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Impact of workplace romances on coworkers and workplace climate

Literature Review

As Americans begin spending more and more time at their respective workplaces – the average is up to 47 hours per week according to the results of a Gallup survey done in 2013 and 2014 (Saad, 2014) – the relationships that coworkers begin to develop with one another have become even more important as they help to foster cohesiveness, trust, and an overall healthy and efficient work environment. But with this increase in time at the workplace comes an increase in the possibility of a different type of relationship developing: a workplace romantic relationships (or WRR). The topic of romance within the workplace is an issue of professional ethics, as it not only has the ability to affect the couples' relationship outside of the workplace, but also that these relationships create many issues within the workplace.

Robert E. Quinn is a key figure in early research of WRRs and he found that there are three main motivations behind a person entering a WRR: 1) love, 2) job motivation (promotions, advancement, etc.), and 3) ego (personal excitement, satisfaction, adventure, sex). Researchers Cowan and Horan (2014) also found that additional motivations for people entering into WRRs include time spent with coworkers, ease of opportunity due to proximity, and similarity due to a shared occupation.

While prior research has indicated that romantic relationships in the workplace are considered anywhere from neutral (Cole, 2009) to negative (Brown & Allgeier, 1996; Powell, 1986), the reactions of coworkers to WRR's have been found to be dependent on what the coworkers perceive are the individuals' motivations/reasons for being in the relationship

(Wilson, 2015). This perceived motivation has been shown to be most influenced by the type of romantic relationship that is occurring. For example: most coworkers have little to no problem with lower level employees in their workplace engaging in a relationship with another lower level employee. Research has actually found that employees who were dating an organizational peer were perceived by coworkers as higher in both goodwill and trustworthiness than those employees dating superiors (Horan and Chory, 2011) These relationships are known as lateral relationship. However, coworkers have been shown to have problems with hierarchal relationships, which are relationships between two employees of different organizational levels. This was highlighted in a studies done by Malachowski, Chory, & Claus (2012), which revealed that employees perceive relationships between their peers and higher ups to be more driven by job motives, and less driven by love. This is understandable as the study above also showed individuals involved in a WRR with their superior were perceived as being more likely to receive unfair organizational advantages. Because these are all perceived to be possibilities, coworker's reactions to WRRs that look to be driven by job motivation, aren't very positive (Brown and Allgeier, 1996).

Studies such as the one above, and one conducted by Horan and Chory (2009), have shown that not only are coworkers less likely to trust those in WRRs when they are in hierarchal relationships, but their coworkers are also more likely to engage in information manipulation/deception, be less honest, and self-disclose less with those in the WWRs. In other cases, coworkers were even reported to go as far as to attempt to break the couple up (Quinn, 1977). This information presents potential ethical dilemmas because if coworkers are misleading one another it could affect the organization's efficiency and productivity.

While prior research has explored the reactions and perceptions of coworkers of

individuals in both lateral and hierarchal relationships, there has not been much research that focuses on how these WRRs might affect co-workers in specific fields and occupations. I chose to focus on the fields of public relations, advertising, and marketing not just because there is little to no research to date that has examined WRRs within these specific professions, but also because these professions are predicated on the art of persuasion, which has the potential to (if unchecked) snowball into manipulation (Larson, 2004). As noted above from the study done by Malachowski, Chory, & Claus (2012), this idea and concept of manipulation is one that many coworkers of people in hierarchal WRRs perceive to be their [the individuals within the WRR] reason/motivation for entering into that particular relationship, which contributes to the lack of trust that Horan and Chory (2009) found coworkers have towards those in hierarchal relationships.

Because of the heavy emphasis on persuasion, the fields of advertising, marketing, and public relations have strong codes of ethics, which can easily be related to WRRs in the workplace. The following items from these profession's guiding organizations that particularly relate to WRRs include:

o   Employees should then be open and honest with one another, and look to correct wrongful or erroneous communication with one another (Public Relations Society of America [PRSA], 2016, ¶"Free Flow of Info" section).

o   "Avoid actions and circumstances that may appear to compromise good business judgment or create a conflict between personal and professional interests" (PRSA, 2016 ¶"Conflict of interest" Section).

- o   Advertisers and their agencies, and online and offline media, should discuss privately potential ethical concerns, and members of the team creating ads should be given permission to express internally their ethical concerns (AAF, 2011, p. 10).

Also, many professionals in the fields of advertising, marketing, and public relations have communication degrees, which suggests that they have had training in being effective communicators by adapting to different situations. Adaptation includes communicating in an ethical manner (Wood 2015). Because of this, I was interested in seeing if these professionals -- who presumably have had effective communication training -- perceive and experience their coworkers' WRRs differently than in other fields.

   With this study I hope to see in what ways WRRs affect the coworkers of those in the WWRs, as well as the communication in the workplace and the overall work climate. More specifically this study addresses the following research questions:

1. Are workplace romantic relationships perceived as an ethical issue by the coworkers of those participating in the workplace romance?

