

5

Romantic Workplace Relationships

Workplace romance experiences are varied and unique—almost as varied as the people participating in such relationships. For many, like Sarah Kay and Matt Lacks, a workplace romance can grow to be a happy and lasting relationship. The couple met when both were employees at a New York area community center, and they quickly developed a romantic relationship after sharing lunch, stories, and interests with one another. They recently married (Rosenbloom, 2007). At the other extreme, a workplace romance can lead to disaster, such as the (in)famous case involving astronauts Lisa Nowak and William Oefelein. The two became romantically involved when they trained together in Houston. Oefelein eventually broke off the romance, sending Nowak into serious despair and depression. When Oefelein began dating another coworker, Colleen Shipman, Nowak became despondent and extremely jealous. She began harassing and stalking Shipman, in violation of a restraining order. The situation took a dangerous turn when Nowak, in disguise, drove 900 miles from her home in Houston to Orlando, approached Shipman in her parked car, and attempted to shoot Shipman with pepper spray. Arriving on the scene, police found a steel mallet, a knife, rubber tubing, \$600 in cash, and garbage bags in the bag Nowak was carrying. Nowak was charged with attempted kidnapping and attempted murder (“NASA Astronaut,” 2007). At the time of this writing, Nowak is awaiting trial.

Romantic relationships are among the most interesting, yet least understood, of all workplace relationships. As the stories above indicate, they can be incredibly rewarding and incredibly painful. Like workplace friendships (see Chapter 4), workplace romantic relationships transcend the boundary between private and public spheres. Like friendships, individuals blend their private and work lives in romantic relationships in unique ways. Like friendships, romantic relationships are voluntary and have a “personalistic” focus in which partners know and interact with one another as whole persons, not simply as work role occupants (Sias & Cahill, 1998). Romantic relationships differ from

friendships in a number of important ways, however. The difference between friendship and romance represents the difference between liking and loving, affection and passion, intimacy and arousal. While friendships have an emotional component that can, but does not necessarily, threaten rationality, romantic relationships incorporate emotion at a higher and more intense level. The emotional, as well as physiological, nature of romantic relationships leads practitioners to fear the repercussions of workplace romance and the development of policies to “manage” or even forbid these relationships (Quinn, 1977).

Workplace romance does not need to be feared, however. These relationships can be quite rewarding for the individuals involved as well as the work environment in which they exist. In this chapter, I discuss existing research on romantic workplace relationships, focusing on developmental processes, the “gray area” between romance and sexual harassment, consequences and outcomes of workplace romance, and workplace romance policy and law. As in other chapters, I also develop a research agenda for the future by conceptualizing romantic relationships from a variety of theoretical perspectives and provide a case study highlighting the practical implications of current research and alternative theoretical perspectives.

Overview

While philosophers and scholars have found defining love an exercise in futility, researchers do agree on a few defining characteristics of workplace romantic relationships. At a broad level, a workplace romantic relationship is any “relationship between two members of the same organization that entails mutual attraction” (Pierce, Byrne, & Aguinis, 1996, p. 6). At a deeper level, workplace romances incorporate both emotional and physiological components, including the following:

- (a) an intense, passionate desire to be in the presence of one’s romantic partner,
- (b) a shared, intimate exchange of personal disclosures, (c) affection and respect,
- (d) pleasant emotional states such as need satisfaction, happiness, and sexual gratification, and (e) physiological arousal and the desire for sexual acts such as kissing, petting, and intercourse with one’s partner. (Pierce et al., 1996, p. 6)

Thus, workplace romantic relationships are emotional, physiological, and consensual. It is important to note that the consensual nature of these relationships distinguishes workplace romance from sexual harassment. Because the focus of this chapter is on consensual romantic relationships, I do not review the vast literature on sexual harassment in the workplace. However, romance and sexual harassment are not always clear-cut and can overlap. Moreover, what begins as a romance sometimes devolves into harassment. Accordingly, I begin this chapter with discussion of the “gray area” between romance and harassment before discussing research in the area of workplace romantic relationships. This research is summarized in Table 5.1 below

^ = ^

0/e

Table 5.1 Summary of Workplace Romantic Relationship Research

The “Gray Area” Between Romance and Sexual Harassment

Social-Sexual Behaviors in the Workplace

- Flirting
- Quid pro quo
- Nonverbal (e.g., looks, glances, touch)
- Sexual language (e.g., comments, compliments, vulgarities)
- Confused communication (e.g., jokes, pet names)

Distinguishing Characteristics of Sexual Harassment Behavior

- Unwelcome
- Repetitive
- Severe

Romantic Workplace Relationship Development

Factors Influence Relationship Development

- Proximity (geographic, ongoing work requirement, occasional contact)
- Attitudinal similarity
- Employee attitudes toward workplace romance
- Job autonomy
- Organizational culture (“conservative” vs. “liberal”)
- Organizational climate (“cold” vs. “hot”)

Relationship Motives

- Job
- Ego
- Love

Relationship Types

- Fling
- Companionate
- Utilitarian

Communicating Romance

- Flirting
- Technology

Outcomes and Consequences

Impact on Coworkers

- Gossip
- Morale
- Jealousy
- Attributions of motives

Impact on Relationship Partners

- Attitudes and morale
 - Job satisfaction
 - Motivation
-

(Continued)

Table 5.1 (Continued)

-
- Behavior and performance
 - Productivity
 - Favoritism
 - Sexual harassment (after romance dissolves)

Workplace Romance Policy

Policy Characteristics

- Formality
- Organization vs. employee rights
- Unwritten rules

Employee Perceptions of Policy

- Fairness
 - Appropriateness
 - Severity
-

The “Gray Area” Between Romance and Sexual Harassment

Romantic communication and sexual harassment are both forms of social-sexual behavior (Pierce et al., 1996), which refers to “any non-work related behavior having a sexual component, including harassment, flirting and making sexual jokes” (Gutek, Cohen, & Konrad, 1990, p. 560). Social-sexual behavior is common in organizations. In fact, studies indicate the majority of employees report experiencing social-sexual behavior in the workplace (Burke & McKeen, 1992; Gutek et al., 1990). The intent of such behavior, however, is not always clear, and much research has focused on distinguishing between romantic communication and sexual harassment.

Some forms of sexual harassment are unmistakably clear (e.g., an explicit request for a sexual relationship in exchange for job-related rewards). Much social-sexual behavior, however, is unclear and ambiguous. What one person perceives as harmless fun another might perceive as harassing behavior. Flirting, for example, is defined by indirectness. The indirect nature of flirting renders it a “risky” behavior in that the target of the flirting may reject the overture and/or interpret the behavior as sexual harassment (Yelvington, 1996).

