

Cupid's Cubicle: Co-Workers' Reactions to Workplace Romance Characteristics

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Workplace romances are commonplace yet widely debated due to organizational policies, roles, and fairness issues. They involve more than just physical attraction and love; promotions, rewards, and access to information may also be shared. Despite such issues, little research has examined reactions to workplace romances. This experimental study examined the impact of power dynamics (hierarchical/lateral), sexual orientation of romance participants (homosexual/heterosexual), and organizational role of the observer (manager/employee) on reactions. Hierarchical and homosexual (especially lesbian) workplace romances were perceived to have the most negative impact on the work environment. Only managers found heterosexual, lateral romances as problematic. Implications are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Workplace romances have been a debated topic in organizational literature ever since Quinn (1977) published the first article on workplace romance formation, impact, and management. Workplace romance research has primarily focused on (a) motives underlying workplace romance formation (e.g., Anderson & Fisher, 1991; Brown & Allgeier, 1996; Dillard, 1987; Powell, 2001), (b) the relationship between workplace romance, job performance, and sexual harassment (e.g., Dillard, 1987; Pierce, 1998; Pierce & Aguinis, 1997, 2001, 2003, 2005; Pierce, Aguinis, & Adams, 2000), (c) the effects of hierarchical and extramarital workplace romances (e.g., Anderson & Hunsaker, 1985; Brown & Allgeier, 1996; Jones, 1999; Powell, 2001), and (d) the effect of organizational climate on workplace romances (e.g., Mainiero, 1986; Mano & Gabriel, 2006; Riach & Wilson, 2007).

While the above research has been instrumental in highlighting the formation and impact of workplace romances, there has been relatively little research on workplace romances in the last thirty years in comparison to other organizational topics leaving large gaps in the literature. Workplace romances occur when two employees of the same organization engage in a mutual desired relationship entailing sexual attraction (Pierce, Byrne, & Aguinis, 1996). It is estimated that nearly 10 million workplace romances develop each year in the United States and approximately 40% of employees have participated in one (Parks, 2006; Spragins, 2004). Despite these figures, according to a survey of Human Resource professionals conducted by the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), about 70% of organizations do not have a workplace policy (Parks, 2006) and they often struggle with deciding

whether or not one should be put in place and what a workplace romance policy should include (Boyd, 2010).

Although managers may not want to involve themselves in the personal relationships of their employees, the potential of organizational impact is large enough to warrant attention. In fact, research indicates workplace romances have the possibility of both negative and positive impact. Despite the potential for gossip, exploitation, lower performance, and sexual harassment, participating in a workplace romance may also lead to increased job performance, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment (Anderson & Hunsaker, 1985; Dillard, 1987; Pierce & Aguinis, 2003). Based on such research, consensus on an overall picture of workplace romance's impact in the workplace remains to be developed, factors that lead to such positive or negative effects are even less known. The present study aims to advance the workplace romance literature by examining factors that may lead to positive or negative perceptions of a workplace romance. Accordingly, the goals of the present study are as follows: First, we wanted to determine whether or not different workplace romance types (e.g., lateral, hierarchical) are perceived differently as previous research has shown. Second, we wanted to determine whether the sexual orientation of the workplace romance (e.g., heterosexual, homosexual) impacted perceptions of the relationship. Third, we wanted to determine whether or not an individual's organizational role (e.g., manager, employee) impacts perceptions of the romance.

We accomplished these goals by asking study participants to assume the role of an employee and (a) read one of several different versions of a vignette that describes a hypothetical organization, their role in the organization, and a workplace romance between coworkers they have witnessed, and then (b) respond to measures of perceptions of the workplace romance and its participants, promotional decisions, and control variables. The present study explores whether different types of workplace romances and the organizational role of the observer are related to different perceptions of the relationship and its participants, and whether those differences relate to future job decisions.

Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses

Power Dynamics

There are two types of workplace romance based on the power dynamics of the participants in the romance – lateral and hierarchical. A lateral workplace romance occurs between two employees of equal or similar status in the organization such as coworkers (Pierce & Aguinis, 1997). Hierarchical workplace romances occur between two employees of different status in the organization such as a supervisor and a subordinate. Most research has focused on the latter due to the power differential between the romance participants and the potential negative consequences it can have. Workplace romances with power differentials (e.g., hierarchical) are viewed as most disruptive to the work environment which causes them to be less tolerated (Anderson & Hunsaker, 1985; Powell, 1986; Quinn, 1977). In fact, 70% of respondents felt romantic relationships between supervisors and subordinates should be restricted (SHRM, 2001). Much of the debate over hierarchical romance centers on the potential for exploitation which grows dramatically when the subordinate reports directly to the supervisor with whom he/she is romantically involved with (Anderson & Hunsaker, 1985; Foley & Powell, 1999; Quinn, 1977). Many fear that their coworker (the subordinate in the relationship) might be receiving better assignments, more relaxed work expectations, or even private information, and could relay private information about the team to their supervisor. Coworkers of the subordinate are not the only ones who fear the exchange of resources in hierarchical romances; coworkers of the supervisor also may feel threatened by the possibility of confidential information being shared in the romantic exchange (Neville, 1990). It is for these reasons that workplace romances, especially hierarchical workplace romances, have the potential of being very disruptive to the workplace.