2. How do workplace romances affect relationships with coworkers?

3. How do workplace romances affect the overall climate of the workplace?

Methodology

   In order to get the best understanding of how WWRs affect coworkers, I looked at the detailed, lived experience of those coworkers who had experienced others' WWRs through semi-structured interviews. This was particularly important given the majority of the studies about WRRs have been quantitative surveys. Interviews allow for understanding the nuances of WRRs from coworkers' perspectives regarding how they perceive WRRs affect a work environment.

Participants

Participants for this study consisted of professionals from the advertising, marketing, and/or public relations fields, who had experienced working with coworkers in a WRR. Participants were initially recruited through sending out of an announcement on Facebook social media pages, which also included a short section requesting that people who were comfortable doing so would re-share the post on their own Facebook page. Anyone who was interested in participating in the study was then asked to email or call one of the researchers. Other forms of recruitment included posting a recruiting call on electronic bulletin boards such as the CSB/SJU Bulletin Board and CRTNET (communication academic and professional listserve), and contacting alumni of the College of St. Benedict & St. John's University – through the CSBSJU Alumni CANE files. Participant recruitment took place during June and July 2016, and of the six people who agreed to participate in the study, three were women and three were men

Procedures

After expressing interest, participants were sent a copy of the CSB/SJU Institutional Review Board approved consent form to look over in case they had any questions or any confusion regarding the study*. The time and location of the interview was then arranged, and participants were asked to sign and return the consent form before the start of the interview. At the time the interview took place, the interviewer would go over the nature of the study, re-inform the participant that their interview would be recorded, explain how the participant's information would be kept confidential, and then have the participant choose a pseudonym; after which the interview (which lasted no more than an hour) would commence.

Participants' interview audio recordings were collected using the researcher's password protected cell phone or laptop, and converted to an MP4 file so that it could be uploaded to an unlisted, private, and password-protected YouTube channel within 24 hours of the interview.

Following the upload, the original audio recording was deleted from the cell phone or laptop so that only the researchers had access to the MP4 file. The YouTube channel has a function to convert the spoken word to text yet the data was still protected because the channel was unlisted and password protected. Once the files were adapted to text, they were downloaded into a word document to form transcripts, and the files on the YouTube channel were deleted.

Data Analysis

Once downloaded, the transcripts were analyzed individually for the most often repeated ideas to identify possible themes in participants' responses. I initially code sorted, following the method described by Auerbach & Silverstein (2003), which was done by assigning a color to each theme, and highlighting quotes and information in the different interviews that were related to the theme in that color. Then, I went through the interviews a second time and began to develop revised themes based on the patterns repeated throughout the quotes pulled though code sorting. The themes identified are broken down into three main categories: 1) Descriptions of an Enjoyable and Ethical Workplace, 2) Effects of Workplace Romance on Work Environment, and 3) Workplace Expectations for Lateral vs. Hierarchal Workplace Romantic Relationships. For descriptions of an enjoyable and ethical workplace, sub-themes included trust, open communication, collaboration, and fair and respectful treatment of employees. For effects of workplace romance on the work environment, subthemes included Secrecy, Openness, Us vs. Them, Dysfunctional and Deviant Behavior, and the impact of the end of the relationship on the workplace. And for the workplace expectations for lateral vs. hierarchal workplace romantic relationships, subthemes included Favoritism, Manipulation, and the influence of gender.

Results

<u>*Enjoyable and Ethical Workplace*</u>

At the beginning of the interview, two of the questions we asked participants required them to describe the work environment they found enjoyable and their definition of an ethical workplace. These questions were asked in order to get a baseline for what things employees would like from their work environment and coworkers, which would help us to better understand how the WRR's they experienced impacted them. I also wanted to see what they used to describe an ethical workplace in order to gain information related to RQ1: Are workplace romantic relationships perceived as an ethical issue by the coworkers of those participating in the workplace romance? Participant themes relating to an enjoyable and ethical workplace were that those in the workplace must have trust with one another, communicate openly, collaborate, and treat one another fair and respectfully.

Trust

Participants in this study described trust as being able to depend on their coworkers to both do their work and do the right thing in any given situation, as well as flexibility in the workplace that stems from belief in the participant and what they can provide in the work setting. This trust is important to any work environment in which people need to work together. Sam went so far as to say, "Trust is fundamental," with which Gabby concurred:

> *Being able to trust and depend on your coworkers is super helpful. It'll work better if you*
>
> *know they're going to follow through with what they say they're going to do. – Gabby*

While it's no surprise that trust was one of the things that people thought made up an enjoyable and ethical workplace, what was interesting to hear was how participants interpreted the level of trust between themselves, their coworkers, and their superiors. One of the ways in which this is seen is in a sub-theme that was repeated throughout the interviews. When participants were

asked what makes up a work environment they do not enjoy, all of their answers included one word: micromanagement.

> *I also don't like being micromanaged. We had a manager who did that and that really took a toll on the staff's morale. Because honestly, it's demoralizing to have a manager that does not trust your work ethic, constantly follows up and questions every decision that you make. – Sam*

And while this is not something that these participants enjoy in a work environment, they did recognize that it was necessary at times.