Markert (1999) organized various types of social-sexual behavior with respect to the extent to which the behavior is clearly sexual harassment, or more ambiguous and open to various interpretations. Relying on survey data, as well as sexual harassment case law, Markert argued that any “quid pro quo” behavior is clearly sexual harassment. Quid pro quo refers to requests for sexual favors in exchange for job security or enhancement, and case law identifies such behavior as sexual harassment. Moreover, 95% of the American public

also interprets quid pro quo behaviors as sexual harassment (Markert, 1999). Markert notes, however, that this clarity becomes somewhat murky depending on who is involved in the event. Specifically, situations in which the initiator is male and the target is female are most likely to be perceived as sexual harassment. Those involving female initiators and male targets are slightly less likely to be interpreted as sexual harassment. Finally, same-sex quid pro quo is even less likely to be interpreted as sexual harassment.

The overtness of the social-sexual behavior also helps individuals identify the thin line between romance and sexual harassment, with more overt acts more likely to be interpreted as sexual harassment (Markert, 1999). Overt forms of behavior include explicit comments like “Let me pet your sweater” or the use of frank, vulgar, and explicitly sexual language. Like quid pro quo situations, overt sexual behavior is interpreted as sexual harassment by 95% of the American public (Barr, 1993).

Behaviors less likely to be interpreted as sexual harassment include compliments, looks and glances, pet names, and “asking out.” There are gray areas within these behaviors, however, that make it more or less likely for them to be construed as harassing behaviors. Compliments, for example, tend to be acceptable unless they are overtly sexual. As Markert (1999) explains, “There is a difference between saying ‘That’s a nice dress, Jane’ and ‘Wow, Jane, that dress really turns me on’” (p. 42). Similarly, women are more likely than men to interpret looks and glances as sexually harassing. Finally, pet names vary in their appropriateness. Pet names that are not demeaning or overtly sexual tend to be perceived as appropriate. Asking a coworker out on a date is a necessary first step in developing a romantic workplace relationship. Thus, it is not typically seen as sexual harassment. Asking the same person out multiple times after being rejected, on the other hand, can be construed as harassment because the continued requests are perceived as pressure. Research suggests that women generally feel two refusals should be sufficient, and any requests after that constitute harassment (A. B. Fisher, 1993).

The murkiest area of social-sexual behaviors, according to Markert (1999), deals with “confused communication,” in particular, remarks about sexual performance and sexual joking. According to research, people are split in their opinions of remarks about sexual performance. A large number of people see another’s comments about their sexual life as inappropriate; many do not see such comments as sexual harassment. The line is crossed, however, when an individual makes comments about another employee’s sex life. Sexual jokes are also open to multiple interpretations, but as Markert (1999) points out, “The sexual nature of the joke is not the problem. It is the ‘butt’ of the joke that is more problematic” (p. 48). Thus, jokes that disparage or denigrate a particular gender are more likely to be interpreted as sexual harassment.

More recently, Robinson, Franklin, Tinney, Crow, and Hartman (2005) reviewed existing case law distinctions between sexual harassment and romantic

communication in the workplace. Their analysis revealed characteristics of social-sexual behavior that distinguish sexual harassment from nonharassing, romantic behavior. First, any social-sexual behavior that is *unwelcomed* by the target is sexual harassment. Moreover, to the extent that such unwelcome behavior is *severe* and *repetitive* and, consequently, constitutes a *“hostile”* work environment (i.e., the behavior interferes with target’s work performance, harms their psychological well-being, creates an abusive work environment, and/or is such that leaving the organization would be the most constructive decision for the target), such behavior constitutes sexual harassment.

Burke and McKeen (1992) also examined various types of social-sexual behavior in the workplace. Their analyses revealed three primary categories—complimentary looks and comments, negative looks and comments, and sexual harassment. Complimentary looks and comments included comments, looks, and gestures of a sexual nature that the receiver perceived as complimentary and positive. Negative looks and comments included comments, looks, and gestures the receiver perceived as “put downs.” Sexual harassment included being touched in a sexual way, being required to “go out” with a man or suffer negative job consequences, and being required to engage in sexual relations to avoid negative job consequences. Thus, in Burke and McKeen’s study, sexual harassment was distinguished from romantic behavior by sexual touch and quid pro quo requirements (e.g., sex for favors).

Solomon and Williams (1997) used an experimental design to identify variables that make it more likely that social-sexual behavior will be interpreted as sexual harassment rather than a romantic overture. Their results indicate messages that more explicitly convey sexual interest, that are initiated by supervisors, that are initiated by unattractive individuals, and that were directed toward attractive targets were more likely to be interpreted as sexual harassment than romantic overture. In addition, similar to other studies, female respondents were more likely than male respondents to interpret a social-sexual behavior as sexually harassing.

A recent survey by Kiser, Coley, Ford, and Moore (2006) found large agreement from respondents (75–100%) that the following behaviors constitute sexual harassment: sexual propositions, “brushing up,” crude jokes (including those sent via e-mail), sexist comments (including those sent via e-mail), inappropriate comments, e-mailing inappropriate pictures, passing around inappropriate pictures or cartoons, and displaying inappropriate pictures or calendars. In contrast, few respondents perceived casual touching as sexual harassment.

J. W. Lee and Guerrero (2001), however, examined the interpretation of “touch” in greater detail. Their study focused on types of touch used in cross-sex workplace relationships. Acknowledging that employees must walk a “thin line” (i.e., the gray area) when initiating a workplace romance, they note that touch is a particularly ambiguous form of communication. As they explained, touch has the potential to be interpreted as friendly, affectionate, flirtatious, controlling,

<rom>

) =)

I

inappropriate and/or harassing in the context of cross-sex relationships between coworkers” (p. 198). To more clearly identify that “thin line,” the authors examined employee perceptions of nine types of touch, ranging from shaking hands to face touching, by having participants watch a series of stimulus videos and rating the behavior they observed in the videos on a number of scales, including intimacy, positive affect, dominance, formality, composure, inappropriateness, and sexual harassment. Results reveal the complexity of the thin line between romance and harassment. Specifically, they found that face touch, and to a slightly lesser extent, placing an arm around another’s waist, were the most powerful forms of touch with respect to both romance (e.g., flirting, friendliness, affection) and sexual harassment and inappropriateness. As the authors note, “in some cases, face touch may send a positive message of intimacy and attraction. However, in other cases, face touch may be perceived as a flirtatious gesture signaling unwanted love and romantic attraction. In the latter case, perceptions of inappropriateness and sexual harassment are likely” (p. 214).

An important question, then, is what factors make the latter interpretation more or less likely. J. W. Lee and Guerrero’s (2001) study indicates the sex of the initiator may have some impact. Specifically, participants who watched videos in which the toucher was a male were more likely to interpret the touch as having romantic or sexual intentions such as flirting. In contrast, those who viewed videos in which the toucher was a woman were more likely to interpret the behavior as friendly, trusting, happy, and composed. Although there were no sex differences with respect to interpretations of sexual harassment, these findings suggest that men are perceived to be more sexual at work than women.

In sum, although social-sexual behavior is common in the workplace, those who engage in such behavior risk the possibility that it will be interpreted as harassing rather than romantic. The greatest risk occurs with messages that are overtly explicit, unwelcome, repeated a number of times, and initiated by males in positions of authority toward females in lower level hierarchical positions. Social-sexual behavior intended, and interpreted, as romantic rather than harassment represents the first step toward development of a romantic relationship. Developmental processes associated with workplace romance are discussed in the following section.

