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Hypocrisy Temporalities in CSR Communication
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Timely hypocrisy? Hypocrisy temporalities in CSR communication

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ABSTRACT

Hypocrisy is usually understood as inconsistencies between talk and action. Most research on hypocrisy in the context of corporate social responsibility (CSR) tends to evaluate such inconsistencies in the immediate present, thus disregarding the temporal dynamics of hypocrisy, that is, what hypocrisy might *do* to organizations and society over time. Taking our point of departure in a performative notion of communication, we present time as an important intervening factor in talk-action relationships. Specifically, we base our discussion on a *reflexive* conception of time according to which dimensions of the past and the future are inevitably reflected in the ongoing present. On this backdrop, we propose four temporal modes of hypocrisy: aspiration, deferment, evasion, and re-narration. Applying our discussion to the context of CSR, we consider in each mode the performative potential of hypocrisy beyond the immediate presence.

1. Introduction

Hypocrisy is a serious charge for organizations because it challenges their moral integrity. Nonetheless, it is an allegation that is frequently mobilized in public discourse to air suspicion of pretense or disrespect for behaviors that seem to contradict expressed beliefs. At the same time, the prevailing understanding of hypocrisy has expanded well beyond its traditional meaning. While the notion of hypocrisy used to refer to the practice of engaging in the very same behavior for which one castigates other actors (e.g., Runciman, 2018), today it is employed even in the absence of explicit disapproval of others. Moreover, whereas hypocrisy traditionally has been associated with religious and moral beliefs, it is increasingly applied in a broader sense to suggest that the organization fails to practice what it preaches (Weick, 1995). Even when there is no open preaching going on, the hypocrisy claim may refer to unacceptable discrepancies between one set of activities, including communicative practices, and another (Higgins & Walker, 2012; Wagner, Lutz, & Weitz, 2009). Today, thus, the understanding of hypocrisy encompasses a wide-ranging, but also more nebulous, notion of *inconsistency*.

With this broader understanding of the term, the notion of hypocrisy is today mobilized in a wide variety of situations where inconsistencies (gaps, imbalances or disparities) can be observed and claimed. Activities subsumed under the headline of "responsibility" are especially prone to attract attention to such inconsistencies, not the least when associated with powerful actors. Thus, it is no surprise that organizations and politicians are the main focus of hypocrisy charges. Such actors are expected to demonstrate responsibility by, as the sayings go, practicing what they preach and walking their talk (Grant, Keenoy, & Oswick, 1998). This tendency has both advantages and disadvantages for society and its members. While the ability to draw "the hypocrisy card" has emancipatory potential because it allows for resistance to existing power relationships and what appears to be empty talk (Sturdy & Fleming, 2003), the expansion of the term calls for further theorizing of its organizational and social implications.

This paper examines the temporal dimension of organizational hypocrisy in the context of corporate social responsibility (CSR) with a special emphasis on talk and action in this particular domain. While "talk" and "action" may refer to many different types of activities inside and outside an organization, it seems logical at first sight that such examination takes its point of departure in the relationship between *official* and externally directed CSR messages (for instance visions, ideals and goals), on the one hand, and organizational practices behind, on the other. However, given the expanded use of the hypocrisy term described above, we cannot confine our discussion within the realm of official organizational self-presentations. In today's communication environment in which inconsistencies of all sorts may cause moralizing judgments and be taken to represent hypocritical practices, virtually *all* types of talk – unofficial as well as official, prescriptions as well as descriptions, stories as well as numbers, figures and graphs, etc. – are

relevant in understanding hypocrisy dynamics. Our aim, accordingly, is not to determine what hypocrisy is or should be. Rather than legislating terminology, we focus on the interaction between hypocrisy charges, on the one hand, and organizational responses to such charges, on the other.

This approach implies a focus on what hypocrisy can *do*. Most writings in the context of CSR circumvent this question by assuming a "transmission view" on communication (Schoeneborn & Trittin, 2013), focusing for example on how CSR talk can be used to inform the public about an organization's good deeds (Ferrell, Gonzalez-Padron, Hult, & Maignan, 2010). Although it is generally recognized that CSR talk can improve an organization's reputation and legitimacy (e.g., Sen, Bhattacharya, & Korschun, 2006), the prevailing communication perspective in the field is "representational" (Schoeneborn, Morsing, & Crane, 2019). Also, and relatedly, while recent publications indicate a growing interest in the performative power of talk in shaping and driving CSR practices (e.g., Christensen, Morsing, & Thyssen, 2013, 2017; Schultz, Castelló & Morsing, 2013), the predominant perspective on hypocrisy is *normative* (e.g., Delmas & Burbano, 2011; Foote, 2001), emphasizing that talk should *reflect* rather than shape such practices (e.g., Archel, Husillos, & Spence, 2011; Milne, Tregidga, & Walton, 2009; Roberts, 2003; Wagner et al., 2009). Thus, while consistency is a pervasive ideal in most literatures on CSR communication (for a comprehensive review, see Crane & Glozer, 2016), talk is considered subservient to organizational action and not regarded as a productive force in and of itself. As we shall see, a few works, including especially Brunsson's (2003, 2007) writings, escape such view and its implied normativity by describing hypocrisy as a normal organizational practice (see also Cho, Laine, Roberts, & Rodrigue, 2015). These works, however, tend to limit the performative dynamics of hypocrisy by focusing on how talk is able to offset the need for action in the here and now.