> *I don't enjoy being micromanaged, especially now that I'm coming up on 20 years of working in PR and communications. I understand for some micromanagement is necessary – like when people are new into a position -- but at some point I would hope that I, and others, have earned the trust and respect that he or she knows what they're doing, and I don't need every project to be looking over their shoulder. So micromanaging leaves me rather frustrated. – Frank*

Through these quotes we see that while employees recognize some micromanagement as necessary, for some employees it can become associated with a work environment they do not enjoy because they begin to associate micromanagement with a lack of trust.

To many of the participants in this study, the opposite of micromanagement is shown through flexibility, not in the sense that they are allowed to do anything they want whenever they want, but flexibility meaning that they are trusted to get their work done. When talking about flexibility, Frank said:

> *I particularly like the attitude and philosophy that we expect that you're going to get your work done. No one's going to be here at eight o'clock making sure that every employee is*

here. To have the flexibility that if some morning I'm running late because I'm dropping

my kids off at school, or if my son says, "daddy can you have breakfast with me?" you

know, the work flexibility that says we expect you to get your work done. If one day that

means it takes six hours; fine. If means the next day it takes 12 hours, well that's the way

it is. - Frank

And while flexibility may be a part of some people's ideal workplace, what it really boils down to is trust in the form of another sub-theme of trust that was shown throughout the interviews as both something the participants said is part of a workplace they enjoy, as well as a part of an ethical workplace; integrity. Integrity is best defined in a quote from Sophie when she says:

I think the true test of character is when you can do the right thing when no one is

watching or when you think no one is watching. And I think working in an ethical

environment is when you can trust the fact that you don't have to be there and they're

still doing the right thing.

Open Communication

Open communication can best be described as the quality of being honest in both feedback, and in overall interactions with coworkers. It also includes individuals feeling free and comfortable to share and self-disclose information. One participant further describes open communication:

I think just making sure you're being as efficient as possible. So you know…going

straight to the source instead of telling someone to tell someone else something that

needs to be done ya know? So that's one of the biggest things I've seen in my office is

everyone kind of round about talking to each other when it's like, if you've got something

you need from me, why don't you just call me instead of this person?.... So just being able

to talk to people in a constructive manner; getting things across instead of getting

deceptive and trying to cover your own butt…just making sure your effectively

communicating so you can get things done, rather than just blaming each other. – Blaire

Collaboration

Collaboration – "the action of working with someone to produce or create something" (New

Oxford American Dictionary, ¶Definition 1) -- is very important in the fields of Marketing,

Advertising, and Public Relations, and this was reflected in the responses of the participants in

this study. Jenny, who works in advertising, said:

Well really the honesty and transparency is huge. In the ad agency culture, it's a very

competitive environment. And so if your team is truly operating as a team, you're in

much better shape than if you have a lot of competition. – Jenny

Frank, who works in PR, also shared the importance of collaboration in his line of work:

I think an interest and desire to work collaboratively; someone that always wants to work

by themselves likely will not succeed in a PR communication role. – Frank

Through these quotes we see the importance of collaboration, but what makes the themes of

collaboration, trust, and open communication so intriguing in the scenario of a work environment

is that they all seem to go together. This shared relationship was also expressed by one of the

participants when they stated:

Also those three pieces are very important for me in a work environment. That trust

would be there [in an enjoyable work environment], there would be communication,

there would be collaboration, and honestly I like to have fun and laugh a lot at work and

I think that could be an important element. When you do have relationships built on trust,

I think that there is more fun and laughter that can happen then too. – Sophie

In an environment where trust is present, there is most likely going to be open communication. In order for an employee to feel that they can communicate openly, they have to trust those that they are around, and in order to have effective collaboration there has to be that trust that the people you're working with are going to do what they said they will do, and there has to be open communication so that the project or assignment is done efficiently.

Fair and Respectful Treatment of Employees

While this particular theme may seem obvious in terms of what an employee would see as an enjoyable and ethical workplace, it is one that will later give us insight into the impact that a WRR can have on a work environment. One participant best explains this theme:

> *Also that employees are treated well and treated with respect. No one's being abused and*
> *everyone's being paid fairly and not being forced to work overtime for no pay or forced*
> *to do anything they don't want to or don't feel comfortable with. – Gabby*

The concepts of trust, open communication, collaboration, and fair and respectful treatment of employees were all themes seen throughout the six interviews when it came to the questions of workplaces they found both enjoyable and ethical. These themes were not only present in their lived experiences, but also help us to understand why coworkers and others in the workplace reacted to these WRR's the way they did.

<u>*Main Workplace Romance Themes*</u>

The next part of the interviews explored experiences the participants had involving the people in their workplace who were in the romantic relationships. The questions in this section sought to gain an understanding of the perspective of the coworkers of those in these WRRs and see how they reacted to these relationships, as well as how they perceived these relationships affected the work environment. The themes that emerged from the participants lived experiences included

secrecy, us vs. them, openness, deviant behavior, and the impact of the end of the relationship on the workplace.