Workplace Romantic Relationship Development

Although men and women have likely engaged in romantic working relationships for centuries, scholars generally identify the mid-20th century as the “beginning” of workplace romance (Quinn, 1977). The increased number of women in the postwar workforce made workplace romance virtually inevitable. In the 1960s and 1970s, women’s rights movements resulted in even more gender diversity in organizations, with women taking positions in all types of

organizations at all levels (although, as noted in previous chapters, the number of women becomes drastically smaller moving up the organizational hierarchy). The increased presence of women led to increased interaction between men and women. This interaction occasionally leads to the development of a romantic relationship (Dillard, 1987). In fact, research indicates 75% to 85% of employees experience a romantic relationship at work, either as a participant or an observer (Pierce & Aguinis, 2003).

DEVELOPMENTAL FACTORS

Several scholars have attempted to identify various factors that impact the development of workplace romantic relationships. Much of this work conceptualizes the workplace environment as a type of “incubator” for romantic relationships. Studies, for example, highlight the role of proximity in romantic relationship development. Quinn (1977) identified three primary types of proximity that are associated with the development of romantic relationships. *Geographical proximity* refers to individuals being physically near one another via proximal work spaces or offices. *Ongoing work requirement proximity* refers to proximity resulting from employees working on joint projects, training workshops, business trips, and other requirements of the job that bring the individuals in close proximity to one another. *Occasional contact* refers to situations in which the individuals do not enjoy regular, patterned proximity via their work station locations or ongoing requirements of their job, but instead are brought into occasional contact with one another via such mechanisms as riding the elevator together or running into one another in other locations, such as a cafeteria, because they work in the same organization.

In a major review of research, Pierce et al. (1996) found a number of other empirical studies that revealed the important role of proximity in romantic relationship development. The authors point out that the repeated exposure individuals are provided by proximity enables them to gain information from one another and develop a liking and affection for one another. In particular, repeated exposure enables employees to determine whether they are similar to one another. Much research identifies *attitude similarity* as an important contributor to liking and eventually romance. Pierce et al. (1996) argue that such relationships are particularly likely to develop in organizations because organizations, via their hiring and selection processes, tend to attract and retain individuals with similar interests (e.g., occupation) and attitudes, and filter out those individuals who are dissimilar to the organization’s general population. Thus, they argue, the workplace is a natural environment, or “incubator,” for attraction.

The type of job an employee has can impact the likelihood that they will develop a romantic workplace relationship. Specifically, the more autonomous one’s job, the more likely one is to engage in workplace romance (Haavio-Mannila, Kauppinen-Toropainen, & Kandolin, 1988; Pierce & Aguinis, 2003).

Job autonomy, defined as “the ability to make decisions about one’s own work and the ‘freedom to move in the work environment and to make contacts with coworkers’” (Pierce et al., 1996, p. 17), essentially enables employees to create proximity and opportunities for exposure that enhance relational development.

The organizational culture can also enhance or hinder romantic relationship development. Mainiero (1989) found that “conservative” organizations, for example, those that were slow paced, conventional, and traditional, were more likely to discourage workplace romances via formal or informal policies than were “liberal” organizations, for example, those that were fast paced, action oriented, and dynamic (Pierce et al., 1996). Moreover, the fast-paced, dynamic environments of “liberal” organizations “often contain an atmosphere of intense pressure and activity that stimulates sexual excitement” (Pierce et al., 1996, p. 16).

Similarly, Mano and Gabriel (2006) examined workplace romance in “hot” and “cold” organizational climates. Cold organizational climates are characterized by impersonal, formal organizational structures. Grounded in bureaucratic principles, such climates are designed to “exclude human feeling and emotion from mainstream organizational activities, focusing instead on instrumental, task-related relationships” (Mano & Gabriel, 2006, p. 10). Hot climates, in contrast, “involve an ‘aestheticization’ of labour that puts employees ‘on display’ with respect to their physical appearance.” As Mano and Gabriel (2006) note, industries such as tourism and advertising tend to have a “sexual simmer” about them, sexualizing employees and the workplace itself. By gathering stories of romance from individuals in different types of organizational climates, Mano and Gabriel (2006) found that those in “hot” climates told more stories of romance, with more passion, and indicated a more hospitable environment for romance than did those in “cold” climates. Employees in cold climates, instead, told stories of the rare romance and employees’ attempts to keep the relationship a secret.

Finally, studies indicate that an individual’s attitude toward workplace romance is associated with the likelihood that she or he will engage in a romantic relationship at work. Haavio-Mannila et al. (1988) found that people who had positive attitudes toward flirting in the workplace were more likely to engage in a romantic workplace relationship.

In sum, a number of factors influence the initiation and development of romantic workplace relationships. Such relationships are more likely to emerge in work environments that encourage and provide multiple opportunities for interaction via physical proximity, shared tasks, and the like, and that tend to be fast paced, exciting, and high energy or “hot” climates. Individuals with positive attitudes toward romance and flirting in the workplace are also more likely to engage in romantic relationships themselves. Not all romantic relationships are alike, however, and different relationships emerge and evolve for different reasons. The following section addresses distinct types of romantic relationships, driven by varying motives on the parts of the romantic partners.

RELATIONSHIP MOTIVES AND TYPES

As with any type of relationship, all romantic workplace relationships are not alike. Researchers have identified a variety of romantic relationship types by examining the partners' motives for engaging the relationship. Quinn (1977) was the first to empirically address these issues. Via qualitative and quantitative studies, he identified three primary motives for participating in a romantic relationship. The *job motive* refers to instances in which individuals engage in a romantic relationship for purposes of job advancement and security, financial rewards such as promotions and bonuses, increased power, and easier or more efficient tasks. *Ego motives* reflect the desire for excitement, adventure, and ego gratification. *Love motives* reflect sincere affection, love, respect, and companionship. Employees motivated by love seek a long-term commitment from the romance.

According to Quinn's (1977) study, women and men differed with respect to their motives, and the varying combination of motives resulted in three different types of workplace romantic relationships. The *fling* represents a relationship in which both the male and female partners seek ego gratification and adventure (i.e., ego motives). *Companionate love* refers to relationships in which both partners engage in the romance for love motives and a sincere desire for long-term commitment. The *utilitarian* relationship refers to relationships in which the male partner seeks ego gratification and the female partner engages in the romance for job motives or a desire to improve her position and financial situation. This relationship represents the "sleeping up the ladder" stereotype that has persisted over the years.

It should be noted that Quinn's research was conducted nearly three decades ago, and these findings are quite dated. In a somewhat more recent study, Anderson and Fisher (1991) found little evidence that women entered romantic workplace relationships for job motives. Interestingly, however, Powell (2001) found that observers of workplace romantic relationships were more likely to perceive job motives in hierarchical romances (i.e., relationships between individuals at different hierarchical levels) when the lower-level participant was female instead of male. Thus, despite evidence from the participants' perspective that women are no more likely to engage in workplace romance for job motives than are men, perceptions of observers appear to retain the stereotype. Coworkers' perspectives of workplace romance are addressed in more detail later in this chapter when I discuss research on consequences of romantic relationships at work.

