

Workplace romance versus sexual harassment: a call to action regarding sexual hubris and sexploitation in the #MeToo era

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Abstract

Purpose – The #MeToo movement has brought questions of sexuality and power in the workplace to the forefront. The purpose of this paper is to review the research on hierarchical consensual workplace romances and sexual harassment examining the underlying mechanisms of power relations. It concludes with a call to action for organizational leaders to adopt fair consensual workplace romance policies alongside strong sexual harassment policies.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper represents a conceptual review of the literature on consensual workplace romance, sexual harassment, passive leadership and power relations. Passive leadership leads to a climate of incivility that in turn suppresses disclosures of sexual harassment (Lee, 2016). Consensual workplace romances across hierarchical power relations carry significant risks and may turn into harassment should the romance turn sour.

Findings – Two new concepts, sexual hubris and sexploitation, are defined in this paper. Sexual hubris, defined as an opportunistic mindset that allows the powerful to abuse their power to acquire sexual liaisons, and its opposite, sexploitation, defined as a lower-status member using sexuality to gain advantage and favor from an upper-level power target, are dual opportunistic outcomes of an imbalanced power relation. Sexual hubris may increase the likelihood for sexual harassment such that a mindset occurs on the part of the dominant coalition that results in feelings of entitlement. Sexploitation is a micromanipulation tactic designed to create sexual favoritism that excludes others from the power relation.

Research limitations/implications – Sexual hubris and sexploitation are conceptualized as an opportunistic mechanisms associated with imbalanced power relations to spur future research to tease out complex issues of gender, sexuality and hierarchy in the workplace. Sexual hubris serves to protect the dominant coalition and shapes organizational norms of a climate of oppression and incivility. Conversely, sexploitation is a micromanipulation tactic that allows a lower-status member to receive favoritism from a higher-power target. Four research propositions on sexual hubris and sexploitation are presented for future scholarship.

Practical implications – Most organizational leaders believe consensual romance in the office cannot be legislated owing to privacy concerns. Passive leadership is discussed as a leadership style that looks the other way and does not intervene, leading to workplace hostility and incivility (Lee, 2016). Inadequate leadership creates a climate of passivity that in turn silences victims. Policies concerning consensual workplace romance should stand alongside sexual harassment policies regardless of privacy concerns.

Social implications – The #MeToo movement has allowed victims to disclose sexual misconduct and abuse in the workplace. However, the prevalence of sexual harassment claims most often can be traced to a leadership problem. Employers must recognize that sexual hubris and sexploitation arise from imbalances of power, where sex can be traded for advancement, and that often consensual workplace romances end badly, leading to claims of sexual harassment. Consensual romance policies must stand alongside sexual harassment policies.

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Originality/value – Sexual hubris and sexploitation are offered as novel concepts that provide a mechanism for conceptualizing the potential for abuse and manipulation from unbalanced power relations. These are original concepts derived from the arguments within this paper that help make the case for consensual workplace romance policies alongside sexual harassment policies.

Keywords Harassment, Sex and gender issues, Sexual discrimination, Sexual behavior, Managerial power

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

The #MeToo movement has placed a long overdue and welcome spotlight on power relations and sexual behavior in organizational settings. Men such as Federal Emergency Management Agency Personnel Chief, Corey Colman, who openly offered *quid pro quo* advancement exchanges for sexual relations (*The New York Times*, July 30, 2018), Bill Cosby, who manipulated women by sneaking date rape drugs into their drinks so he could prey on them for sex (*The New York Times*, April 26, 2018) and Harvey Weinstein, who spent decades harassing and raping women in Hollywood with *quid pro quo* requirements to appear in his films (*The New York Times*, September 13, 2018) have victimized women for decades. Each of these cases showcase a power differential where a *quid pro quo* took place; men in power abused their power to sexually compromise women of lesser status.

Workplace romances may begin consensually between colleagues but turn sour and result in harassment (Pierce and Aguinis, 2009). Power inequality facilitates sexual harassment, and sexual harassment reinforces power inequality, leading to a divisive self-perpetuating negative spiral. Punitive or abusive sexual relations are the result of power imbalances where the higher-status partner, usually but not always a male, holds dominion over the lower-status partner, usually but not always a woman (Cortina and Berdahl, 2008; MacKinnon, 1979). The Equal Opportunity Employment Commission (www.eeoc.gov) reports that the majority of sexual harassment claims concern hierarchical relationships where the higher-status employee abused their power over the low-status employee by requesting or requiring sexual relations as a *quid pro quo*. Since the #MeToo movement, this has now been referred to among human resource professionals as *the Harvey Weinstein effect* (Gurchiek, 2018, October 4).

A lesser but also noteworthy aspect of unequal power relations is the opposite concern that the lower-level individual, often but not always a woman, may exploit sexuality as a means to manipulate the higher-status individual, often but not always a man. Films and novels such as *Disclosure* and *Fatal Attraction* showcase the siren song of sexuality as a source of power for women, but feminist scholars have been understandably reticent to discuss the use of sexuality as an instrumental tool of social influence (Glick *et al.*, 2015; Kray *et al.*, 2012; Watkins *et al.*, 2013). A lower-power participant using sexuality to gain advantage and favor from an upper-level power target can be viewed as opportunistic outcomes of an imbalanced power relation. While this scenario is uncommon, recent research on sexual performances as a microinfluence tactic has recently expressed this view (Hakim, 2011; Watkins *et al.*, 2013).