Secrecy

Although none of the participants were in a work environment where company or organizational policies prohibited them from engaging in a romantic relationship in their place of work, nearly all of them (the ones who didn't were married) revealed that the WRR they experienced working with was kept a secret from the rest of the people in the office for quite some time.

> *In every instance [of a WRR], there were only a few people who were aware that a relationship was even happening. – Sam*

And while some cases showed the couple in the WRR eventually revealed their relationship status, others remained discreet for quite some time.

> *"I think for virtually all of the examples they were very discreet at the beginning. So they….however they went about it, either limiting their interaction at work at the beginning of the relationship, or you know….that…for some of them I was rather surprised that they made the decision to tell people…. and these two individuals were really secretive about it -- they announced it when they were engaged and that was rather shocking." – Frank*

Others found out about the relationship through gossip:

> *One of the girl's friends told me and told me not to tell anyone because no one else knew at the time. So I had to act like I didn't know for a while, so when the girl in the relationship told me I had to act surprised. - Gabby*

And one participant even had to find out through confrontation:

I found out that the two people I was working with on a daily basis were in a relationship when-oh gosh- I had to confront one person about a situation, and they so fiercely defended the other person that I asked if there was something that was going on with them and the younger one kind of broke down and said "yes, but you can't tell him I told you this." And I said well we're in a work environment where there are only three of us so this absolutely affects the workplace and we have to have this discussion. So then the three of us sat down and had to have a conversation about it and set some ground rules and all that, but it still didn't really change the feel in the workplace. And then the other two – who were the consultants [who were also in a workplace romance] – they actually never came forward at all, it was actually when they had added me on social media and then when I was going around looking at stuff is when I realized that they were [in a WRR]. And then I confronted them about that situation too. And just asked the question because with the small team that we had it does affect the work environment, and does affect the relationship so I just want to know for my own knowledge. So neither one of them came forth about it which, I've learned now from that experience so if that was me in that situation [an office of three and two of them in a romantic relationship with one another] I would absolutely be coming forth about it and making sure that my T's were crossed and my I's were dotted. - Sophie

While the quote above displays a situation in which revealing your relationship should happen, my research was unable to find any evidence suggesting that keeping a WRR a secret negatively impacted the work environment. As a matter of fact, when people described their experience with a healthy WRR, they mostly described it by saying that if you didn't already know the people in the WRR were in a relationship, you couldn't tell. But as participants in this study

revealed, once the relationship is out in the open, it can affect the workplace in numerous ways depending on how the individuals in the WRR interact with coworkers and with one another.

Us vs. Them

Another theme that emerged from the interviews was participants' feeling like it was the individuals in the WRR vs. them. This sentiment was not just reflected by the participants of the study, but participants also expressed this was a sentiment felt by coworkers as well.

> *"My co-workers very much felt the same way. We felt like it was the two other employees [in the WRR] vs. us, and the two consultants [in the WRR] vs. us, and it became sort of a toxic environment….I think that's where a lot of the people were like 'ok, we can't take this anymore. We're done.' Because you want to feel like your whole team has your back and the whole team has each other's back. And really when it's like two people vs. the rest of you it doesn't feel very good. – Sophie*

When diving deeper into why and how this feeling of us vs. them develops, a sub-theme began to emerge. For a lot of the participants in the study, they felt that because the individuals in a WRR were in a relationship with one another, their loyalty to one another would drive them to choose their partner over their coworkers regardless of the situation, thus, creating an 'us vs. them' type of feeling. One of the participants described it by saying:

> *I felt like at sometimes…some ability to be objective in some decision-making sometimes gets thrown out the window because their views are a little skewed because they don't want to offend the person they're dating. – Franks*

This can also become an issue of ethics because this loyalty could cause an individual to defend or side with their partner even when the partner is doing (or did) something wrong. One of the

participants showed this when explaining the ethical concerns they had with the WRR they experienced:

> *I think where it really came down and had the ethical concerns is just them having that person's back rather than being on the ethical side if that makes sense? So the fact that they weren't even going to come forward and say, "yes this person did something wrong," it was like, "nope, I have no idea what your talking about." – Sophie*

When we look at the potential reasons for this perception amongst coworkers -- of the loyalty of people in WRRs – we can go back to the theme of trust reflected in the Enjoyable and Ethical Workplace section. If coworkers perceive that individuals in WRRs are more loyal to one another than to them or any other coworker, they will more than likely not trust those individuals as much, which paves the way to the theme of us vs. them. This lack of trust can lead to suspicion, and -- if there is a hierarchal WRR in play -- that suspicion can move beyond just thoughts of favoritism and into how the company or organization is being run. This can be seen in the quote by one of the participants while talking about the hierarchal WRR they experienced in their place of work.