We take a different approach by regarding talk as a type of action with potential to instigate further activities over time (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969; see also Gond, Cabantous, Harding, & Learmonth, 2015). By acknowledging that talk-action relationships are dynamic and time dependent, we are able to distinguish analytically between different forms of hypocrisy considering in each case its performativity beyond the immediate present. Bringing time and communicative dynamics to the fore allows us to show that hypocrisy not only is unstable, as Brunsson (2003) suggests, but also that it plays a far more complex and indefinite role in the shaping of contemporary organizations than usually assumed. Our analysis contributes to extant research by deconstructing the concept of hypocrisy, examining its different versions and exploring how it has potential to influence the conduct of organizations and their stakeholders over time.

2. Theorizing hypocrisy

Extant research is limited by normative and common-sense understandings of organizational hypocrisy. The primary problem with such perspectives is that they severely underestimate the complexities of the phenomenon. Calls for organizations to align their communication with existing practices, for example, tend to ignore that this is not a simple and straight-forward thing to do (e.g. Delmas & Burbano, 2011; Archel et al., 2011). Still, the demand for talk that accurately represents the walk is so pervasive that organizations that are not doing so are seen as amoral and irresponsible (Sweetin, Knowles, Summey, & McQueen, 2013). Moreover, hypocrisy is often deemed manipulative and unethical (Greenbaum, Mawritz, & Piccolo, 2015; Roberts, 2003) because the involved organizations pretend to be "better" than they are. In the purview of this perspective, the "walk-the-talk" recipe provides a sensible buffer against deception and manipulation. A more complex understanding of hypocrisy, however, needs to acknowledge the potential of talk to do more than simply represent existing practices.

2.1. The inevitability of hypocrisy

Brunsson (1989, 1993, 2003) work moves the discussion of hypocrisy beyond normative and common-sense understandings. Hypocrisy, according to Brunsson, is a normal and inevitable – if not acceptable – practice through which organizations of all sorts seek to handle conflicting demands. While organizations are usually expected to behave and present themselves as coherent and consistent entities (March, 1988; see also Christensen & Cornelissen, 2011; Girschik, 2018), there are several reasons why it might be difficult to honor such expectation in practice. Faced with a need to cater to many different stakeholders with incompatible values and expectations, organizations frequently end up sending conflicting messages or otherwise behaving in ways that are regarded as insincere or deceptive. Examples of such behavior are the use of different ideologies for internal and external consumption (Brunsson, 1989), the use of euphemisms (La Cour & Kromann, 2011) or strategic ambiguity (Eisenberg, 1984), the separation of formal and informal organization (Meyer & Rowan, 1977) or the construction of different façades vis-à-vis different stakeholders (Cho et al., 2015). In these cases, the conflicts between different interests are incorporated into the talk or the structure of the system (Fassin & Buelens, 2011). While such solutions, when exposed, are likely to attract criticism, they are often inevitable when organizations face demands that must be fulfilled but are impossible to combine.

Brunsson (1989, 1993, 2003) presents an extensive analysis of such behaviors arguing that hypocrisy occasionally serves as a convenient solution. By addressing different audiences in different ways, appealing to some through declarations or decisions and to others through actions that point in opposite directions, organizations are able to subscribe to prevailing norms without jeopardizing their current activities. BP, for example, explained its 2001 rebranding campaign "Beyond Petroleum" in terms that at once signaled a subscription to principles of sustainability and allowed the company to retain its current focus on fossil fuel. In this perspective, the specific values underlying conflicting interests are of minor importance. Hypocrisy, in Brunsson's rendition, is a functional term that relieves organizations from the immediate pressure to handle conflicts or develop difficult compromises that leaves all audiences dissatisfied.

2.2. A simple causality and time perspective

Brunsson's work has much to offer in terms of moving the analysis of hypocrisy beyond prevailing understandings. Emphasizing that hypocrisy is a more or less inevitable side-effect of organizational maneuvering in complex environments, his analysis escapes the a priori condemnation of hypocrisy as an organizational and social evil. As such, his work constitutes a fruitful starting point for any attempt to theorize hypocrisy. Yet, his analysis has two related shortcomings: 1) it reinstates a rather simple causality between talk and action, and 2) downplays the productive potential between the two over time. These points will be elaborated below.

In his commendable attempt to challenge the idea of a direct and linear causality between talk, decisions and actions, Brunsson retains an equally simplistic – albeit *inverted* – causality where talk and action move in opposite directions. Brunsson, thus, not only argues that hypocrisy is a convenient solution for organizations that operate in complex environments. His model extends this expediency into a far more wide-ranging logic: "Talk and decisions in one direction *compensate* for actions in the opposite direction and vice versa" [italics in original] (Brunsson, 2003: 205). One example is his conjecture that the formation of a council for gender equality will reassure everyone that the issue *is* being dealt with, which, accordingly, allows for action on the issue to be postponed or perhaps even halted. Brunsson, in other words, hypothesizes that talk in one direction decreases the likelihood that action in that particular direction will actually take place (Brunsson, 2007). It certainly is possible to find examples of such

reversed "coupling". Many organizations talk a lot and often make claims and decisions in areas where matching action is lacking. Conversely, much of what organizations actually do cannot justifiably be put into matching words (Brunsson, 1993).

As a general model, however, this reasoning is problematic for several reasons. The assumption that talk and action exclude or nullify each other implies that *talk* about responsibility is an enemy of responsible *action*. While the dominance of such reversed causality would explain and justify much stakeholder suspicion about CSR communication (Morsing & Schultz, 2006), the implied logic disregards the possibility that talk *is* action or at least able to stimulate some type of action. Moreover, and this is our primary concern here, along with normative approaches to CSR, Brunsson's analysis is short-term oriented and ignores talk-action dynamics over *time*. Although his discussion of unstable hypocrisy seems to acknowledge that talk gradually *might* become action, he downplays this possibility by claiming that hypocrisy is mostly stable. Hereby, he disregards situations in which talk drives action (Austin, 1962; Gond et al., 2015; Searle, 1969).

