stakeholder groups will try their best to provide the most convincing arguments; even if this involves a flexible understanding of truth (commitment to truthfulness involves deviations from the truth). Hence, self-deception adds another valuable variable to the theory of public relations, which until today lacked a proper psychological and sociological foundation.

Informed by evolutionary psychology and sociology, four basic internal and external drivers of self-deception in public relations have been identified in this paper: internal self-deception is motivated by the avoidance of cognitive dissonance and by individual benefits from successful deception; external self-deception is driven by the urge to comply with internal regulations as well as external normative expectations. Within the discussed limits of self-deception, its positive effects, like the reduction of mental stress or the activation of proteus and winner effects, should be acknowledged as drivers of organizational legitimation in society. The potential threats of self-deception as a mechanism that reinforces manipulation require further research on the prevention of self-deception in public relations ethics. This includes the incorporation of the topic in codes of ethics and more importantly in educational programs for public relations professionals.

Given the complexity of organizational environments, public relations cannot be assessed as a thoroughly rational function. The proposed framework contributes to the understanding of pseudo-rational behavior. Future research should elaborate on this issue because pseudo-rational behaviors like self-deception have the power to explain continuous and urgent problems in public relations, like the lack of strategy in communication management, ethical failures and resulting threats to society.

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