Hierarchical romances are also linked to sexual harassment, a topic of great concern to organizations given its potential of incurring large penalties, settlements, and legal fees (Pierce & Aguinis, 1997; Sandberg, 2004; Schaefer & Tudor, 2001). When supervisors are romantically involved with subordinates, he/she may abuse his/her power. In fact, coworkers perceive sexual harassment claims as more legitimate if there was a power differential (Pierce, Aguinis, & Adams, 2000).

Hypothesis 1: There will be a significant main effect for power dynamics. Hierarchical romances will negatively impact perceptions of a) the organization, b) romance participants, c) observer's job and d) willingness to recommend participants for promotion more than lateral romances.

Sexual Orientation

While power dynamics in workplace romances have garnered attention throughout the years, sexual orientation in workplace romances has been relatively ignored. In fact, research in general has a heterosexist bias (Croteau, 1996; Herek, Kimmel, Amaro, & Melton, 1991). One's acceptance of an individuals' participation in workplace romances may not be entirely formed through organizational policies and accepted work behavior, but also through one's own beliefs. Although society has become more accepting in recent decades, organizations are often still run by older generations who may not be as receptive to non-normative individuals and behavior. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) research has continually shown homosexuals face discrimination in most aspects of life and society. Fourteen to 66% of LGBT individuals have experienced harassment or discrimination in the workplace (Badgett, Donnelly, & Kibbe, 1992), and both LGBT men and women were 4.3 times more likely than their heterosexual coworkers to report being fired from their jobs due to their sexual orientation (Mays & Cochran, 2001). Despite such alarming rates, very little is done to protect homosexuals in the workplace. To date, no federal legislation is in place to protect homosexuals from discrimination like other groups (i.e., age, race, sex, national origin, religion, and disability).

According to present LGBT and discrimination literature, homosexual employees face an uphill battle at work. Research investigating homosexual romances, however, is very rare, and actual statistics on such relationships are quite small. Friskopp and Silverstein (1995) surveyed homosexual individuals and their participation in workplace romances and found that lesbians were more likely to participate in romances than gay men, with roughly half of the lesbian women interviewed having participated in at least one workplace romance in the past. Whether or not homosexual relationships are prevalent within the workplace or not, they are still just as important to study. They can have the same positive and negative effects as any heterosexual workplace romances if not more due to prejudicial views towards homosexuality.

Although qualitative research has been conducted, little experimental work has examined homosexual workplace romances. Sandberg (2004) found homosexual workplace romances were perceived as a bigger problem for the organization and romantic partners were perceived as having more ego motives for being in the relationship than heterosexuals. Participants saw the homosexual relationships as more disruptive because the romance participants were perceived to be in the relationships for sexual reasons rather than love and therefore recommended organizational action be taken against the homosexual relationships. So homosexuals' workplace romances are seen as more negative, their motives more ego motivated, and harmful to the organization. Although enlightening, more research needs to be conducted on these issues. The current study explores possible differences in perceptions of homosexual male and homosexual female romances at work. Some research has shown that lesbians receive harsher criticism at work in general due to their lifestyle, and this study will explore if that is the same in workplace romances.

Hypothesis 2: There will be a significant main effect for sexual orientation. Homosexual romances will negatively impact perceptions of a) the organization, b) romance participants, c) observer's job and d) willingness to recommend participants for promotion more than heterosexual romances.

Hypothesis 3: There will be a significant interaction between sexual orientation and power dynamics. Homosexual, hierarchical romances will negatively impact perceptions of a) the organization, b) romance participants, c) observer's job and d) willingness to recommend participants for promotion more than homosexual, lateral romances.

Organizational Role

Attitudes toward workplace romances may not only reflect an individual's personal morals/beliefs but also the level of organizational accountability he/she has. The higher the individual's position, the more responsible he/she is for the company, employees, and decisions made. As previously mentioned, 70% of organizations do not have a workplace policy (Parks, 2006) and they often struggle with deciding whether or not one should be put in place and what a workplace romance policy should include (Boyd, 2010). While top managers are clearly involved in the decision making and culture formation of a company, a majority of organizations continue to do nothing to manage workplace romances. In fact, employees prefer management to take no action rather than place restrictive policies into action (Karl & Sutton, 2000). With no clear cut policy regulating or outlining appropriate dating behavior within the organization, interpretation of what is right and wrong falls on middle managers.