2.3. The performativity of talk

Talk is not a neutral or passive dimension of human existence. Rather than merely representing an already existing reality, it *does* things (Foucault, 1977). Talk directs our attention, shapes our perception and engages us in various ways (e.g., Cassirer, 1953). Some acts consist precisely in *saying* something, for instance declaring, promising, warning, inviting and congratulating (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969). The uttering of the words "I apologize", for example, is usually accepted as the act of giving an apology. In more complex situations – like, for example, major sustainability projects – the action implied by the talk is less clear-cut and often takes considerable time to materialize (e.g. Penttilä, 2019).

Whether the action is accomplished immediately or takes time to unfold, the simple distinction between talk and action breaks down. Talk may be action in itself or a "leading incident" in accomplishing the action (Austin, 1962: 8). In either case, one cannot assume a priori that one is superior to or precedes the other. As Weick, Sutcliffe and Obstfeld (2005: 412) point out: "Talk occurs both early and late, as does action, and either one can be designated the starting point to the destination". To emphasize that talk, in many instances, *is* action – or a precondition for action – is not to reject the common-sense distinction between the two altogether. Sturdy and Fleming (2003), for example, argue that while the distinction is "overdrawn", it is still important to create awareness of espoused ideals that are difficult to implement in practice or talk that never results in any discernible action. A too sharp distinction, however, ignores what talk can actually do. In all fairness, Brunsson's model of hypocrisy does not ignore the performative potential of communication as such. Talk in his theorizing certainly does something, for example pacifying critics with promises and ideals while the organization continues its practices in other directions. What Brunsson downplays, however, is the likelihood that talk shapes and drives action *over time*. In the following, we discuss this possibility.

While talk cannot conjure up *any* new reality (Sturdy & Fleming, 2003), talk is often an indispensable phase that the organization needs to pass through in order to stimulate further action (Marshak, 1998). Weick (1979), for example, has pointed out that organizations rely on talk to explore and enact possibilities and limitations and often have only little insight into the subject matter before they begin to speak. The words spoken are therefore likely to be tentative and vague. Often there will be an initial discrepancy between the words and the implied action. Still, they define an arena of attention upon which ideals and identities can emerge and unfold (e.g., Dunford & Palmer, 1998). Organizations may, for example, learn from the ways they describe themselves and their surroundings – even when those descriptions are not fully accurate – and, this way, talk themselves into new realities. While the performative effects of talk are uncertain, morally superior talk might, as

March (1978) suggests, be a preparatory stage towards virtuous actions. Again, this line of reasoning suggests that time has a significant role to play in making talk perform. Importantly, however, since the action implied by the talk is often difficult to accomplish – and is likely to be adjusted several times on its way – time is more than a simple *delay* between the talk and the action. To fully comprehend the performative potential of communication, we need to understand time as a complex phenomenon that not only stretches the performativity of talk beyond the immediate moment, but as a dimension that intervenes in shaping what talk and action means.

On this backdrop, we investigate different types of inconsistencies that can give rise to charges of hypocrisy. Since each dimension may influence "itself", such that talk may produce additional talk, numerous discrepancies or inconsistencies are likely to be at play simultaneously. Acknowledging that talk is action too, just as action also talks, allows us to identify a broader and more dynamic set of hypocrisy practices than discussed in extant theory. Moreover, such approach allows us to dig deeper into the question of what hypocrisy can do for organizations and their engagement with issues of responsibility and sustainability.

3. Temporalities of hypocrisy

Organizations are subject to several different time regimes. The dominant business narrative on economic growth is characterized by a *linear* conception of time, according to which the future is "an indefinite extension of present commitments" (Skrimshire, 2018: 5; see also Slawinski & Bansal, 2012). A similar perspective is implied by the CSR norm that organizations must let action follow their words (Ciulla, 2004; Seele & Lock, 2015). At the same time, *cyclical* conceptions of time characterize many organizational practices where talk and action shape each other in spirals. Penttilä's (2019), for example, show how CSR talk and CSR practices occur in cyclical routines where talk is expected to challenge action and vice versa in ongoing processes.

In the following, we move beyond these two perspectives by basing our discussion on a *reflexive* conception of time. The central idea in this perspective, inspired by the systems theory of Niklas Luhmann (1995, 1998, 2000), is that time is always "now" because past and future states are always and inevitably observed self-referentially through the present. The now, accordingly, is saturated with memories and anticipations. However, since past and future are without boundaries – having no starting or ending points – both dimensions can be stretched indefinitely and refer to an endless number of real and possible events. In order to handle such complexity, the observer – for example the organization or its stakeholders – must simplify in the present by selecting which events in the past and which states in the future to focus on. Any such selection is contingent and likely to be contested by other observers who may select differently. In the words of Luhmann, "the *relevance* of time (…) depends upon the capacity to mediate relations between past and future in a present" [italics in original] (Luhmann, 1976: 137). Similarly, what constitutes short and long term cannot be established independently of observers and their selections. These conjectures constitute the backbone of the following discussion of hypocrisy and its different temporal dimensions.