COMMUNICATING ROMANCE

Many scholars have examined the role of communication in romantic relationships. These studies, either explicitly or implicitly, assume a social construction notion of relationships; that is, they assume relationships are created

and maintained via communication patterns. This research focuses primarily on flirting, banter, nonverbal communication, and communication technology.

Flirting refers to “indirect behaviour designed to communicate a possible sexual interest in another individual, as well as to inquire through this indirection, as to the other’s possible interest” (Yelvington, 1996, p. 314). Scholars note a few defining characteristics of flirting. First, it is romantic and sexual (Yelvington, 1996). Second, it is an indirect behavior characterized by hints and innuendo. Third, because it is indirect, it also ambiguous and uncertain—the target of the flirting may interpret the message in a number of different ways (Henningsen, 2004). Fourth, despite the fact that flirting involves indirect communication, it is nonetheless directive, not ambient, in that the behavior is directed toward a specific target. Fifth, flirting is a risk-taking behavior (Yelvington, 1996). Risks of flirting include both possible misinterpretation (e.g., a romantic gesture interpreted as sexual harassment) and rejection (i.e., the romantic interest is not reciprocated). Flirting, therefore, is usually the first step in the development of a romantic relationship.

A recent study examined communication among romantic relationship partners via workplace e-mail technology (Hovick, Meyers, & Timmerman, 2003). Analyses yielded a number of interesting results. First, employees involved in ongoing workplace romantic relationships relied on e-mail more than any other communication medium, including face to face, to communicate with one another at work. They used e-mail primarily to ask their relationship partner work- and non-work-related questions, engage in small talk, and for flirting and expressing intimacy. In contrast, employees reported using e-mail only rarely to *initiate* a romantic relationship, to obtain information about their partner, and to engage in conflict. These results indicate that face-to-face interaction, including face-to-face flirting, may be important for initiating a romantic relationship, and e-mail may be less effective in the early stages of a romance. As the romance develops, e-mail appears to be important for maintaining the relationship.

As seen above, we have developed an understanding of why individuals engage in workplace romantic relationships. Research also provides some insight into how employees communicate interest in one another. We know little, however, about how workplace romantic relationships actually develop, are maintained, and are eventually terminated over time. These issues will be discussed in greater detail in the later section of this chapter. For now, we turn to discussion of the consequences of workplace romance.

Outcomes and Consequences of Workplace Romantic Relationships

Generally, scholars and practitioners have assumed that allowing workplace romance would be harmful to the organization. This likely stems from the

classical management school of thought that emotion has no useful place in organizational processes (e.g., Fayol, 1949; Weber, 1946). While many studies have demonstrated the negative impact of romantic relationships, research also suggests such relationships can have positive impact, not only on the employees involved in the relationship, but also on the larger work environment.

IMPACT ON COWORKERS

Perhaps the greatest amount of research attention in this area has focused not on the individuals involved in the relationships, but on their coworkers. Specifically, studies have examined how coworkers interpret and make attributions about the romantic relationships of other employees. Despite efforts on the part of the romantic partners to hide their relationship, workgroup members tend to know when their coworkers are romantically involved (Quinn & Lees, 1984). The relationship then becomes a subject of gossip for the rest of the employees (Michelson & Mouly, 2000; Quinn, 1977). The tone of this gossip is, to some extent, dependent on the perceived motives of the participants in the romance. In general, situations in which the female partner is perceived to have engaged in the romance for job motives tend to generate negative gossip, while romances in which the male partner is perceived to have been motivated by love tend to generate more positive gossip (Dillard, 1987).

In addition to, and perhaps because of, employee gossip regarding the romantic relationship, these relationships can impact coworkers' morale and attitudes. In some cases, the romance can improve workgroup morale by providing an "uplifting" and happier work environment and creating an exciting "sexual electricity" (Horn & Horn, 1982; Smith, 1988). In other cases, the romance can have a negative impact on morale. Hierarchical romances, in particular, tend to have a more negative impact on the workgroup due to jealousy and suspicions of favoritism. As Pierce et al. (1996) explain, "Basically, members of the workgroup perceive organizational injustice as the result of boss-subordinate romances, thereby lowering morale at work" (p. 20). Similarly, Werbel and Hames (1996) found that employees reported negative attitudes regarding married couples in the workplace. These negative attitudes centered on disruption of group processes and concerns regarding favoritism. Their analysis revealed that men, supervisors, and employees in small firms were most likely to hold these negative attitudes.

Pierce, Broberg, McClure, and Aguinis (2004) examined how various characteristics of a *dissolved* workplace romantic relationship that led to harassment impact how others judge the harasser and make decisions about personnel actions. Results indicated several factors impact observers' decisions regarding appropriate personnel decisions, ranging from recommending no action be taken to support and counseling to disciplinary action. Specifically, situations involving a direct supervisor-subordinate reporting relationship, situations in which the accused (in this experiment, a male supervisor) was

deemed responsible, and situations representing “utilitarian,” rather than companionate or fling, relationships were perceived as deserving harsher personnel decisions than indirect reporting relationships, situations in which the accuser/complainant was deemed responsible, and situations involving companionate or fling relationships. The Pierce et al. (2004) experiments also examined how observers judge the morality of the sexual harassment. Observers were likely to judge the behavior as immoral when the dissolved romantic relationship was an extramarital relationship, when the behavior represented quid pro quo rather than a hostile environment or sexual harassment, and when the situation occurred in an organization with an explicit policy prohibiting workplace romantic relationships.

Jones (1999) examined coworker perceptions of hierarchical workplace romance (i.e., between a supervisor and subordinate employee). Using hypothetical scenarios, the author manipulated several variables to assess employee perceptions regarding the appropriateness of, attitudes toward, and consequences of the workplace romance. The manipulated variables included sex of the supervisor and the marital status of both parties involved in the relationship. Results indicated that respondents reacted more negatively when one or both of the partners were married. In addition, respondents were more likely to attribute blame to the supervisor rather than the subordinate employee. Finally, respondents were far more likely to attribute ego motives than love motives to the couple, especially when the supervisor was a male. Female supervisors were more likely than male supervisors to be perceived as having entered the relationship for love. Overall, however, the respondents in the Jones (1999) study were unlikely to perceive the romantic relationship as one of love, rather than ego gratification and excitement. Using a similar method, Powell (2001) examined coworker attitudes and responses toward hierarchical romance. Consistent with Jones (1999), respondents held the most negative attitudes toward relationships in which the supervisor was male and the subordinate employee was female, and were more likely to attribute a “job” motive to the female subordinate than either ego or love. These findings again confirm the persistence of the “sleeping up the ladder” stereotype.