Placed into this role, middle managers are in a difficult position. They are seen as leaders and are called upon to interpret and enforce company policies yet often have no voice in creating the policies. Whether they agree with the policies or not, they are held accountable for whether or not their employees adhere to them. In other words, middle management is largely concerned with sense making. The more managers feel and think that decisions made by top management do not make sense, the more difficult it is for them to make sense of these decisions as they affect their own work (McKenna, 1999). It is far trickier when there is no set policy in place; such as often is the case with workplace romances. Middle managers must decide what appropriate and inappropriate behavior is, and will be held accountable for their decision. One false step made by an employee may not only lead to punishment for the individual, but also his/her manager.

Some research has found that middle managers want to be proactive when it comes to human resource management and often exceed their requirements to do so (McConville, 2006) while other research has shown that managers prefer tactics of delay or no action (Ivanova, 2007). In order to be proactive, however, McCall and Kaplan (1985) found that four general areas affect managerial decision making: instructions to be active, ownership, availability of solutions, and the context. When there is little instruction and greater uncertainty, however, inactive decision making takes over. Inactivity is most common in larger organizations where there is less accountability and autonomy of middle management (Ivanova, 2007).

If one were to apply these findings to workplace romance, it is possible that middle managers will want to be just as proactive towards the human resource issue. Unfortunately, very few organizations have set workplace romance policies in place to guide such decision making. Whether it is the lack of instructions or clear context, most research has shown managers to be inactive in the face of uncertainty (Ivanova, 2007). Inactivity does not, however, mean inactivity in the mind. Middle managers know the negative effects that are possible outcomes of workplace romances such as sexual harassment and are not only more sensitive to them, but also responsible for controlling them. Whether or not they take action, due to their role in the organization and greater sense of responsibility and accountability, managers will likely perceive workplace romance to be more problematic than the average worker.

Hypothesis 4: There will be a significant main effect for organizational role. Observers will view the relationship as a) more problematic for the organization, b) more problematic for the observer, c) view the participants as having lower job performance, and d) be less likely to recommend the relationship participants for promotion when the observer is in a managerial role.

METHOD

Participants

Three hundred and thirty-four undergraduates participated -- 251 females and 83 males. Their mean age was 19.27 years ($SD = 2.50$). Most were Caucasian (69.20%), followed by Hispanic (15.60%). Fifteen percent reported prior management experience. Most were conservative (44.90%) followed by

middle of the road (35.60%), and liberal (15.00%). Participants were disproportionately Protestant (60.50%) followed by Catholic (27.80%), other (9.00%), and Atheist (2.40%). In terms of religiosity, (1 = not practicing, 7 = very active) the mean was 4.34 ($SD = 1.80$). Most (96.70%) described their sexual orientation as heterosexual and twenty-four percent reported personal involvement in a workplace romance while 78.70% knew someone in a workplace romance.

Design and Procedure

The questionnaires contained the following sections: (1) introduction with a description of the study and instructions, (2) vignette describing the nature of a hypothetical organization, the participant's role in the organization, and a description of a workplace romance the participant had recently witnessed, (3) measures of dependent variables, (4) measures of control variables, and (5) a manipulation check.

Each participant was randomly assigned to read one of 12 vignettes about two single employees having a workplace romance in a 2 (power dynamics: lateral, hierarchical) x 3 (sexual orientation: heterosexual, homosexual male, homosexual female) x 2 (organizational role: employee, manager) between-subjects design. The first part of the vignette manipulated organizational role. Participants in the employee condition were described as sales agents, while those in the management condition were in the role of a Sales Manager who was characterized as having considerably more organizational accountability. The next section manipulated the gender of the romance participants. There were three gender manipulations: heterosexual couple, homosexual male couple, and homosexual female couple. Additionally, the workplace romance's power dynamic was identified as either lateral (i.e., coworkers) or hierarchical (i.e., supervisor and subordinate). The last section described recent observations of the couple. Since research shows that couples often try to keep their romances secret (Anderson & Hunsaker, 1985), couples were described as trying to keep the romance hidden from others within the organization.

Measures of Dependent Variables and Manipulation Check

Perceptions of Workplace Romance

Two questions asked how serious of a problem participants perceived the workplace romance to be for the organization and one question assessed how serious a problem they perceived the romance was for their own job. Each question used a seven-point Likert response scale where "1" represented "Major Negative Effect" and "7" represented "Major Positive Effect" (Cronbach's $\alpha = .63$). Because workplace romances not only represent a potential problem for the organization, but for co-workers as well, research participants were also asked one question to indicate how serious of a problem they perceive the workplace romance to be for them as well. This question used the same response scale as the other two.

Perceived Performance

Participants answered two questions on perceptions of job performance for each romance participant since perceptions could differ between romance participants. Each question used a seven-point Likert scale where "1" represents "Major Negative Impact/Change" and "7" representing "Major Positive Impact/Change." Coefficient alpha was .87 for perceived performance of romance participant 1 and .90 for romance participant 2.