3.1. Temporal challenges and tensions

Time obviously plays a significant role when organizations engage with complex issues such as CSR and sustainability. As researchers have argued, one of the main challenges in contemporary society is to radically revise our narrative constructions of the future with regards to the environment (e.g., Skrimshire, 2018). While short-termism is the dominant and preferred perspective in most business contexts (Slawinski & Bansal, 2018), it is generally acknowledged that long-term thinking is necessary to avoid further devastating effects of climate change (Skrimshire, 2018: 3). Long-termism, however, face numerous difficulties in practice. The complexity of most CSR initiatives makes it

difficult to observe their immediate effects, hereby favoring a short-term orientation (Timmermans & Epstein, 2010) or "presentism" (Skrimshire, 2018: 2). Moreover, and of particular relevance for our argumentation, the expectation that long-term perspectives may encourage hypocrisy produce much skepticism towards such perspectives (Slawinski & Bansal, 2018).

In spite of these challenges, the need to implement long-term systemic perspectives is accentuated in most literatures on CSR and sustainability (e.g., Gilbert & Rasche, 2007; Gladwin, Kennelly, & Krause, 1995; Slawinski & Bansal, 2018; see also Winkler, Etter, & Castelló, 2019). Organizations (and politicians) are often reproached by media and other stakeholders for being unambitious when it comes to goal-setting and visions for the future (e.g. Hoffman, 2014; White, 2015, see also Morsing & Spence, 2019). At the same time, the past is frequently mobilized to critique, ridicule or outright reject such future visions. Interestingly, such conflicting tendencies, which subject organizations to temporal tensions and multiple hypocrisy charges, are preconditions for the performative potentials discussed in the following.

3.2. Temporal modes of hypocrisy

Given the expanded understanding of hypocrisy as inconsistency, contemporary organizations are often engaged in practices of consistency management (e.g., Christensen & Cornelissen, 2011), seeking to (re)assert acceptable links between their past, present and future (Ashcraft, Kuhn, & Cooren, 2009; Schoeneborn & Vasquez, 2017). Since inconsistencies can emerge along multiple dimensions, organizational efforts to circumnavigate perceptions of hypocrisy are likely to be innumerous. For simplicity, we consider in the following four situations in which temporality influences hypocrisy charges as well as organizational attempts to deal with them.

Our typology, presented in Fig. 1 below, involves two temporal dimensions: a temporal *orientation* and a temporal *direction*. The temporal *orientation* refers to the attention span (short-term or long-term) of participants when making or responding to hypocrisy charges. The temporal *direction* refers to point of comparison (past or future) that participants mobilize when discussing such charges. Temporal tensions and hypocrisy charges appear along both dimensions. Since the "now",

as we have argued above, is the inevitable point of departure for (re)constructions of links between past, present and future, the present is not depicted explicitly in Fig. 1, but constitutes its underlying context.

Although consistency or lack thereof is inevitably observed through the present, the ideal of long-termism tends to direct organizational talk towards the future. Many hypocrisy controversies therefore concern action that has not yet materialized. We discuss these as respectively aspiration and deferment.

3.2.1. Aspiration

Aspirations denote organizational self-descriptions to which current practices cannot yet live up. Some organizational aspirations are explicitly formulated as goals and ambitions, e.g., "We aim to raise the bar for sustainable product solutions". However, the combined desire to improve the organization's reputational standing and motivate internal audiences towards better practices implies, as Christensen et al. (2013) point out, that visionary self-descriptions tend to be formulated more boldly *as if* they reflect already existing practices. Aspirational self-descriptions are therefore likely to be regarded as hypocritical. Shell's "Net Zero Emissions" ideal and BP's "Beyond Petroleum" slogan are examples of lofty talk that seems inconsistent with existing business models of the corporations in question. Although such communication responds to the demand for future-oriented ambitions, the expectation that talk is congruent with existing practices (e.g., Wagner et al., 2009) is likely to stir intense criticism.

While aspirational talk is likely to be seen as hypocritical in the moment it is articulated, it has potential to enact novel and innovative approaches towards a more responsible future (Christensen, Morsing, & Thyssen, 2015), provided the ambitions are met with optimal pressure from stakeholders (Christensen et al., 2013). Aspirations are performative to the extent that they mobilize expectations for better practices. Research has indicated that this is possible provided internal and external audiences play along with the ambitions, take the goals seriously while demanding follow-up action (e.g., Haack, Schoeneborn, & Wickert, 2012; Livesey & Graham, 2007; see also Bromley & Powell, 2012).

Tolerance for temporary inconsistencies, however, is difficult to achieve and maintain because it challenges the typical inclination