In sum, existing research shows that a workplace romance has ramifications beyond the relationship itself. It impacts others in the workplace by generating gossip and impacting attitudes toward the relationship partners and toward the organization as whole.

IMPACT ON THE RELATIONSHIP PARTNERS

Of course, a romantic workplace relationship affects not only observers of that relationship, but also the partners directly involved in the romance. Research in this area focuses primarily on how a workplace romance impacts the partners’ attitudes, performance, and careers.

Attitudes and Morale

A workplace romantic relationship can have both positive and negative impacts on the participants' attitudes and morale. Certainly the relationship creates a happier environment for the partners who look forward to being near ~~their partner~~ at work. Thus, engaging in a romance can improve the participants' job satisfaction (Pierce et al., 1996). In addition, participating in a workplace romance can improve an employee's motivation (Dillard & Broetzman, 1989; Mainiero, 1989). This is likely because individuals engaged in a romance tend to feel better about themselves and show a willingness to work longer hours to be with their partner (Pierce et al., 1996). It also may result from a concern about coworker perceptions such that the partners wish to prove to others that their relationship will not affect their performance. Pierce et al. (1996) point out, however, that the impact on participant attitudes depends, in part, on the quality of the relationship itself. To the extent that an individual is unsatisfied or unhappy with the relationship, that relationship is likely to harm, not improve, job satisfaction and motivation. In addition, the attitudes of the partners' coworkers are also an important moderator of these links. If the coworkers engage in negative gossip and ostracize or otherwise "punish" the partners, the difficulties of working in such an environment may decrease participants' satisfaction, morale, and motivation.

each other

3

Behavior and Performance

Similar to research on participants' attitudes, studies indicate that engaging in a workplace romance can have positive and negative effects on employee behavior and task performance. In one of the earliest studies on this topic, Quinn (1977) found that participating in a romantic relationship resulted in a variety of behavior and performance changes for the partners, including preoccupation, becoming more productive, becoming less productive, showing favoritism to the other, and protecting one another in a variety of ways. The relationship type may moderate the link between romantic relationships and productivity. Specifically, hierarchical romances tend to impede productivity more than lateral relationships (Devine & Markiewicz, 1990). In addition, hierarchical romances are more likely to impede the productivity of others in the group given that the supervisor involved may be distracted and/or favoring his or her romantic partner. Dillard (1987) found that individuals who engaged in a romantic relationship for love motives tended to show an increase in productivity, in contrast to those motivated by job or ego, who showed no change in productivity.

All of the research discussed so far has examined the impact of "intact" romantic relationships on the participants and their coworkers. Pierce and his colleagues have pursued an interesting line of research regarding the impact of *dissolved* workplace romantic relationships, focusing on how and why dissolved workplace romances sometimes devolve into sexual harassment—issues that are

consequences discussed above, such as favoritism, decreased productivity, and sexual harassment claims. In this section, I discuss the types and effectiveness of such policies.

PRIVATE RIGHTS IN PUBLIC SETTINGS

Formal workplace romance policies vary from very strict comprehensive policies forbidding dating among all employees, to those forbidding romantic relationships only between supervisors and subordinates, to simple lenient policies that only request employees notify management if they become involved in a workplace romantic relationship (Wilson, Filosa, & Fennel, 2003). In addition, many organizations forego implementing a formal policy and rely, instead, on “unwritten rules” that employees are assumed to know and respect.

Much research on workplace romance policy addresses the tensions between individuals’ personal rights and responsibilities in public settings such as organizations. Essentially, case law and the policies the law informs focus on delineating the point at which an organization’s necessities outweigh the employee’s right to engage in a workplace romance. Dworkin (1997) noted that the employer’s ability to control employee behavior such as smoking and dating has increased over the years and recommended that courts (and organizations) adopt a “reasonable business necessity standard” in designing, and assessing, workplace romance policies. Along these lines, Paul and Townsend (1998) recommend organizations only get involved in workplace romantic relationships if they are shown to impair job performance.

More recently, Wilson et al. (2003) reviewed case law and concluded that “in many, if not most instances, the employer’s legitimate business interests in maintaining a peaceful and productive work environment and avoiding liability outweigh an employee’s right to privacy. This has proved to be especially true in the context of an employment relationship in the private sector” (p. 87). Thus, Wilson et al. (2003) recommend organizational policies that are reasonable and do not unduly intrude on the employees’ private lives. They also recommend forbidding only supervisor–subordinate romantic relationships, as these are the ones most likely to motivate legal action.

PERCEPTIONS OF POLICIES

While the above studies provide analysis and description of laws and policies governing workplace romantic relationships, other scholars have examined how employees and employers feel about those laws and policies. Having a formal policy in place does not necessarily mean employees will agree with, and abide by, the policy. Researchers have examined employee attitudes toward workplace romance policies, specifically with respect to the perceived fairness and appropriateness of those policies.

Foley and Powell (1999) developed a model of how and why coworkers of employees engaged in a romantic relationship react toward management intervention in that relationship (e.g., interventions ranging in severity and intrusiveness from punitive action such as termination to no action at all). According to the model, coworkers are more likely to prefer punitive intervention when the workplace romance creates a conflict of interest, disrupts work procedures, involves a relationship in which one partner directly reports to the other, when the relationship is perceived as a “utilitarian” relationship, when one of the partners in the relationship is married, when the coworker has a negative attitude toward workplace romance in general, and when the coworkers work in a “conservative” versus “liberal” work environment. In a subsequent study testing some of the model’s propositions, Powell (2001) found that employees prefer both punitive and positive (e.g., advice giving, counseling) interventions in cases involving supervisor–subordinate romances. Results of that study also indicated employee concerns that such relationships create disruption in work processes.

Finally, in an interesting critical study, Schultz (2003) argued that as a byproduct of sexual harassment lawsuits, courts have unduly encouraged the “sanitization” or “de-sexualization” of the workplace. Taking a critical stance on sexual harassment law, Schultz argued that such laws reflect the bureaucratic notion that emotion does not belong in the workplace and that rationality is the only appropriate organizational system. This “dehumanizing” of organizations created an emotionless, and therefore “sexless,” workplace. Sexual harassment law is grounded in this rational approach, and many courts and, consequently, organizations have implemented “zero tolerance” policies for sexual harassment that function to drive all sexual behavior (welcome or not) out of the workplace and essentially “policing sex” in employees’ private lives. Instead, Schultz argues, “we should question the idea that workplace sexual conduct always constitutes harassment, and become more open-minded about the presence and uses of sexuality at work” (p. 2168). In addition, organizations and practitioners should place their focus back on the original root of sexual harassment law—that of discrimination and gender inequities at work. As she explains,

The most crucial step, therefore, is to create incentives for organizations to fully integrate their workforces, rather than simply desexualizing their environments, as a means of complying with sex harassment law. The theoretical justification for doing so is straightforward. In an ideal world, the goal would be to put women in a position of complete equality in fully integrated work settings, so that they would have equal power to shape the environments and cultures in which they work to their own liking. In such a world, even if some women ended up working in environments that included a lot of sexual conduct and expression, we would be comfortable concluding that the presence of such conduct was not itself a product of sex discrimination. Of course, even in such egalitarian environments, sexual conduct—like any other form of conduct—might still be used as a weapon of sex discrimination against individual women or men, so we would still need to protect

W
≡

individuals from harassment directed at them because of their sex. But, by definition, we would not equate the mere presence of sexual conduct with sex discrimination. (p. 2174)

In sum, despite their ubiquitous nature, workplace romantic relationships have received relatively little research attention. Similar to workplace friendships, romantic relationships are not part of an organization's formal structure and are not formally sanctioned or mandated by management. They do, however, flourish in all types of organizations, at all hierarchical levels, and in all occupations. Moreover, they are relationships of consequence for employees and for the organizations in which the romances are embedded. Concerns about such consequences have led many organizations to implement formal policies governing workplace romance.