Promotion

Participants were asked whether knowledge of the relationship affected whether they would recommend either workplace romance participant for promotion. Again, a seven-point Likert response scale where "1" represented "Strongly Not Recommend for Promotion" and "7" represented "Strongly Recommend for Promotion."

Demographics

Items assessed age, sex, ethnicity, school classification, experience with workplace romance, work experience, religious affiliation, level of religiosity, political affiliation, sexual orientation, current relationship status, and geographic background.

Manipulation Check

Two items assessed whether each of the three manipulations (i.e., power dynamics, sexual orientation, organizational role) were effective. Individuals not answering correctly were dropped from analyses.

RESULTS

Descriptive statistics (Appendix) and correlations (Table 1) were examined. Due to correlations among the dependent variables, hypotheses were analyzed using a MANOVA framework with power dynamics, sexual orientation, and organizational role serving as the independent variables and perceptions of workplace romance, perceived performance of romance participants, and willingness to recommend romance participants for promotion acting as dependent variables.

**TABLE 1
CORRELATION COEFFICIENTS FOR DEPENDENT AND DEMOGRAPHIC VARIABLES**

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
<i>M(SD)</i>	-1.07	-.69	-.60	-.46	-.49	-.44	19.27	.25	4.34	1.24
<i>SD</i>	.65	1.07	1.17	.96	.96	.79	2.50	.43	1.80	.43
1. Org Impact	--	.49**	.42**	.31**	.38**	.46**	-.10	.10	-.17**	.11*
2. Perc. of 1		--	.72**	.32**	.30**	.43**	-.03	-.03	-.15**	.11*
3. Perc. of 2			--	.18**	.18**	.32**	.01	.00	-.11*	.11
4. Rec. 1				--	.85**	.20**	-.06	-.08	-.05	.17**
5. Rec. 2					--	.22**	-.04	-.07	-.11*	.16**
6. Obs. Job						--	-.03	.04	-.11	.06
7. Age							--	-.05	-.20**	.16**
8. Sex								--	-.10	-.18**
9. Religiosity									--	-.17**
10. Prev. Rom										--

Note. 1 – Org Impact = Perceived organizational impact where lower scores indicate more negative impact, 2 – Perc. of 1 = Impact on professional perceptions of workplace romance participant 1 where lower scores indicate more negative impact, 3 – Perc. of 2 = Impact on professional perceptions of workplace romance participant 2 where lower scores indicate more negative impact, 4 – Rec. 1 = Impact on observer’s willingness to recommend romance participant 1 for promotion where lower scores indicate less willingness, 5 – Rec. 2 = Impact on observer’s willingness to recommend romance participant 2 for promotion where lower scores indicate less willingness, 6 – Obs. Job = Perceived impact on observer’s job, 8 – Sex where 0 = F, 1 = M, 9 – Reported level of religiosity where higher scores indicate higher levels of reported religiosity, 10 – Prev. Rom = Previous involvement in a workplace romance where 0 = No, 1 = Yes.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

n size range from 333 to 334.

Hypothesis 1 predicted observers would view hierarchical romances as having a more negative impact on the organization, perceptions of the romance participants, willingness to recommend the participants for promotion, and the observer’s own job. As predicted, there was a significant multivariate main effect for power dynamics, $F(6, 317) = 6.72, p < .001, \text{par. } \eta^2 = .11$. Additionally, there were significant univariate effects on all dependent variables except for perceived impact on the second participant in the romance. There was a significant effect on perceived organizational impact $F(1, 322) = 20.10, p < .001, \text{par. } \eta^2 = .06$. Hierarchical romances ($M = -1.23, SD = .67$) were perceived to have more negative organizational impact than lateral romances ($M = -.92, SD = .59$). Power dynamics also affected perceptions of relationship participant 1, $F(1, 322) = 12.50, p < .001, \text{par. } \eta^2 = .04$. Hierarchical romance

participants ($M = -.90$, $SD = 1.15$) were perceived more negatively than those in lateral romances ($M = -.49$, $SD = .95$).

TABLE 2
MULTIVARIATE AND UNIVARIATE ANALYSES OF VARIANCE
FOR DEPENDENT VARIABLES

Source	Multivariate		Univariate					
	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	Perceived Org. Impact	Part. 1	Part. 2	Rec. Part. 1	Rec. Part. 2	Impact Observer's Job
Power Dynamics (P)	6	6.72**	20.10**	12.50**	.32	11.42*	17.87**	8.31*
Sexual Orientation (S)	12	1.80*	4.00*	2.74 [†]	3.67*	.28	.08	.80
Org. Role (R)	6	2.06	1.74	.00	.06 [†]	3.50	2.66	3.33 [†]
P x S	12	1.96*	3.29*	2.47 [†]	4.55*	.30	.76	2.97
P x R	6	1.21	.63	3.12 [†]	1.64	.00	.16	.28
S x R	12	1.49	.38	.53	.57	.74	1.30	3.41*
P x S x R	6	1.37	.43	1.05	1.79	.58	.43	2.30
<i>MSE</i>			.39	1.08	1.32	.91	.88	.59

Note. Multivariate *F* ratios were generated from Pillai's statistic.