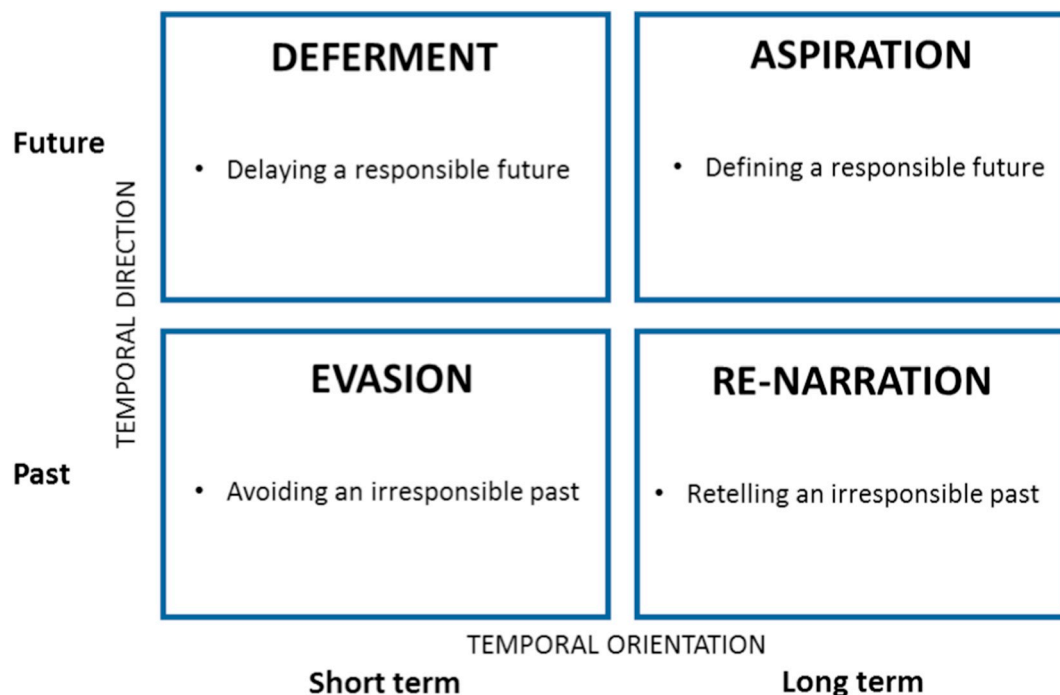|		
DEFERMENT • Delaying a responsible future	**ASPIRATION** • Defining a responsible future
EVASION • Avoiding an irresponsible past	**RE-NARRATION** • Retelling an irresponsible past

Fig. 1. Hypocrisy temporalities in CSR communication.

towards short-term thinking. Moreover, lofty aspirations do not guarantee an improved future. The risk of always being in the process of "becoming" yet never "arriving", as Costas and Grey (2014: 918) put it, is a serious problem, especially in contexts of responsibility and sustainability. Chocolate bar manufacturers such as Hershey, Mars, Nestlé and Toms, for example, have all expressed their support to end child slavery. Documentary films and studies, however, show that child labor still constitutes the basis for cheap production of cocoa in Western Africa. Such examples indicate the possibility that aspirations might offset the need to take action here and now. Reversed coupling (Brunsson, 2003), thus, is certainly a risk when action is complex and stretched into an unknown future.

Yet, without aspirations and their inherent hypocrisy, improved actions might not transpire either. Tensions and inconsistencies are potential resources for change because they empower stakeholders with ammunition to demand better practices (Bromley & Powell, 2012). At the same time, interesting aspirations have potential to inspire similar aspirations among competitors such that shared aspirations or "fictional expectations" become self-fulfilling prophecies (cf. Beckert, 2013; see also Weick, 1979). The challenge, thus, is to combine an understanding of what aspirations can do under the right circumstances with open and ongoing negotiations about what timeframes are reasonable and acceptable for major projects of societal interest. Without such understanding, organizations are likely to resort to deferment.

3.2.2. Deferment

Deferment refers to delays, extensions or suspensions of organizational action towards a better or more responsible future. Organizations may often need to postpone or reschedule large CSR projects, either because new information creates hesitation among decision makers or because uncontrollable factors and events in the environment – for example financial crises – affect the conditions for carrying out the project. Still, deferment calls for explanations vis-à-vis external audiences who tend, as we have argued, to assess the credibility of organizational ideals and projects in a short-term perspective. Organizations that are behind schedule or not yet able to evidence the results of their initiatives, must therefore engage vigorously in consistency-restoring communication (e.g., Christensen & Cornelissen, 2011). Expressions such as "we are not there yet but we are working on it" illustrate such attempts to bridge what appear to be inconsistencies between talk and action. Instead of acknowledging that ideals are dropped, organizations are likely to claim that the program is still operating, but delayed by unforeseen external circumstances. Another common deferment practice is reference to ongoing dialogues with stakeholders. Total, for example, sought to justify its problematic cooperation with the military dictatorship in Burma by stressing that its presence there was necessary to instigate positive changes down the road.

While delays of desirable futures may be accepted in some organizational contexts, for example in personal career development (Costas & Grey, 2014; see also Thornborrow & Brown, 2009), they are likely to be met with suspicion in the CSR arena where deferrals of responsible futures seem to indicate a level of cynicism on the part of its sender. Nike's "Equality should have no boundaries" campaign, for example, has prompted several hypocrisy charges. While the slogan was designed for equality in sports, critical voices use it to highlight that Nike pays unequal salaries to its own workers. As a response, Nike is engaging in various deferment practices. Instead of immediately implementing equal pay across the corporation, Nike has provided million-dollars grants to advance equality in communities. In addition, Nike's CEO, Mark Parker, has promised to review the company's salaries, bonuses and other equality policies for Nike workers. These short-term activities might be called displaced action because they are not directed towards the raised inequality problems themselves. Yet, they buy the organization time while signaling that its engagement in the cause (equality) is unchanged.

Such practices, however, may not reassure stakeholders that the

organization remains committed to its long-term goals and that further action can be expected in due time. Much of what organizations do are hidden from view and in many cases stakeholders only have access to what organizations *say* about themselves (Brunsson, 2003). The performative outcomes of deferment therefore risk being only suspicion and disbelief. In the case of Nike, deferment may not have the desired effect of distracting public attention from remaining inequality issues. Rather, Nike's stakeholders are likely to insist on a broader notion of equality, including issues of race, gender and salaries. At the same time, however, suspicion and skepticism may help instigate better practices.