> *"Yeah, there was a little bit of that [being cautious] and just a lot of suspicion all the way around. We hadn't had this position before, was there really a need? And you know…was the boss doing this so that he had more of that income coming to them versus the profit share you know? – Jenny*

Through these experiences, we see that the perception of the loyalty of those in WRRs can lead to coworkers feeling like it is the individuals in the relationship against them.

Openness

As was stated in the ethical and enjoyable workplace themes' section: Open communication can best be described as the quality of being honest in both feedback, and in overall interactions with coworkers. It also includes individuals feeling free and comfortable to share and self-disclose information. One participant shared how a hierarchal WRR in their workplace affected the open communication between coworkers:

> Well It [the hierarchal WRR] affected our culture, for sure, because now we had someone who's married to the boss right in with all of us….so we did become a little more formal, and just a little bit more aware of our professionalism. I guess you could say some of the candor dissapeared...it did shift our culture a little bit, because we became a lot more cautious around her. – Jenny

Another participant shared how a lateral relationship in their workplace specifically affected their communication with those in the WRR:

> I would say my communication with them was very transparent before I found out. I was very honest with them about, 'ok, this needs to be in a different place' or 'this isn't up to our standards and we need to redo this.' I tried to be very…like just talking to one person or just talking to the other person and when we were in a group setting, I'd again be very transparent with them and tell them how I was feeling, where I was at, and (being the leader of the organization too) I felt it important to be transparent to build trust with them--to be open with them with where I stood with things. And as time went on, and as I found out they were in a relationship, a lot of my transparency ended, because – not ended but just ceased a little bit more – because I didn't trust them. – Sophie

Through this quote we see that an individual's ability to be open with those in a WRR may be tied to how much they trust them. Later in the interview, Sophie more explicitly talks about why a lack of trust leads to a lack of openness in WRRs:

> *I think your transparency is a bit limited and your communication is a bit limited because you—if you're in a relationship with a person you are probably loyal to that person. So I think that especially when I interact with certain coworkers here that are in relationships with people, of course I'm not going to say anything about how I'm really feeling, where I'm at, or being transparent with their team or about that person because I know that that's going to go right back to that person. – Sophie*

In this quote we not only see how WRRs can affect communication between coworkers, but we also see how the perception of loyalty between the people in WRRs can effect coworker communication and the workplace as a whole.

Deviant Behavior

Deviant conduct consists of voluntary behaviors that violate significant organizational norms and threaten the well being of the organization, its members, or both (Kidwell, 2005, p. 136). While this study doesn't suggest that WRRs should be considered deviant behavior or conduct, the theme of deviant behavior emerged from the study in two specific subthemes: political deviance, and deviant workplace sexual behaviors.

Political deviance can be defined by the "action(s) of badmouthing others, spreading rumors, and displaying favoritism" (Kidwell, 2005, pg. 138). While displaying favoritism was mentioned in a few interviews, the actions of badmouthing others and spreading rumors (also known as gossiping) was a prominent theme that emerged through the interviews. And while gossip is not a rarity in the workplace, participants' experiences showed that gossip resulting

from the WRRs in their workplace impacted both the communication between coworkers, and the effectiveness of the work environment. One participant stated:

> *"Some people made other peoples' relationships a constant topic of discussion at all of the outings. And it was frustrating because people would talk behind people's backs when they weren't around; yet act "normal" when they were there. So that was really frustrating because we're all supposed to be adults and yet the way people would act was....well a little immature."– Sam*

Another participant expressed that in her particular experience, the gossip actually impacted the effectiveness of the workplace and how productive they were.

> *"It was just becoming an office thing when really no one wanted anything to do with it. So it just became a place where we weren't getting anything done, we were just talking about how people messed around." - Blaire*

Again, gossip isn't anything new in the workplace, but through these quotes we see that gossip concerning the WRRs coworkers experience working with can impact the productivity within the workplace, as well as coworkers' interactions with one another.

The sub-theme of deviant workplace sexual behaviors encompassed two main concepts: 1) sexual activity within the workplace, and 2) affairs with coworkers. One participant explained the work environment they were in by saying:

> *"Well that was a workplace where ethics and trust were not overflowing in every regard, and so that was totally acceptable in that culture. There were affairs going on all over the place. And while, in fact I never had an affair with anybody at all, I was one of the few who never dabbled, but I would bring in clients for meetings and I learned early on that before you bring a client into a conference room you're going to knock on the*

conference room door and you poke your head in first before sending clients in because

you never know what's gonna happen….There was one [situation] where -- she was a

writer and she was sleeping with the boss (who was also sleeping with the other

boss…but he slept with lots of people and I don't think she knew that)…but this friend of

mine was a young copywriter and she put her marriage at risk. She had two or three

children at the time and I was not married so I remember being in a bar with her and

she's using my cell phone to call the boss. And I'm like geez…don't you realize what you

have going on?" – Jenny

While many would feel uncomfortable in an work environment such as the one above, one of the things I sought to find in the experiences of participants who dealt with deviant workplace sexual behaviors was how coworkers reacted to these relationships, and how these behaviors affected the work environment. When asked how the work environment she had described above impacted their [the individuals who didn't engage in affairs] relationships with their bosses and coworkers, Jenny said:

"I don't know if any of us trusted them…. To me it damaged their credibility."