Extant research provides insights into the distinctions between workplace romance and sexual harassment (e.g., Markert, 1999), primary types of workplace romances (e.g., Quinn, 1977), employees' motives for engaging in workplace romance (Quinn, 1977), factors associated with the development of workplace romantic relationships (e.g., Mano & Gabriel, 2006), consequences and outcomes of workplace romance (e.g., Pierce et al., 2000), and development and responses to organizational workplace romance policies (e.g., Wilson et al., 2003).

Theoretical Perspectives on Workplace Romantic Relationships

Relative to the relationships discussed in previous chapters, our understanding of workplace romance is substantially underdeveloped. Much about these relationships is unknown. Similar to the research regarding other types of workplace relationships, workplace romantic relationship research is primarily guided by the postpositivist perspective and our knowledge. Our body of knowledge regarding these relationships can be greatly enriched by considering and studying them from multiple theoretical perspectives. The remainder of this chapter develops a research agenda for the future designed to address current voids in the literature. Table 5.2 summarizes these research directions.

POSTPOSITIVIST PERSPECTIVE

Postpositivism underlies the vast majority of workplace romantic relationship research. Most studies rely, for example, on self-report survey data to test hypotheses and examine research questions. Data obtained via these methods indicate the "reality" of workplace romance. And like research on other types of workplace relationships, the nature of the data results in analyses

Table 5.2 Theoretical Perspectives on Romantic Workplace Relationships

	<i>Postpositivism</i>	<i>Social Construction</i>	<i>Critical Theory</i>	<i>Structuration Theory</i>
Conceptualization of organizations	Real entities that exist beyond human perception “Contain” individuals Indicated by attitudes, behavior	Socially constructed Constituted in social practices Dynamic	Socially constructed Constituted in social practices Dynamic Systems of power, domination, and control	Socially constructed Constituted in social practices Dynamic Patterned social practices of organizational members across social systems
Conceptualization of communication	Occurs “inside” the relationship Indicates nature and status of the relationship	Constitutes social reality Constitutes relationships; as communication changes, so does the relationship	Constitutes social reality Constitutes relationships Essentializes and reifies organizational “realities” and relationships	Constitutes society and social systems Enables, produces, and reproduces structure Enabled and constrained by structure
Conceptualization of relationships	Real entities that exist beyond human perception “Contain” individuals Indicated by attitudes, communication behavior Predictive of outcomes (e.g., satisfaction, productivity, commitment) Influenced by physical environment	Socially constructed Exist in interaction Observable in interaction	Socially constructed Sites of power, domination, marginalization Sites of hegemonic, unobtrusive control	Socially constructed Constrained and enabled by structure

(Continued)

Table 5.2 (Continued)

	<i>Postpositivism</i>	<i>Social Construction</i>	<i>Critical Theory</i>	<i>Structuration Theory</i>
Research goals	Measuring indicators of relationship quality and status Predicting outcomes of relationships	Understanding social construction process Understanding relationship development dynamics	Understanding social construction of power, marginalization, reification, consent, domination, universalism of managerial interests and rationality	Understanding production, reproduction, and institutionalization of relationships
Sample research topics/questions		How do employees communicatively construct and transform the work relationship into a romantic relationship? How do employees communicatively dissolve a romantic relationship? How do coworker observers of a romantic relationship socially construct that relationship?	What discursive processes contribute to the reification of the "sleeping up the ladder" gender stereotype? How do gendered discursive processes regarding romantic workplace relationships disempower women? What discursive structures hinder the voluntary nature of workplace romantic relationships?	What structures constrain/enable workplace romantic relationships? What structures enable/constrain romantic and sexually harassing communication? What structures enable/constrain coworkers' interpretations of a romantic relationship?

<i>Postpositivism</i>	<i>Social Construction</i>	<i>Critical Theory</i>	<i>Structuration Theory</i>
Sample research topics/questions (continued)	<p>How do employees socially construct same-sex romantic relationships?</p> <p>How coworker observers of a same-sex romantic relationship socially construct that relationship?</p> <p>How does a romantic relationship transform the relationships of the romantic partners with other coworkers?</p> <p>How do employees socially construct formal organizational policies governing workplace romance?</p> <p>How do employees socially construct “unwritten rules” governing workplace romance?</p>	<p>How does participation in a workplace romance (dis)empower employees?</p> <p>How does participation in romantic relationships reflect emotional versus rational reasoning processes?</p> <p>How does the “desexualization” of the workplace via organizational policies marginalize women?</p>	<p>How do “unwritten rules” (structures) guiding workplace romance become institutionalized via employee communication?</p> <p>What workplace romantic relationship structures span time and social context?</p> <p>How do workplace romantic relationship structures become institutionalized across time and space?</p> <p>How do the media and popular culture contribute to the institutionalization of workplace romantic relationship structures?</p>

based primarily on correlation analyses (e.g., correlations, regressions, and analyses of variance). While such analyses identify associations between variables, they cannot provide insights into what direction and why the variables are associated.

The postpositivist naturalist principle is also illustrated in the many studies that rely on cross-sectional, rather than longitudinal, data to obtain an assessment or “snapshot” of the relationship at that single point in time. This method, at least implicitly, conceptualizes workplace romantic relationships as static and limits our understanding of relational change and dynamism. For example, many studies designed to identify the “gray area” between romantic behavior and sexual harassment rely on experimental methods in which one or more independent variables are manipulated in hypothetical scenarios and vignettes, and their association with various dependent variables are measured. Independent variables include such factors as the sex, marital status, and hierarchical rank of the vignette characters who typically exhibit, in the scenarios, a behavior such as touching, joking, or flirting. Study participants then rate that behavior as to its appropriateness, clarity, and the extent to which it is harassing versus romantic behavior. Such methods provide “indicators” of the reality of workplace romance at that particular point in time. While such insights are valuable, the discussion of literature above reveals we know almost nothing about the *dynamics* of such behavior. Flirting, for example, occurs in a dyadic conversation. In conversation, each statement made is dependent upon, and responsive to, the statement that precedes it. Analysis of romantic behavior (both verbal and nonverbal) from a more dynamic perspective could reveal insights into how partners together construct the behavior and the types of statements that lead the behavior toward or away from harassment. Reliance on postpositivism has also prevented understanding of developmental processes associated with workplace romantic relationships, beyond individuals’ motives for engaging the relationship and how the work environment (e.g., proximity) impacts the likelihood of romance. We also know nothing about how and why romantic relationships deteriorate, or the ebb and flow of these relationships with respect to quality, emotion, and other relational dynamics.

