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

A. Gaara; 1; M. Kaptein; 1; G. Berens; 1;

1. Rotterdam School of Management, Erasmus University Rotterdam, Rotterdam, The Netherlands.

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.

Keywords
Public relations professional
Role theory
Deductive approach
Ethical dilemmas
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
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.

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Insert Figure 1 about here

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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.
References


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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.