Org. Role = organizational role (manager vs. employee); Perceived Org. Impact = perceived organizational impact; Part 1 = perceptions of participant 1; Part 2 = perceptions of participant 2; Rec. Part 1 = willingness to recommend participant 1 for promotion; Rec. Part 2 = willingness to recommend participant 2 for promotion

For analyses examining sexual orientation (S), Multivariate $df = 12, 636$. Univariate $df = 2, 322$.

For all other analyses, Multivariate $df = 6, 317$. Univariate $df = 1, 322$.

[†] $p < .01$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .0001$.

Power dynamics also significantly impacted observers' willingness to recommend workplace romance participant 1 for promotion, $F(1, 322) = 11.42$, $p = .001$, $\text{par. } \eta^2 = .03$. Participants were less willing to promote relationship participant 1 when in a hierarchical romance ($M = -.65$, $SD = 1.04$) than in a lateral romance ($M = -.29$, $SD = .85$). The same was found for relationship participant 2, $F(1, 322) = 17.87$, $p < .001$, $\text{par. } \eta^2 = .05$, with less willingness to recommend those in hierarchical romances ($M = -.72$, $SD = .97$) than in lateral romances ($M = -.28$, $SD = .90$). Power dynamics also significantly influenced the perceived impact on the observer's job, $F(1, 322) = 8.31$, $p = .004$, $\text{par. } \eta^2 = .03$. Hierarchical romances ($M = -.57$, $SD = .81$) were perceived to have more negative impact on the research respondent's job than lateral romances ($M = -.33$, $SD = .75$). See Table 2.

Hypothesis 2 predicted homosexual romances would have more negative effects on perceptions compared to heterosexual romances. As predicted, there was a multivariate main effect for sexual orientation, $F(12, 636) = 1.80$, $p < .05$, $\text{par. } \eta^2 = .03$. Univariate results showed sexual orientation significantly influenced perceptions of organizational impact, $F(2, 322) = 4.99$, $p = .02$, $\text{par. } \eta^2 = .02$. Participants reported homosexual male ($M = -1.13$, $SD = .06$) and female couples ($M = -1.16$, $SD = .06$) impacted the organization more negatively than heterosexual couples ($M = -.94$, $SD = .06$). Sexual orientation also impacted perceptions of workplace romance participant 2, $F(2, 322) = 3.67$, $p = .03$, $\text{par. } \eta^2 = .02$. Romance participant 2 was perceived more negatively if a homosexual female ($M = -.83$, $SD = 1.02$) than a homosexual male ($M = -.47$, $SD = 1.18$) or heterosexual ($M = -.48$, $SD = 1.27$).

Hypothesis 3 predicted observers would view lateral workplace romances as more problematic when relationship participants were homosexual. As predicted, there was a multivariate interaction between power dynamics and sexual orientation, $F(12, 636) = 1.96, p = .03$, $\text{par. } \eta^2 = .04$. Additionally, there was a significant univariate interaction for perceived impact on the organization, $F(2, 322) = 3.29, p = .04$, $\text{par. } \eta^2 = .02$, and perceived impact on perceptions of workplace romance participant 2, $F(2, 322) = 4.55, p = .01$, $\text{par. } \eta^2 = .03$. In terms of organizational impact, the power dynamics variable was only significant for heterosexual relationships, $F(1, 328) = 22.09, p < .001$, where heterosexual, hierarchical workplace romances ($M = -1.22, SD = .09$) were perceived to have a more negative impact on the organization than lateral, heterosexual workplace romances ($M = -.66, SD = .08$). For perceived impact on workplace romance participant 2, power dynamics were only significant for homosexual male relationships, $F(1, 328) = 4.48, p = .04$, where perceptions of participant 2 were lower if involved in a lateral, homosexual romance ($M = -.70, SD = .15$) than a hierarchical, male workplace romance ($M = -.23, SD = .16$).

Hypothesis 4 predicted participants in a managerial role would have more negative workplace romance perceptions than those in an employee role. However, the main effect was for organizational role was nonsignificant $F(6, 317) = 2.06, p = .06$, $\text{par. } \eta^2 = .04$.

Exploratory Analyses

As respondents' level of religiosity increased, perceptions of organizational impact were more negative $r(333) = -.17, p = .001$ as were perceptions of workplace romance participant 1, $r(333) = -.15, p = .01$ and workplace romance participant 2, $r(333) = -.11, p < .05$. Also as religiosity increased participants were less willing to recommend workplace romance participant 2 for promotion, $r(333) = -.11, p < .05$.