In sum, existing research on workplace romantic relationships provides insights into a variety of important issues such as identifying the “gray area” between romance and sexual harassment, employee motives for engaging in workplace romance, and the various types of workplace romantic relationships. Research has also identified a number of factors that encourage the initiation of workplace romance such as physical proximity, repeated exposure, and similarity. Finally, extant work has revealed a number of positive and negative consequences of workplace romance for the relationship partners, their coworkers, and the organization in which such relationships exist. There is much we do not know about workplace romantic relationships,

however, due to the fact that the substantial postpositivist bias of this research has constrained our conceptualizations and approaches to the study of these entities. As detailed below, we can greatly expand our knowledge by conceptualizing, and studying, workplace romantic relationships from other theoretical perspectives.

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION PERSPECTIVE

Applying social construction concepts to workplace relationships directs our attention to a variety of processes and issues ignored by the postpositivist perspective. As a social reality, social construction theory conceptualizes organizations, and workplace romantic relationships, as socially constructed entities constituted in member interaction. A romantic relationship exists in the partners' communication with one another; it does not exist outside their interaction. Consequently, and again in contrast to postpositivism, employee behavior does not simply indicate the relationship; it constitutes the relationship, and therefore, the relationship is directly observable in the partners' communication.

Social construction's dynamic conceptualization of social reality turns research attention toward process-related issues such as the processes of creating, maintaining, and changing social reality. The social construction perspective could be particularly valuable in enriching workplace romantic relationship research by providing insights into the socially constructed nature of such relationships. For example, although evidence indicates factors such as physical proximity and repeated exposure affect workplace romance initiation, we know nothing about the nature of that initiation and, in particular, how employees communicatively construct, and transform, their coworker relationship into a workplace romance.

Similarly, to date, researchers have not examined how and why romantic relationships deteriorate. Research grounded in social construction theory would contribute greatly to the literature by revealing the communicative processes by which employees disengage from a workplace romance. Especially important is identifying processes that accomplish the dissolution of the romance while also enabling the former partners to continue to work together effectively. Such studies could be accomplished using methods similar to those examining workplace friendship developmental processes (e.g., Sias & Cahill, 1998; Sias et al., 2004; see also Chapter 4 of this volume). These studies used the retrospective interview technique (RIT) to obtain participants' narrative histories of their workplace relationships. The method involves asking participants to trace their relationship history as it changed at important turning points or points at which the relationship substantively transformed. The RIT could be used similarly to examine developmental

processes in romantic relationships by obtaining information from employees regarding why they engaged in the romantic relationship and how they communicatively transformed the relationship from coworkers to romance. Scholars could use the same method to obtain information regarding romantic relationship deterioration. Such events are likely to be somewhat traumatic and, consequently, memorable; thus, respondents may be able to provide rich and vivid narrative accounts of those processes, in particular focusing on how they and their partner communicatively withdrew or disengaged from the romantic relationship.

As noted earlier in this chapter, much research suggests that the partners' coworkers are aware of the workplace romance and form perceptions about the relationship. These perceptions have consequences for employee morale, productivity, and how the coworkers treat the romantic partners. To date, while we know coworkers form perceptions about the romance (e.g., attribute motives to the partners, develop perceptions that the romance is hurting employee job performance, etc.), we know nothing about *how* those perceptions are formed. Research grounded in the social construction perspective could identify the social processes by which employees together socially construct perceptions of a workplace romantic relationship via conversation. Analysis of such interaction would provide useful insights into how and why employees make particular attributions regarding the motives of the romantic partners, and how they come to believe performance is impaired or improved. The joint conversation reconstruction (JCR) method described in Chapter 3 enables such data collection and analysis (see also Sias & Odden, 1996).

Although previous research indicates romantic workplace relationships impact coworkers' perceptions, morale, and productivity, no studies have examined how the romantic relationship might impact the relationships the romantic partners have with the other coworkers. Extant work (Sias & Jablin, 1995) suggests that workplace relationships do not exist in isolation from one another, but the relationship an employee has with one coworker (e.g., his or her supervisor) can affect the relationship(s) that employee has with other coworkers (e.g., peer coworkers). It is quite likely that once an individual becomes involved in a romantic relationship at work, that relationship will affect his or her relationships with coworkers. If, for example, the employee develops a romance with his or her supervisor, the employee's peers may suspect favoritism and begin to distrust and withdraw from their relationships with that employee. Social construction research would provide important insights into the processes by which these relational transformations occur.

As noted in an earlier section, many organizations implement formal policies governing workplace romance. Researchers have examined how employees respond to and interpret those policies, yet we know nothing about how employees socially construct the policies and their perceptions of the policies. Similarly,

many organizations forego formal policies and rely on informal “unwritten rules.” Scholars should examine the ways in which employees construct those unwritten rules and norms via their informal communication with one another.

Finally, existing research has centered on heterosexual romance in the workplace. We know virtually nothing about the processes associated with homosexual romantic relationships at work. Social construction research can make several important contributions to the literature. Given the difficulties and risks associated with “coming out” in the workplace, scholars should examine how employees socially construct same-sex romantic relationships at work. A social construction perspective would also enable study of how coworker observers of a homosexual romantic relationship socially construct that relationship with one another, to reveal their attributions and perceptions regarding the relationship.

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

As noted in earlier chapters, critical studies of organizations center on four main themes—reification, consent, the managerial bias, and technical rationality (Deetz, 2005). Considering these issues as they may apply to workplace romantic relationships suggests a number of interesting and important research projects.

Critical studies of reification examine the social processes and discursive practices that constitute organizational structures and processes as normal and natural, making alternative structures and processes appear abnormal and unnatural. As noted above, a variety of studies examining various workplace romance issues consistently indicate that women are perceived as more likely than men to engage in workplace romantic relationships for job-related, rather than love, motives (e.g., Powell, 2001). These results have been consistent over three decades of research and suggest a persistent reified stereotype, despite other research that indicates women are just as likely as men to be motivated by love or ego. Critical research should examine the discursive practices that construct and maintain this perception.

Similar to workplace friendships, the “voluntary” nature of workplace romantic relationships makes the issue of consent particularly relevant. Although romantic relationships are chosen, not mandated, a number of factors impact the initiation and development of these relationships, such as proximity and repeated exposure. Scholars should question the extent to which workplace romance is indeed voluntary and examine the social processes that may limit the “voluntariness” of romance and the extent to which employees are actually able to choose to engage in a workplace romance.