Another participant described how coworkers reacted to the deviant workplace sexual behavior in their place of work.

"After they started dating some people were extremely judgmental, and honestly

borderline hostile at times, to a specific couple because one of the parties was married….

Long story short, due to the workplace romance, she separated from her husband, and it

took a couple of years for that event to stop shaping and impacting their experience (and

how the majority of coworkers treated them)." – Sam

Again, while the research doesn't show that WRRs should be considered deviant behavior or conduct, the experiences of some of the participants in the study show that these behaviors can in fact impact the work environment and interactions between coworkers.

The Impact of the End of a WRR on the Workplace

One of the most concerning situations in regards to a WRR is: what happens in the aftermath of a break up? How do the individuals in the WRR act and interact with their coworkers as well as with the person they used to date? While only a couple of participants in this particular study experienced a dissolved WRR, the combination of their experience and the responses of the others to the question of how they thought (in a hypothetical scenario) a breakup up would affect their workplace show that coworkers feel the need to take sides as well as feel decreased happiness with their jobs. One participant – who experienced a few dissolved WRRs – explained how these impacted their specific work environment.

> *In most cases, the relationships fell apart. The people who knew about the relationships, in some cases, had to "pick sides" in terms of who they choose to be friends with which made for an interesting workplace dynamic at times. – Sam*

Another talked about how they imagined their workplace would react to a break-up.

> *I can imagine maybe people taking sides at first but I don't think it would be like overtly. Like everyone would still treat both of them nicely, and be pleasant and professional….I like to imagine that at least. – Gabby*

One participant also talked about how these break-ups could affect those who were in the WRRs, as well as the reaction coworkers could have.

> *As I described the happiness of those individuals and kind of the residual effect it had on other employees…kind of the flip side is you know a little bit of sadness, anxiety of what*

does it mean it now that the relationship didn't work? What does that mean for the

department? What does it mean for the employees? – Frank

Through these quotes we can briefly see how a break up in the context of a WRR could possibly impact the workplace.

Workplace Expectations for Lateral vs. Hierarchal Relationships

The majority of the relationships that participants in this study experienced were lateral, but we also discussed how they thought their situation would have been different if the WRR they witnessed had been hierarchal? For this study's participants, the perception of lateral relationships was relatively indifferent. People do not mind their coworkers engaging in these types of relationships as long as they are healthy and do not disrupt the workflow and environment. However, the perception of hierarchal relationships was found to be rather negative; individuals revealed that with a hierarchal relationship there may be favoritism or manipulation involved.

When asked what differences they think there would be if the WRR they experienced had been hierarchal, one participant quickly stated:

"Well, probably concerns of favoritism." – Frank

This answer was one repeated by the participants of the study almost immediately after the question was asked. But why is there speculation?

The theme of favoritism being involved in hierarchal relationships was one that was not just repeated in the hypothetical question, but was also one that two participants experienced – or suspected was happening -- in their own workplaces. This was a sentiment shared by many in one participants' organization:

"There were some people who were kind of frustrated with that. She didn't have any work experience and she's into management? We all have degrees she didn't even have a degree and oh look: just because you marry this man you know…for me, I was ok with it because work is work. But there were some of our more creative creatives where they…you know they're designers and they put their heart and their soul and everything into everything that they do, and so they're sensitive and they're dramatic and they're creative and…so some of them took it as a personal insult ya know? Like why wouldn't he offered us a position of management instead of bringing in this young pretty girl?" – Jenny

Another participant shared how their experience of favoritism at their place of work led to bigger consequences than frustration and speculation.

Yeah…you just don't want a lot of the tension that could happen or the supervisor ends up playing favorites with somebody and…what we had at [former place of work] (somebody got fired at [former place of work]) because what ended up happening is that supervisor didn't do an annual review of the person yet that person still ended up getting a raise and that's obviously a big no-no. But there are things like that that happened and I learned a lot from those lessons. - Sophie

Through these quotes we see why favoritism was one of the main concerns participants stated when asked what differences would there be if the WRR they experienced had been hierarchal. This concern comes as no surprise when we look back to the themes expressed by participants in the enjoyable and ethical workplace section. The theme of loyalty is again expressed here, as participants' concern comes from the fact that they think because the upper

level employee is in this relationship, they will look after and take care of their significant other

no matter what. One participant expressed this when they stated:

> *Well, if you if you have a couple and one is at a higher level, I would imagine there's*
>
> *some speculation about the skills and the value of the person in the lower level. You*
>
> *know, are they here because they have earned it and they have the credibility? Or are*
>
> *they here because they're sleeping with the boss? And until you know the value that that*
>
> *person can bring, I think there's a natural skepticism. – Jenny*

As we see in this quote, the concern that the loyalty of the individuals in the WRR to one another

may cause the person in a position of power to use that power to benefit their partner is a genuine

concern, and one that some individuals have unfortunately seen first hand in their respective

workplaces.