Explicit justifications of deferrals indicate that the organization is sensitive to its social standing and still holds on to its future-directed ideals and goals. Such sensitivity might be used by stakeholders to demand further explanations and updated timeframes. While deferment practices are likely to be perceived as hypocritical, they illustrate what Rochefoucauld called "a tribute vice pays to virtue" (Runciman, 2018: 10). In other words, by holding on to long-term-ideals and goals even when they are difficult to implement in full, organizations acknowledge what is right and what they ought to do (see also Brunsson, 2003). Such acknowledgement is an important precondition for – later – virtuous behavior (March, 1978). The performative potential of deferment, accordingly, requires that justifications are publicly available and that stakeholders are willing to enter explicit dialogues and negotiations that hold organizations to their own words.

By holding on to long-term ideals and goals while taking account of demands for immediate action, deferment practices illustrate the temporal tension between the "now" and some ideal future. Other hypocrisy charges and responses concern the past. We discuss such instances in the following as respectively evasion and re-narration.

3.2.3. Evasion

Evasion refers to organizational attempts to bypass, neglect or otherwise distance themselves from dubious or irresponsible decisions and behaviors of their past. Examples of such practice are organizational efforts to circumnavigate certain topics, speak about something else, downplay the significance of problematic behaviors in their past, ingratiate themselves by focusing on their positive contributions to society or distance the organization from immoral actors (cf. Coombs, 1995). As a response to the charges of complicity in large-scheme tax avoidance programs, for example, many banks and law firms are currently seeking to stress that their involvement in such practices was terminated several years ago. Organizations may also seek to dodge an issue by referring to local norms and laws at the time. When research documented that FL Smidth never informed its employees about the potential cancer-causing implications of working in the company's asbestos mine in Cypern from 1936 to 1986, management argued that the company – at the time – had acted within the boundaries of the law.

The past is frequently evoked by critics to dismiss the credibility of organizational goals and visions and to support charges of hypocrisy. While some rejections are based on empirical evidence, others draw more generally on suppositions about modern organizations and their inherent inability to fulfill societal concerns (e.g., McMillan, 2007; Roberts, 2003). Thus, while "past behavior" may refer to actual performances of *specific* organizations, it may alternatively refer to a generalized image of corporate behavior. Either way, the primary hypocrisy issue here is how the past throws a dark shadow over current ideals and practices thereby undermining their value and credibility in the public eye. Efforts to dissociate the organization from certain aspects of its past are therefore understandable, even though such practices are unlikely to be openly acknowledged.

Yet, attempts to escape the past is seriously challenged by digital communication technologies and the ability they afford NGOs, journalists and other stakeholders to access information about organizations independent of time and space. Today, the reputation of an organization is a contested terrain where virtually all aspects of past behavior, including communicative practices, may be circulated and

assessed by official and unofficial stakeholder groups (Etter, Ravasi, & Colleoni, 2019). Thus, even if evasion may be a tempting way out for organizations when facing negative publicity about their prior behaviors, chances are high that certain traces of their past – perhaps in rudimentary and simplified forms – will keep popping up. Under these circumstances, explicit organizational attempts to evade the past may perform contrary to intentions, producing even stronger perceptions of hypocrisy. While IKEA, for example, has documented that its long-term engagement in India has reduced child labor without taking away the livelihood of their families, doubts remain whether IKEA has done enough in the past to prevent child labor (Luce, 2004).

Yet, attempts to evade some non-flattering past indicate the organization seeks to improve its reputation. Such attempts *can* become performative, provided stakeholders apply pressure without insisting that the past is the whole story. At the same time, the staggering amount of information available as well as the growing number of scandals involving corporate and political actors implies that a certain level of forgetting is always at play. In order to deal with new events, social actors need to forget (e.g., Blaschke & Schoeneborn, 2006). Thus, it is no surprise that new disclosures have long since overshadowed recent scandals such as the Volkswagen emission gate of 2015 or the Panama paper leaks of the same year. Collective forgetting – sometimes stimulated by deliberate organizational "forgetting work" (Mena, Rintamäki, Fleming, & Spicer, 2016) – and the immense power of the "now", thus, seem to help organizations in their evasive endeavors. Based on these observations, it may be argued that evasion is more likely to perform in the interest of the organization if it is practiced silently "under the radar". Interestingly, however, many organizations seem uncomfortable leaving the past to be forgotten all by itself. As a consequence, some organizations engage actively in re-narration.

3.2.4. Re-narration

Re-narration refers to attempts by organizations to mobilize and reedit their past in selective and self-flattery ways. Re-narration involves rearranging specific events and symbols of the past into an idealized picture that can be used as a resource to guide and justify current practices and future goals. This strategy may be applied in the ongoing renewal of the organization's identity or it may be used ad hoc as damage control in the wake of a crisis. Out of the immense complexity that constitutes the past, the organization selects those incidents that will support its present endeavors. At the same time, it is strengthening its path towards a future, chosen among an immense array of possibilities. Re-narration, thus, involves re-opening the past and closing the future. A common re-narration practice is the appeal to historical symbols or values of the organization's founder (e.g., Latour, 2013). By expressing veneration for respected leaders of the past, organizations seek to redirect and control the perception of their identities.

Updates and revisions of the past are normal activities in many organizations. This is not to suggest that organizations generally enact fictive Orwellian pasts; rather that re-narration is an essential dimension of legitimacy maintenance (Gioia, Schultz, & Corley, 2000; Schultz & Hernes, 2013). While some efforts to retell corporate stories and accounts pass unnoticed, perhaps because the adjustments are considered minor or uncontroversial or because the organization in question is unknown to the general public, other such efforts are highly contentious. Deliberate attempts by large corporations to re-narrate their past in order to conceal an irresponsible past can attract massive attention and charges of manipulation and hypocrisy. This may be the case, for example, when organizations try to shape updates on Wikipedia or seek to control the order in which their names appear in Google searches (Hafner, 2007). Even if the recycled ideals and values from the past appear self-evident and hard to reject, such blatant attempt to redefine the "true" core of the organization's identity and, thus, reconstrue "authenticity" are likely to be met with fierce resistance and critique.