Significant multivariate effects were found for political affiliation, $F(18, 978) = 1.82, p = .02$, $\text{par. } \eta^2 = .03$. Political affiliation had significant effects on perceptions of romance participant 2, $F(3, 329) = 3.41, p = .02$, $\text{par. } \eta^2 = .03$, and willingness to recommend for promotion romance participant 1, $F(3, 329) = 2.92, p = .03$, $\text{par. } \eta^2 = .03$, and romance participant 2, $F(3, 329) = 3.40, p = .02$, $\text{par. } \eta^2 = .03$. Conservatives perceived workplace romances to have significantly more negative impact ($M = -.79, SD = .114$) on participant 2 than non-conservative respondents ($M = -.07, SD = 1.07$). Conservatives were also less willing to recommend romance participant 1 ($M = -.63, SD = 1.06$) and participant 2 ($M = -.67, SD = 1.03$) for promotion than all other political affiliations for romance participant 1 ($M = -.34, SD = .84$) and participant 2 ($M = -.28, SD = .73$).

DISCUSSION

This study examined how power dynamics, sexual orientation, and observer's organizational role affected perceptions of workplace romances. Hypothesis 1 was supported. Consistent with previous research (Pierce, Aguinis, & Adams, 2000; Sandberg, 2004; Schaefer & Tudor, 2001), while all respondents felt that workplace romances had a negative effect on their own job, hierarchical relationships were perceived as having a larger impact perhaps acknowledging the potential for exploitation and special treatment.

Hypothesis 2 was also supported; observers perceived homosexual romances as having a more negative impact on the organization, the observer's job, perceptions of the relationship participants, and willingness to recommend relationship participants for promotion compared to heterosexual romances. Findings are consistent with research indicating that homosexuals face harsher working conditions and criticisms than heterosexuals in the workplace (Riach & Wilson, 2007). Our results indicated that perceptions of a homosexual female's performance was more negatively impacted by the romance than homosexual males and heterosexuals. While surprising that perceptions of homosexual males and heterosexuals were roughly equivalent, our results could be due to changing perceptions of homosexuality. Movies and television have begun to mainstream male homosexuality (e.g., *Glee*, *Will & Grace*, *Sex and the City*) to a greater degree than female homosexuality. Homosexual females also contend with female stereotyping in general. Qualitative research shows that homosexual women feel

pressure to remain silent about their sexual orientation, rendering them essentially invisible (Giuffre, Dellinger, & Williams, 2008). It is argued that white, working class men maintain a form of “White male solidarity” (Embrick, Walther, & Wickens, 2007) putting lesbians at a double disadvantage. Not only are they working women, but also homosexual thus representing two minority groups who may be targeted for discrimination.

Hypothesis 3 was also supported. The interaction between sexual orientation and power dynamics had a significant effect on perceptions. Specifically, the effect of sexual orientation was only significant for lateral relationships, where homosexual, lateral workplace romances were perceived to have more negative impact on the organization than heterosexual, lateral relationships. Hierarchical relationships were perceived as impacting the organization more than lateral relationships no matter the couple’s sexual orientation. While homosexual, hierarchical romances were not perceived more negatively than homosexual, lateral romances to a significant degree, the effect of power dynamics in lesbian romances neared significance ($p = .06$). With a larger sample, it might be found that lesbian, hierarchical workplace romances encounter the most workplace discrimination.

The interaction between power dynamics and sexual orientation was also significant for perceptions of romance participant 2. Perceptions of romance participant 2’s performance were more negative for a gay man involved in a lateral romance rather than a hierarchical romance. It is possible that views of gay men’s performance vary based on whom they are dating. When a gay man is dating his coworker, observers might downgrade his performance because he is focusing on relationships rather than work—which runs counter to traditional stereotypes for men in a work setting. While dating one’s supervisor could be just as distracting as dating one’s coworker, it may be perceived by others as career motivated (i.e., benefits, better assignments) which runs in line with the male stereotype in business of doing whatever is needed to get ahead.

The organizational role of respondents did not come into play (Hypothesis 4). The vignette methodology makes it challenging to simulate the extra responsibilities associated with a manager’s role. Analyses did, however, show an interaction effect between organizational role and sexual orientation on the respondent’s job. Respondents in the managerial condition reported all romances as having a negative impact on their job, whereas those in the role of employees reported significantly less impact on their job if the relationship was heterosexual. These findings support work discrimination literature suggesting homosexuals face a double standard at work and also provide some evidence that the scenarios effectively manipulated the organizational role variable.