Relatedly, while researchers have identified individuals’ motives for engaging in workplace romance, the actual functions of these relationships remain

unexamined. Studies indicate, for example, that individuals sometimes initiate romantic relationships at work to improve their jobs in some way and to acquire power. Critical studies should investigate how such relationships do, or do not, imbue the partners with power, how the relationships impact the power structure of the work environment, how the power accrued to the romantic partners may constitute the disempowerment of others in the workplace, and the like. In other words, while we know some employees engage in romance to accrue power and influence, we have not interrogated issues of power in workplace romance in any deep and critical fashion.

The highly emotional component of workplace romance makes research in the area of technical rationality particularly relevant. One of the defining characteristics of a romantic workplace relationship is its emotional and passionate nature. Emotion and passion are considered as antithetical to rationality (Mumby & Putnam, 1992). This is why, of course, many organizations formulate policies forbidding romance in the workplace (Schultz, 2003). Critical research can lend important insights into emotion and rationality in key organizational processes such as the ways in which romance impacts (either positively or negatively) the rationality of employee decision making. Moreover, research should build on Schultz's (2003) argument that removal of sexuality from the workplace via workplace romance policies effectively "desexualizes" organizations by examining questions such as how the "desexualizing" occurs and which employees tend to be marginalized and disempowered by these processes.

STRUCTURATION PERSPECTIVE

Workplace romantic relationship research centered on the primary components of structuration theory would lend a number of important and interesting insights to the current body of literature. Central to structuration theory is duality of structure, or the reciprocal relationship between agency (human behavior) and structure (rules and resources that guide and constrain human behavior). Considering romantic relationships from this perspective, scholars could examine how romantic partners produce and reproduce the structures that simultaneously enable and constrain their interaction. Such research could address a number of important questions. For example, what structures guide romantic communication? What structures enable/constrain ego, job, and love romantic relationship types? Given the important impact of romantic relationships on coworkers not involved in the relationship, structuration research could uncover the structures that constrain and enable coworkers to interpret and react to a workplace romance. Along these lines, existing research indicates that many organizations rely on informal policies or "unwritten

rules” regarding workplace romance. Structuration research could reveal the processes by which such rules are developed and shared via organizational members and the extent to which the “unwritten rules” become institutionalized in, and beyond, a particular organization.

Structuration theory would conceptualize workplace relationships as systems or patterns of social relations that stretch across time and space. This conceptualization could guide an interesting examination of the various romantic relationship “types” reviewed above. Such a study would address issues such as the prototypical qualities of the fling, companionate, and utilitarian romantic relationships and how these typical relationships, in the form of structures, are reproduced and maintained in everyday employee communication.

The structuration concept of time–space distancing could enable research into the extent to which romantic relationship structures are transported across time and context, addressing questions such as how do romantic workplace relationship structures today compare to those in the past and how and why romantic relationship structures have or have not changed over time. Data regarding these issues could be obtained via interviews, as well as analysis of various texts such as books, news media, and film, particularly given the fact that workplace romance is a common theme in U.S. cinema.

Conclusion

Romantic workplace relationships are fascinating and consequential. These emotional and passionate relationships operate in environments designed to be objective and productive. This mix can be joyous and rewarding, exciting and heartbreaking. In this chapter, I summarized what research currently tells us about various types of romantic workplace relationships, how and why employees develop such relationships, and the consequences, both positive and negative, of workplace romance for the romantic partners, their coworkers, and the organization as a whole. I also forward an agenda for future research guided by alternative theoretical perspectives. These perspectives inform not only research, but also practice. Considering workplace romantic relationships from a variety of theoretical perspectives draws practitioners’ attention to various aspects of actual workplace issues and problems involving workplace romance, resulting in a more complex understanding of those issues. Such understanding can help employees and managers address relationship problems in more substantive and effective ways. The following “Practicing Theory” case is designed to highlight the practical implications of multiple theoretical perspectives.

PRACTICING THEORY**Regretting Romance**

Jim has worked at Sycamore Farms, a large food distribution company, for 6 years. He is employed in the company's human resources department as a benefits counselor.

Jim has been quite happy with this job. He gets along very well with his coworkers, many of whom he considers to be good friends. He also has a great relationship with his supervisor, Elliott. Elliott has always been very supportive of Jim. They trust each other and talk frequently and openly about many issues—both work and personal. Elliott gives Jim a lot of latitude in what he does in his job and how he carries out his tasks, so Jim enjoys a lot of autonomy. Jim respects Elliott as a supervisor and as a person. He considers Elliott to be a good friend.

Things have lately become a bit difficult, however. About 10 months ago, Jim became romantically involved with one of his coworkers, Pam. Although he and Pam work in different areas (though both are placed in the human resources department), Pam's job as an employee relations counselor sometimes requires the two of them to work together on projects or specific employee issues and complaints. While working on one of these projects, they found they had much in common and became romantically attracted to one another. Jim and Pam are both single, young professionals, so they didn't see anything morally wrong with becoming romantically involved. However, Sycamore Farms has a formal policy prohibiting romantic relationships among employees. Thus, they kept their relationship a secret from others at work, including Elliott.

Jim felt quite guilty over the past several months keeping something like this from Elliott. It was hard not to share this information with his friend, but he also didn't want to put Elliott in a difficult position. Although Jim felt his secrecy was somewhat of a betrayal to Elliott, he continued his relationship with Pam and, admittedly, found the secretive nature to be part of the allure of the relationship.

After 9 months, Jim decided to break off the relationship with Pam. This was due to a number of factors, but the primary reason was that he felt Pam was getting too serious and too "clingy." He found he had very little time to spend with his other friends away from work, and very little time to himself. While he liked Pam, he didn't see much of a future for the relationship, so he thought it was important to end the romance before it went too far. Unfortunately, Pam didn't agree and is now making things very difficult for Jim. While he used to see Pam occasionally at work, now she is always coming by his office, calling him, and sending him e-mails. He has told her several times he didn't want to interact, but she always seems to find a reason to be around him. Her constant contact has become very annoying and stressful. And his efforts to avoid her have begun to affect his ability to do his job. In short, Jim feels harassed by Pam.

Romantic Workplace Relationships ♦ 153

The irony of the situation is that at Sycamore Farms, employees who experience problems at work are supposed to report them to the employee relations department (where Pam works as a counselor). Clearly, this option is out of the question for Jim.

His only other option is to go to Elliott for help. He is concerned that informing Elliott of the situation will seriously harm their relationship, which would be devastating to Jim on both a professional and a personal level.

Discussion Questions

1. How does this case illustrate current research and theory in the area of workplace romance?
 2. Consider this case from a structuration perspective. How does Jim's relationship with Elliott both enable and constrain his behavior and performance at work?
 3. Consider this case from a social construction perspective. How is Pam's behavior constructing her relationship with Jim? How can Jim communicatively transform the relationship in a more effective way?
 4. Consider this case from a critical perspective. What types of control are operating in this situation? How would you describe the power dynamics between Jim and Pam? How does the organization itself contribute to this situation?
 5. What advice would you give to Jim for resolving this problem?
-