As a particular hypocrisy practice aimed at retroactively editing the past in the interest of the present and the future, re-narration may not help organizations escape hypocrisy charges. Nestlé, whose reputation has been tainted since the milk powder scandal in Africa in the 1980s, has several times tried to reinterpret its history in light of a desired future. When severely critiqued in 2010 for its involvement in deforestation and big fires on degraded peatlands related to its sourcing of palm oil in Indonesia, the company posted the following response on its Facebook site: "We shared the deep concern about the serious environmental threat to rainforests and peat fields in South East Asia caused by the planting of palm oil plantations. The company recently announced its commitment to using 'Certified Sustainable Palm Oil' by 2015 when sufficient quantities should be available" (cited in Morsing, 2017: 407). Not surprisingly, however, these efforts were perceived by critics as yet another example of Nestlé's hypocritical stance on sustainability.

While such critique is understandable, given – especially – the controversial history of large corporations like Nestlé, it tends to retain such organizations in problematic roles from which there is little hope of development, let alone progress. Moreover, such approach to hypocrisy ignores what communication *might* do in stimulating better practices. The fact that many corporations seek to re-narrate their past indicates some awareness that change is called for and that organizational endeavors are being vigilantly observed by others. Current hypocrisy – that is, hypocrisy observed through the "now" – can be mobilized to perform in the interest of responsible practices, provided organizations are forced by regulators and other stakeholders to take their own words seriously. The provocation of stakeholder scrutiny and critique, thus, is another important precondition for CSR talk to perform. Thus, instead of rejecting all attempts to rewrite organizational history as unacceptable hypocrisy, a performative approach to such practice would entail utilizing the tension between what the organization was and what its claims to have been. In such tension are potential seeds of change.

4. Discussion

Hypocrisy charges usually represent moral judgements and stakeholder dissatisfaction with current talk-action relations. Such dissatisfaction is often warranted. Aspiration, deferment, evasion, and re-narration are all attempts to navigate tensions between past, present and future. Writings in the fields of CSR and sustainability tend to regard such attempts as manipulative (Fleming & Jones, 2013; Roberts, 2003). This may often be the case. At the same time, these hypocrisy practices illustrate the enormous complexity involved in stimulating and maintaining significant changes in areas such as responsibility and sustainability. When long-termism is called for, but judged through short-term lenses, and future-directed projects are rejected with reference to past behaviors, organizations are likely to embark on "communicative acrobatics" in order to re-establish some sort of coherence and consistency between their many different practices. The communicative challenge for organizations, as Ybema (2010: 497) points out, is to enact a more "sparkling future identity" that simultaneously represents "present-day concerns". Each of the four hypocrisy modes discussed in this paper involve such acrobatics, that is, attempts to solve a temporal tension between the "now" and some future or some past. Such tricks are likely to attract criticism. While organizations may generally hope to have inconsistencies between their talk and action judged in a long-term and future-directed perspective, because such perspective provides them with leeway for adjustments along the way, the insistence on action in the here and now illustrates a general distrust in corporations and their communication.

Although the preference for short-term thinking is understandable, demands for consistency in the here and now tend to disregard the performative role of communication in unfolding complex projects and exploring potentials for future ideals and projects. Several studies of

CSR communication have illustrated such role. Based on an in-depth study of the Royal Dutch/Shell Group, Livesey and Graham (2007) show how eco-talk can transform not only the perceptions, but also the practices of organizations, even when they are not fully living up to their own words. Shell's idealized aspirations about sustainable development, according to Livesey and Graham, served to force the company into dialogues with its critics and eventually revise its actions, something which also shaped the company's understanding of its own identity and its role in the ecological issue. Similarly, Girschik (2018) shows how CSR managers at Novo Nordisk, a global pharmaceutical company, served as "internal activists" by framing CSR practices in ways that generated new understandings among managers.

To most critics, such changes are likely to be regarded as too slow and too late (e.g., Ansari, Gray, & Wijen, 2011). Moreover, the talk involved may be seen as decoupled from substantial changes in organizational practices (Banerjee, 2008). Research has indicated, however, that policies intended at the outset to be purely symbolic *may* over time become more integrated or "recoupled" with organizational practices if they are used by stakeholders to apply pressure on the organizations in question (Bromley & Powell, 2012). While there is no guarantee that recoupling between talk and action will actually take place, hyperbolic organizational self-descriptions are likely to mobilize internal and external audiences to apply pressure for compliance (Lunheim, 2005). A study of organizational change in Oticon, a globally operating hearing aid company, demonstrates how employees literally communicated themselves into a new organizational structure as they responded to inquisitive external media that wanted to know more about the new organizational design (Kjærgaard, Morsing, & Ravasi, 2011). In their analysis of corporate responsibility standardization Haack et al. (2012) similarly illustrate that increased public scrutiny makes decoupling between words and action a transitory phenomenon because organizations talk themselves into "moral entrapment" and corrective measures. This is so, they claim, not only because external stakeholders enforce compliance, but also because the new way of talking shapes how management and other organizational members see themselves and their roles in a new light.