Practical Implications

Results of the present study have implications for how organizations understand and manage workplace romances. In comparison to lateral workplace romances, hierarchical romances are perceived to have more negative impact on the organization and everyone in it, including the employees in the workplace romance. Research indicates that organizations and individuals fear the potential sharing or exchange of information and resources between individuals in a hierarchical workplace romance. The lines between a relationship and career advancement start to blur in the eyes of organizational observers. These fears are legitimate, especially from an organizational standpoint, and should be guarded against. While it may not be possible to completely eliminate workplace romances altogether, if policies are implemented prohibiting hierarchical workplace romances, measures will be in place to protect both the organization and employees from potential harm.

With respect to sexual orientation, our results suggest that homosexuals face harsher criticism for participating in workplace romances than heterosexuals. With no basis for harsher criticism other than their sexual orientation, the current study highlights another arena in which homosexuals are discriminated against in society, especially lesbians. While federal law has not recognized sexual orientation as a protected class, almost half of the states list sexual orientation as a protected class in their state employment laws. Because of this, organizations need to be aware of the discrimination homosexuals face in the workplace. Discrimination and biases cannot be corrected in society overnight, but organizations need to be aware that such prejudices may ultimately have a real impact on an

individual's career. The present study found that individuals who witness a coworker's homosexual workplace romance not only perceived the relationship to have a more negative impact on the work environment, but that the romance participants were perceived to have lower work performance as well. As organizational research has consistently shown, biases and perceptions continually infiltrate managerial decision making which can ultimately impact a homosexual employee's performance appraisals, and as this study showed recommendations for promotions. In order to create a fair working environment and avoid legal complaints, organizations and management need to be aware of such issues.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The current study has limitations that provide opportunities for future research to address. First, we used vignettes; a less artificial (non-lab) environment may have yielded more genuine respondent reactions. But while there are limitations with vignettes, they did allow us to control contextual variables while manipulating and isolating variables of interest. The current study also found numerous significant results providing further support to the effectiveness of the vignette methodology. Workplace romances are also a sensitive topic and thus it is difficult to conduct organizational research that is not qualitative. Finally, although imperfect, vignettes are a widely accepted research method within organizations (Murphy, Herr, Lockhart, & Maguire, 1986).

A related limitation is the use of undergraduates who may not be representative of the workforce due to their age and work experience thereby affecting the generalizability of results. Our sample also came from a large, southern, conservative university where respondents were largely Caucasian, religious, and conservative. More heterogeneous samples would be advantageous.

Despite these limitations, this study is noteworthy for its focus on homosexual workplace romances—a largely ignored research area. Organizations often view all workplace romances as none of their business much less homosexual workplace romances. Research has continually shown homosexuals face harsher working conditions and less tolerance by their coworkers than their heterosexual counterparts. Our experimental results support this qualitative research although clearly more investigation needs to be done.

Beyond exploring the impact of sexual orientation on perceptions of workplace romances, the current study was one of the first to explore whether the impact of female homosexual workplace romances differed from that of male homosexual workplace romances. Results indicate that there may not be significant differences in perceptions of their effects on the work environment and people around them. Differences were found, however, in how the lesbian romance participants' work performance was perceived by their coworkers. Combining the current results with previous discrimination literature, lesbians may not only face discrimination in the workplace based on their sexual orientation, but their ability and performance may also be perceived to be lower based purely on their sexual preferences. Further research needs to be conducted to explore this trend.

The current study supports previous research in that hierarchical workplace romances present a larger negative impact than lateral relationships. With this knowledge it is vital that research be conducted on workplace romance management. Research has shown hierarchical workplace romances are not only less tolerated by individuals, but are in fact feared for the potential negative impact they can have on the work environment and everyone in it. Hierarchical workplace romances do not only affect the 2 participants in the relationship, but the entire work team. If organizations had clear policies governing workplace romances and set consequences in place for breaking them, would observing employees fear the biasing impact of hierarchical romances? Would hierarchical workplace romances be as prevalent? Future research needs to examine the effect of workplace romance management.

Conclusion

In closing, although many organizations take a hands-off approach to workplace romance, it is increasingly apparent that workplace romances have an impact on the work environment. Research has shown workplace romances can have negative and/or positive impact on the work environment, but the factors that influence the direction of such impact is relatively unexplored. The current study explored the

effect of power dynamics, sexual orientation, and organizational role on perceptions of workplace romances and found significant results, but it is just the beginning. More research needs to be conducted in order for managers and organizations to be aware of such relationships, and step in when there is the potential for negative impact. Only by exploring the factors that lead to positive and negative perceptions and impact can workplace romances truly be understood and potentially managed by organizations.