The negative reaction to WRRs is not merely a result of the individual who is in power.

Participants in this study also mentioned manipulation, on the part of the lower level employee

as, something they would perceive if their WRR were a hierarchal one. This perceived

manipulation stems from the fact that (as prior research has shown) many coworkers perceive

hierarchal WRRs to be driven by job motivations (Quinn, 1977), and suggests that these lower

level employees would be engaging in these relationships in an attempt to gain an advantage

over coworkers in terms of promotions or advancement in their organization. One participant

further described this perception by saying:

> *Yeah I think it might make a difference. I think if a lateral relationship were happening*
>
> *people wouldn't think too much of it, but the power ones are a little different I think. And*
>
> *I think even—and I might sound bad in this day and age saying this—but even the sex of*
>
> *which person was in the position of power might even make more of a difference….You*

might think the person that's a little lower might be trying to make their way up to the top

by engaging with the right people. And then the person in the higher position of

power…maybe it's more of an ego thing or that feeling of power. Because you always see

in the movies bosses and their secretaries. [Implying bosses are male and secretaries are

female] – Blaire

In this quote, we not only see the perception of manipulation on the part of the lower-level employee, but we also see a glimpse of the gender influence on the perception of those in WRRs. There was a strong gender influence in participants' responses, as they tended to give stereotypical gendered answers.

 This perception was expounded upon by a participant:

"I just feel like maybe some people might think like a younger girl is seen as a gold

digger, or an older woman who's an higher up might be seen as a cougar. And people

might think the guy's like manipulating the older women…I don't know I think there are

two sides to it and I think each gender probably has their own stereotypes that can be

played into." – Gabby

These quotes affirm the findings shown in previous research that talk about how coworkers are less likely to trust those in hierarchal relationships (Horan & Chory, 2009), as well as perceive hierarchal relationships to be driven by job motivation. (Malachowski, Chory, & Claus, 2012).

Discussion

This study aimed to look at whether workplace romantic relationships are perceived as an ethical issue by the coworkers of those participating in the workplace romance, how workplace romances affect relationships with coworkers, as well as how workplace romances affect the

overall climate of the workplace. Professionals in the advertising, public relations and/or marketing fields were included in the study, as no prior research has solely focused on these professionals' experiences with coworkers' WRRs and the ethical implications of those WRRs. The topic of romance in the workplace is one of professional ethics because of the potential they have to create tension within the work environment. The themes that emerged from the experiences of participants not only reflected this, but these themes can better be seen as ethical issues when compared to the code of conduct for these respective fields. These codes include:

- o Employees should then be open and honest with one another, and look to correct wrongful or erroneous communication with one another (Public Relations Society of America, 2016 ¶"Free Flow of Info" section).

- o "Avoid actions and circumstances that may appear to compromise good business judgment or create a conflict between personal and professional interests" (PRSA, 2016 ¶"Conflict of interest" Section).

- o Advertisers and their agencies, and online and offline media, should discuss privately potential ethical concerns, and members of the team creating ads should be given permission to express internally their ethical concerns (AAF, 2011 p. 10).

When we look at the first ethical item, open communication, it is clear this was an ethical issue for the participants in this study regarding their co-workers' WRRs. This lack of openness can also be seen in the fact that many of the participants had no mention of anyone talking to the people in the WRR about potential ethical concerns, especially if the relationship was hierarchal. This is a direct contradiction of the third code of conduct mentioned above, and further shows the impact that WRRs can have on the openness of a work environment. Also, political deviance can be seen as a form of wrongful or erroneous communication. As mentioned in the results section, political deviance can

also be referred to as gossip, and gossip is something that this study has found can impact the openness of communication between coworkers It has also been shown in some circumstances to impact the productivity of a workplace (as was seen in Blaire's quote in Deviance section).

The second ethical item -- noted above from PRSA -- highlights avoiding "creat[ing] conflict between personal and professional interests", and is a clear link to why a few of the participants don't think there should be dating in the workplace; as many see WRR's as actions and circumstances that could compromise an individual's judgment. The possibility that an individual's judgment within a WRR could be compromised because of their partner creates a conflict. This conflict is identical to the feeling of Us vs. Them that participants in this study experienced feeling, because the perception of compromised judgment results from a lack of trust, which is derived from the fact that coworkers perceive that individuals in WRRs are loyal to each other to a fault; thus creating the conflict of interest. This also contributes to the ethical concern of favoritism or special treatment (Malachowski, Chory, & Claus (2012). If individuals are in hierarchal WRRs, they may promote their significant other because they are in a relationship with them or because they may not want to upset them. This is both unfair, and unethical, because the judgment of the upper level employee is compromised, and would likely create conflict and tension within the work environment. Participants in this study has noted that the dissolving of a WRR can create ethical concerns, as the taking of sides creates tension and can also lead to more political deviance.