If we take a performative approach to hypocrisy, it is possible to argue that hypocrisy is "timely", as the title of this paper suggests, not only in the sense that it is time-dependent, but also in the sense that it might be appropriate under circumstances where complex changes are at play. Citing Reinhold Niebuhr to the view that hypocrisy is "an inevitable byproduct of all virtuous endeavour" March (2007: 1283) suggests that articulations of ideals might have social advantages because it raises collective expectations and defines a territory upon which different interests and interpretations can be expressed (see also Dunford & Palmer, 1998). Tolerance for lofty ideals, of course, is no guarantee for more virtuous organizational practices. Yet, if we accept the proposition that talk is able to *do* something beyond merely describing existing accomplishments (Austin, 1962; Foucault, 1977; Grant et al., 1998) then we might need to consider whether organizations should be allowed to articulate values they are not presently able to live up to.

At the end of the day, of course, we need to ask how much hypocrisy we can tolerate, in other words, how big differences we are willing to accept between organizational messages and current organizational behavior. And for how long. Moreover, if we add, as we have done in this paper, that hypocrisy has potential to perform beyond the immediate now, then we need to consider how stakeholders can utilize inconsistencies to apply pressure on organizations. While it can be tempting for stakeholders to insist that organizational talk always reflects organizational deeds, an alternative stakeholder approach to hypocrisy might look something like this: "We know that your past is less than glorious and we are ready to mobilize it against you if we do not find that you are moving in the right direction. We are also aware of problems in your current practices. However, we understand your need and desire to move beyond these limitations, so we are willing to accept what currently appears to be hypocrisy, *provided* you are prepared to document all the steps you take in the right direction, including the steps that do not lead straight to the expected results. In other words, we insist on being part of the journey and will hold you accountable all the way". The conditions for organizational talk to become action, accordingly, involves elements of participation (e.g., Deetz, 1992; see also Christensen et al., 2017) and processual transparency (Hood & Heald, 2006). Obviously, this also requires rather different practices on the part of organizations that need to be far more open and inclusive about the difficulties they encounter in living up to their own words. None of this is likely to be easy. The alternative, however, is problematic too. If organizations, out of fear of facing scathing hypocrisy charges, hold back in articulating higher ideals, there will be fewer to support the ideals and less inconsistency "material", so to speak, for stakeholders to work with (cf. Brunsson, 2003). The task for stakeholders, in other words, is to encourage organizations to speak out loud about their ideals and ambitions while honing their own abilities to leverage the inconsistencies at play to the benefit of the greater good.

Our performative approach to hypocrisy, in other words, is not only temporal but also relational, that is, dependent on dynamic interactions with stakeholders. Such approach raises important paths for future research in the context of CSR and beyond. First, longitudinal empirical studies may explore further the dynamics between talk and action within the four temporal modes of hypocrisy. For example, how are organizations over a long-term period able to navigate tensions between past and future in order to avoid long-term charges of hypocrisy? Second, other studies might investigate the optimal boundary conditions for corporate talk to become action, including a focus on the role of stakeholders and the use inconsistencies to drive change. Third, given that hypocrisy research tends to focus on inconsistencies between talk and action in the immediate present, while CSR action is usually long-term oriented, important opportunities exist for developing more precise conceptualizations of time. For example, how can we better understand the ways in which the past and the future play different but parallel roles when organizations seek to enact (or avoid) better practices? Finally, we suggest empirical research to look into how organizational design such as ownership structure or culture might shape public perceptions of and tolerance for hypocrisy in organizations. Is the ability of family-owned business to implement long-term thinking, for example, likely to generate more tolerance for current inconsistencies than hedge funds with their inclination towards short-term thinking?

5. Conclusion

In this paper we make two contributions to hypocrisy research. First, we call for an understanding of time and its role in shaping hypocrisy perceptions and relationships between talk and action. Instead of viewing time as a simple progression from past to present to future, we emphasize that time is always and inevitably perceived through what might be called an "eternal now", that is a now imbued with past memories and future plans. In this view, the past is not closed once and for all, but can be "re-opened" with new memories, just as the future can be "closed" with new plans. We refer to this more complex time perspective as a reflexive time.

Second, we develop an analytical framework that depicts four temporal modes of hypocrisy. Based on the reflexive time perspective, we consider hypocrisy modes along two dimensions: a long-term/short-term orientation and a past/present direction. Within this framework we describe the potential dynamics of hypocrisy and their time dependency. Specifically, we identify aspiration, deferment, evasion, and re-narration as four potential modes of organizational hypocrisy.

If we acknowledge that hypocrisy is as a normal and often unavoidable organizational practice, where words not only compensate for action, as Brunsson suggests, but have a performative force themselves, research need to reconsider what kind of hypocrisy is acceptable

– and perhaps even necessary – for CSR talk to stimulate better organizational practices. Such research must acknowledge that optimal relations between talk and actions are often uncertain, especially in an "opaque field" such as sustainability (Wijen, 2014) where causalities are hard to infer directly. At the same time, research must depart from common-sense understandings of hypocrisy and recognize that the notion of "living up" to ideals and promises is not well defined. Even if an organization manages to accomplish its set goals, critical stakeholders may desire further action, interpreting the goals in a broader and more demanding sense and thereby forcing the organization to articulate even higher goals. Responsibility and sustainability, in other words, are moving targets whose "reality status" (Adam, 2010) is constantly up for grasps. "Tolerance" for hypocrisy can, therefore, not be established once and for all, but requires ongoing analysis, debate and judgment. In this process, different audiences are likely to disagree fervently. For everybody involved, however, it is important to acknowledge that full consistency – and thus absence of hypocrisy – is possible only in very rare moments.

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