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APPENDIX

TABLE 1
CELL MEANS AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS FOR EACH CONDITION ON ALL
DEPENDENT VARIABLES

Type of Relationship	N	M(SD)	Lateral		Hierarchical	
			Employee	Manager	Employee	Manager
Perceived Impact on the Organization						
Heterosexual	112	-.93(.74)	-.64(.75) n = 28	-.68(.54) n = 31	-1.33(.85) n = 27	-1.10(.57) n = 26
Homosexual (M)	107	-1.12(.56)	-1.11(.61) n = 27	-.99(.44) n = 29	-1.30(.62) n = 26	-1.10(.57) n = 25
Homosexual (F)	115	-1.15(.62)	-1.06(.55) n = 29	-1.03(.51) n = 30	-1.27(.70) n = 29	-1.27(.70) n = 27
N	334		84	90	82	78
M(SD)		-1.07(.65)	-.94(.67)	-.89(.52)	-1.29(.72)	-1.16(.61)
Perceived Impact on Romance Participant 1's Performance						
Heterosexual	112	-.52(1.18)	-.16(1.15) n = 28	-.21(1.19) n = 31	-.87(1.27) n = 27	-.90(.92) n = 26
Homosexual (M)	107	-.70(1.02)	-.85(.81) n = 27	-.48(.59) n = 29	-.71(1.44) n = 26	-.78(1.12) n = 25
Homosexual (F)	115	-.85(.97)	-.78(.79) n = 29	-.52(.87) n = 30	-.81(1.19) n = 29	-1.33(.84) n = 27
N	334		84	90	82	78
M(SD)		-.69(1.07)	-.60(.97)	-.40(.92)	-.80(1.28)	-1.01(.98)
Perceived Impact on Romance Participant 2's Performance						
Heterosexual	112	-.48(1.27)	-.34(1.19) n = 28	-.29(1.24) n = 31	-.85(1.34) n = 27	-.46(1.30) n = 26
Homosexual (M)	107	-.47(1.18)	-.85(.81) n = 27	-.55(.54) n = 29	.00(1.80) n = 26	-.46(1.16) n = 25
Homosexual (F)	115	-.83(1.02)	-.78(.79) n = 29	-.55(.86) n = 30	-.84(1.00) n = 29	-1.17(1.34) n = 27
N	334		84	90	82	78
M(SD)		-.60(1.17)	-.65(.96)	-.46(.93)	-.58(1.44)	-.71(1.30)

Willingness to Recommend Romance Participant 1 for Promotion

Heterosexual	112	-.41(.75)	-.36(.78) <i>n</i> = 28	-.19(.54) <i>n</i> = 31	-.78(1.01) <i>n</i> = 27	-.35(.49) <i>n</i> = 26
Homosexual (M)	107	-.50(.98)	-.48(.98) <i>n</i> = 27	-.07(.75) <i>n</i> = 29	-.81 (1.02) <i>n</i> = 26	-.68(1.07) <i>n</i> = 25
Homosexual (F)	115	-.49(1.12)	-.34(1.08) <i>n</i> = 29	-.33(.92) <i>n</i> = 30	-.66(1.23) <i>n</i> = 29	-.63(.1.24) <i>n</i> = 27
<i>N</i>	334		84	90	82	78
<i>M(SD)</i>		-.46(.96)	-.39(.94)	-.20(.75)	-.74(1.09)	-.55(.99)

Willingness to Recommend Romance Participant 2 for Promotion

Heterosexual	112	-.51(.88)	-.21(.1.03) <i>n</i> = 28	-.26(.63) <i>n</i> = 31	-.96(.94) <i>n</i> = 27	-.65(.69) <i>n</i> = 26
Homosexual (M)	107	-.50(.93)	-.48(.98) <i>n</i> = 27	-.07(.575) <i>n</i> = 29	-.92(.98) <i>n</i> = 26	-.56(1.82) <i>n</i> = 25
Homosexual (F)	115	-.47(1.07)	-.34(1.08) <i>n</i> = 29	-.33(.92) <i>n</i> = 30	-.59(1.15) <i>n</i> = 29	-.63(1.15) <i>n</i> = 27
<i>N</i>	334		84	90	82	78
<i>M(SD)</i>		-.49(.96)	-.35(1.02)	-.22(.78)	-.82(1.03)	-.62(.90)

Perceived Impact on Observer's Job

Heterosexual	112	-.38(.87)	-.04(.74) <i>n</i> = 28	-.23(.84) <i>n</i> = 31	-.37(.93) <i>n</i> = 27	-.92(.74) <i>n</i> = 26
Homosexual (M)	107	-.44(.79)	-.37(.74) <i>n</i> = 27	-.48(.74) <i>n</i> = 29	-.65(.98) <i>n</i> = 26	-.24(.66) <i>n</i> = 25
Homosexual (F)	115	-.51(.69)	-.28(.59) <i>n</i> = 29	-.57(.73) <i>n</i> = 30	-.52(.74) <i>n</i> = 29	-.70(.67) <i>n</i> = 27
<i>N</i>	334		84	90	82	78
<i>M(SD)</i>		-.44(.79)	-.23(.70)	-.42(.79)	-.51(.88)	-.63(.74)
