

Responding to sexual harassment complaints: Effects of a dissolved workplace romance on decision-making standards[☆]

Charles A. Pierce,^{a,*} Brandee J. Broberg,^b Jamie R. McClure,^b and Herman Aguinis^c

^a Department of Management, Fogelman College of Business and Economics, University of Memphis, USA

^b Department of Psychology, Montana State University, USA

^c The Business School, University of Colorado at Denver, USA

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Abstract

We introduce and provide support for an ethical decision-making framework as an explanation for the social–cognitive process through which observers make decisions about a sexual harassment complaint that stems from a prior workplace romance. We conducted two experiments to examine effects of features of a dissolved hierarchical workplace romance and subsequent harassing behavior on raters' responses to a sexual harassment complaint. In Experiment 1, results based on a sample of 217 employees indicate that their attributions of responsibility for the harassment mediated the link between their knowledge of features of the romance and three recommended personnel actions. In Experiment 2, results based on a sample of 258 members of the Society for Human Resource Management indicate that their degree of recognition of the accused's social–sexual behavior as immoral mediated the link between their knowledge of features of the romance and harassment and their attributions of responsibility. Raters' attributions of responsibility, in turn, predicted three recommended personnel actions. We discuss theoretical and practical implications from an ethical decision-making perspective.

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Workplace romances and sexually harassing behavior have become commonplace in organizations. Workplace romances are mutually desired relationships involving physical attraction between two employees of the same organization (Pierce, 1998; Pierce & Aguinis, 2003;

Pierce, Byrne, & Aguinis, 1996; Powell & Foley, 1998). They represent approximately 33% of all romantic relationships in the US (Bureau of National Affairs, 1988) and results from a survey of 617 human resource professionals suggest that their frequency has remained stable or increased in recent years (Society for Human Resource Management [SHRM], 1998). Sexually harassing behavior at work involves unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other physical or verbal conduct of a sexual nature that is unwanted (US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 1993). Less blatant types such as gender harassment and unwanted sexual attention, which constitute hostile work environment harassment, are more common than blatant types such as sexual coercion, which constitutes quid pro quo harassment. Between 25 and 50% of women in the US labor force have experienced at least one behavior that could be construed as gender harassment or unwanted sexual attention (Gelfand, Fitzgerald, &

[☆] Brandee Broberg is now at T-Mobile, Overland Park, KS. Jamie McClure is now at Jim Palmer Trucking, Missoula, MT. This article is based on Brandee Broberg's and Jamie McClure's masters theses, which were completed at Montana State University under the direction of Chuck Pierce. We thank Richard F. Martell for helpful comments on earlier versions. Portions of this article were presented at the meeting of the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology, Chicago, April 2004.

* Corresponding author. Present address: Department of Management, Fogelman College of Business and Economics, University of Memphis, Memphis, TN 38152-3120, USA. Fax: 1-901-678-4990. Research conducted while at Montana State university.

E-mail addresses: capierce@montana.edu, capierce@memphis.edu (C.A. Pierce), herman.aguinis@cudenver.edu (H. Aguinis).

Drasgow, 1995; US Merit Systems Protection Board [USMSPB], 1994).

Although workplace romance and sexual harassment are conceptually and legally distinct, researchers have begun to question whether they are independent social–sexual phenomena (Pierce & Aguinis, 1997, 2001; Pierce, Aguinis, & Adams, 2000; Summers & Myklebust, 1992). The concern is that dissolved workplace romances can foster sexually harassing behavior between former relational participants. Consider the following evidence: (a) nearly 50% of workplace romances dissolve (Henry, 1995), (b) 24% of 617 human resource professionals reported that sexual harassment claims occurred in their organization as a direct result of workplace romances (SHRM, 1998), and (c) 26% of 466 human resource professionals and 31% of 557 other employees reported that sexual harassment claims occurred in their organization as a direct result of workplace romances (SHRM, 2002). In addition, recent federal cases have dealt with dissolved workplace romances that resulted in sexual harassment claims supported by the courts (e.g., Jones v. Keith, 2002; McDonough v. Smith, 2001). It is important to note, however, that sexual harassment claims filed as a result of a dissolved workplace romance are not always upheld in court. The outcome of these types of cases may depend, in part, on whether the harassing behavior was a function of gender discrimination as opposed to merely a personal animosity arising from the dissolved romance (e.g., see *Grandquest v. Mobile Pulley & Machine Works*, 2001; *Pipkins v. City of Temple Terrace, Fl.*, 2001; *Succar v. Dade County School Board*, 2000). Nevertheless, the concern about sexual harassment complaints stemming from dissolved workplace romances is warranted.

Organizations face the problem that a prior workplace romance may affect investigators' decisions about an ensuing sexual harassment complaint. Specifically, judgments of responsibility and recommended personnel actions regarding a harassment accusation are affected by whether the accused and complainant were previously involved with one another in a workplace romance. A prior romance between a male accused and a female complainant can result in more favorable judgments and recommended actions regarding the accused and less favorable judgments and recommended actions regarding the complainant (Summers & Myklebust, 1992). Above and beyond the mere history of a romance, certain features of a dissolved workplace romance (e.g., romance motives, lateral vs. hierarchical romance) can also influence judgments of responsibility and recommended personnel actions regarding a sexual harassment incrimination (Pierce et al., 2000).

With regard to an explanation for the influence of a prior romance on raters' decisions, Summers and Myklebust (1992) suggested that investigators of harassment complaints may set different standards for

determining acceptable social–sexual behavior when an accused and complainant have a prior history of romantic involvement. Results of Pierce et al.'s (2000) study provide support for this suggestion in that raters' responses to a harassment accusation were influenced by specific features of a prior workplace romance. The use of different standards for determining acceptable social–sexual behavior when an accused and complainant have a prior history of romantic involvement is apt to lead to perceptions of injustice among harasses and co-workers and, moreover, could result in legal problems for the organization (cf. Foley & Powell, 1999).

Ethical decision-making framework

Observers' knowledge of a prior history of workplace romance and knowledge of features of a dissolved workplace romance affect their decisions about ensuing sexual harassment complaints (Pierce et al., 2000; Summers & Myklebust, 1992). However, researchers have yet to provide a theoretical foundation from which to interpret this phenomenon. What is missing is a theory-based explanation for the underlying social–cognitive process that explains observers' decision making. We propose that the link between dissolved workplace romances and observers' decisions about ensuing sexual harassment complaints can be explained using Jones' (1991) issue-contingent model of ethical decision making in organizations. According to Jones' (1991) theoretical framework, an ethical or moral issue exists when an individual's voluntary actions may harm or benefit another person. Based on this definition, an employee's participation in romantic or sexually harassing behavior at work constitutes a moral act (Bowes-Sperry & Powell, 1999; O'Leary-Kelly & Bowes-Sperry, 2001). The moral issue that raters investigate herein is social–sexual behavior at work whereby a dissolved workplace romance and the ensuing sexual harassment are each exhibits of such behavior.

Jones' (1991) framework asserts that moral issues such as social–sexual behavior at work vary in terms of their perceived *moral intensity*. The moral intensity of an issue is determined by features of the issue that can vary with respect to their perceived magnitude of consequences and social consensus (Barnett, 2001; Bowes-Sperry & Powell, 1999). In the present study, features of the dissolved workplace romance and harassing behavior represent characteristics of the moral issue that vary in terms of their moral intensity. Magnitude of consequences is an individual's perceived degree of benefit or harm that a moral act inflicts upon a target. Social consensus is an individual's perceived degree to which there is collective agreement that a moral act is good or evil or, for purposes of this study, appropriate or

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