However, this study's results did not suggest that WRRs should never occur in the workplace. On the contrary, a few participants in the study actually had positive experiences and interactions with those in WRRs; relationships that exhibited none of the unethical behaviors expressed in the paragraph above. So what separates these positive WRRs from the potential negative and unethical experiences that could also result from WRRs? What I found while conducting this study is that it

came down to the maturity of the workplace romantic relationship. This element of maturity is what was referred to by participants -- and in the above sections -- when relationships were described as healthy and unhealthy.

According to participants in the study, immature WRRs are comprised of couples isolating themselves and spending too much time together in the workplace, fighting in the office, and involving their personal life in work. These immature relationships are ones that coworker's described as unhealthy, and it is from these relationships that the negative themes and experiences described in the results section are derived. Sophie gave an example of this when she highlighted behavior from an immature WRR she experienced:

I didn't trust them, I didn't trust how they were talking behind my back and I think especially after you have—this is the kind of situation that would happen: we'd have a meting with the team so it'd just be the three of us sitting down and having a meeting together. And we'd all have our computers out because we need to be doing a working meeting, and the two of them would all of a sudden look at each other and smile, or look at each other and smirk or something; and I found out later that it was because they were IM'ing about something that I had said. So it felt like they were making fun of me behind my back. So after that happened my communication with them changed very drastically and I was a lot less transparent and much more direct like 'you guys are going to do this, and do this, and this' and it was a lot less team oriented and a lot more just me telling you rather than a team. – Sophie

Through this quote we see clear immaturity on the part of the people in the WRR, but we also see how this immaturity impacted the communication between Sophie and her coworkers. Not only was there a lack of trust, but there was also a diminishing of transparency.

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Mature WRRs were expressed by participants to be relationships with which they did not have a problem, and the reason for that being was the nature of these relationships. Participants essentially described these relationships by "saying if you didn't already know they were dating, you would have no idea." When asked what characteristics contributed to the WRR she experienced being so positive, Gabby explained:

They [the individuals in the WRR] kept their personal life out of the office. Like if they were in a fight, I don't think anyone would notice. Also, knowing when to not bug your significant other at work. Just kind of knowing that they're busy and not bugging them all the time at work; I think that shows that you know the person instead of being clingy, being all over them, and kind of flaunting that you're in a relationship. Not flaunting, flaunt is the wrong word…not acting super couple-y with the person and just being super professional like not engaging in PDA at work, not fighting at the office, etc. – Gabby

Through this quote, we see that the separation of the individual's personal life from work is key in a mature WRR. This doesn't mean that individuals within a WRR aren't able to work together, but rather means that when given the chance to work together individuals in WRRs should act in a professional manner as they would with other coworkers. Interestingly, some participants noted that those in a mature WRR may also motivate their partner to perform better at work, as Sophie illustrated,

In my job right now there are two people that I'm actually leading work with and they're dating right now, and I think for the two of them…it works for them because they both push each other to be better and they really do want to better themselves, they want to do good at their job, and they cherish the opportunity to work together. So for them, when they have an opportunity to work together they want to make sure it's the best it can

possibly be, and they really seize that opportunity. So I think again that it comes down to

the maturity in the relationship…I guess that's a good way to put it. – Sophie

So when we look at workplace romantic relationships and the impact they have on the work environment, maturity is a big part of that and something that needs to be explored more thoroughly in the future.

More concrete definitions for mature and immature WRRs are needed, as well as research saying how these mature relationships can be developed and fostered in a work environment. This can be done effectively through a study similar to this one. The study would consist of semi-formal interviews that look at the experiences of coworkers of those in WRRs, in order to understand how these relationships impact the work environment and the communication between coworkers. In order for the study to effectively capture what criteria constitute a mature versus an immature WRR, it would need to feature both a larger quantity of participants, as well as expand beyond the advertising, public relations, and/or marketing fields.

The larger number of participants would be needed in able to reach saturation for themes, meaning the same ideas are repeated across participants (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003). It is one thing to gather these definitions from a few people's experiences, but if we begin to see these same themes and definitions appear in multiple people's experiences, then we can begin to truly get a sense of mature and immature workplace romantic relationships, and how they impact the work environment. In order for this to occur, I believe a sample size of at least 15-20 participants would be necessary.

The diversity of professions will be key in future studies, as well, because these studies would be looking for an overarching theme of what a mature WRR in any workplace looks like. Not only does diversity allow us to define the theme of mature WRRs, but it also helps us to

increase the number of participants in the study – as the narrow focus of Marketing, Advertising, and Public Relations professionals led to a shortage of participants in this study. We also see that many of the findings of this study affirm prior research done with other occupations (for example, Horan & Chory, 2009), which suggests some overlap in the way that WRRs affect workplaces in different fields. All of this is key going forward because Americans are spending more and more time in the workplace, which opens up an opportunity for WRRs to happen. This is not necessarily a bad thing, but we need to be aware of the potential ethical dilemmas and concerns that may result from immaturity in these relationships in order to make employees aware of the results of the actions they take in the relationship.

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