This paper is a conceptual review of the literature on hierarchical workplace romance and sexual harassment specifically through a lens of power relations. Hierarchical romances are the focus of this paper as unequal power relations may turn sour, leading to sexual harassment claims. Two new concepts: that of *sexual hubris*, defined as a mindset of the powerful to use their power as an entitlement to acquire sexual liaisons and its opposite *sexploitation*, defined as a lower-power participant using sexuality to gain advantage and favor from an upper-level power target are offered. These dual concepts are proposed to

explain a mechanism for abusive, predatory or manipulative power relations that can result from imbalances of power and sexual relations. The purpose of this paper is as follows:

- to expound upon these concepts to encourage further research highlighting gender and power relations in the workplace; and
- to offer guidelines for organizational leaders as a call to action to develop workplace policies to prevent such outcomes.

Thematic literature review

Sexual harassment versus consensual workplace romance

Sexual harassment is a legal construct that must be differentiated from consensual workplace romance. The legal definition of sexual harassment as a construct entails two following forms:

- (1) *Quid pro quo* sexual harassment involves threats to make employment-related decisions such as hiring, promotion or termination on the basis of target compliance.
- (2) *Hostile work environment* (HWE) forms of sexual harassment are defined as sex-related conduct that unreasonably interferes with an individual's work performance or creates an intimidating, hostile or offensive working environment (Cortina and Berdahl, 2008; O'Leary-Kelly *et al.*, 2009).

Most harassers are of higher status than the victim and use their power to overwhelm victims who would not ordinarily consent to sexual relations in the workplace (Pierce and Aguinis, 2009).

Sexual harassment at work has many negative outcomes such as decreased job productivity, increased stress, absenteeism, tardiness and turnover (Cortina and Berdahl, 2008; Frye, 2017; Shaw *et al.*, 2018). The Institute for Women's Policy Research (2019, October 13) has identified that working in a male-dominated environment with significant power differentials is associated with high rates of sexual harassment and assault. For example, in the hospitality industry, where employees work for tips and the balance of power is highly skewed, there is a greater likelihood of harassment (Riach and Wilson, 2007; Rodriguez and Reyes, 2014; Shaw *et al.*, 2018). Sexual harassment incidents are reported reluctantly when employees are marginalized by immigration status in janitorial services and domestic work situations (Yeung, 2015). Male-dominated jobs that espouse a "bro culture" offer tacit approval of sexual harassment in the form of HWE (Kiely and Henbest, 2000; Willness *et al.*, 2007). Finally, in workplace situations, where there are significant power differentials between partners with ownership of a firm and those who do not (Sepler, 2015), sexual harassment in the form of *quid pro quo* is likely to occur. Men also have been subjected to sexual harassment though in lower numbers than women (US Task Force on the Study of Harassment in the Workplace June 16, 2016).

Feminist scholarship situates sexual harassment within broader patterns of discrimination, power and privilege, linking harassment to sex-based inequality (MacKinnon, 1979; Seo *et al.*, 2017; Uggen and Blackstone, 2004). A gendered perspective on organizations yields multiple reasons why women may be harassed, such as threat-rigidity theory, which suggests that women ascending the corporate ladder threaten men in the dominant coalition (Kottke and Agars, 2005; Netchaeva *et al.*, 2015). Similarly, backlash theory, described as behavioral resistance to the perception that women threaten men (Burke, 2014; Rudman and Glick, 2001), suggests that women with masculine qualities, or

“uppity women,” are more likely to be harassed (Berdahl, 2007b). Feminist scholarship focuses on power and views sexual harassment as a means to punish gender-role deviance among women who violate feminine ideals (Berdahl, 2007a) rather than being motivated by sexual desire.

To test this hypothesis, Mclaughlin *et al.* (2012) analyzed the Youth Development Study of longitudinal survey data. They found sexual harassment serves as an equalizer against women in power, motivated more by control and domination than sexual impulses (Mclaughlin *et al.*, 2012). The authors examined workplace authority, gender nonconformity and workplace sex ratios. This study tested the “power threat” hypothesis versus the “vulnerable victim” model and found that conditions of power explained opportunities for harassment. While there is an implicit assumption that harassment, discrimination and bullying will recede if women are in charge, women in authority instead provoked backlash from clients, subordinates and fellow supervisors (Mclaughlin *et al.*, 2012). The authors noted that industry sex ratio serves as a predictor for subjective harassment as well; masculine-dominated workplaces create more opportunities for harassment against women. Studies of women in the military support this dynamic (Buchanan *et al.*, 2014).

Hierarchical workplace romance versus peer romances

Hierarchical romances raise questions of ethics, judgment, predation and manipulation. Romances that cross hierarchy are considered disruptive as supervisors have been known to show favoritism toward direct reports by offering lighter workloads, promotions, pay increases or other special benefits (Chan-Serafin *et al.*, 2017; Horan and Chory, 2011; Jones, 1999; Pierce *et al.*, 2012; Powell, 2001). Specific studies associated with reactions to hierarchical workplace romances have found that coworkers uniformly are suspicious of favoritism between a direct reporting couple fearing sex can be traded for advancement (Biggs *et al.*, 2012; Cole, 2009; Doll and Rosopa, 2015; Horan and Chory, 2009, 2011; Mainiero, 1989; Powell, 2001). Attributions of motives for entering hierarchical workplace relationships and perceptions of unfair advantages are associated with coworker dishonesty on the part of the couple (Cowan and Horan, 2014; Gillen Hoke and Chory, 2015; Malachowski *et al.*, 2012) and lower productivity (Dillard and Broetzmann, 2006; Riach and Wilson, 2007). Disruptive affairs may lead to lower levels of psychological well-being, especially when there is a breakup (Berdahl and Aquino, 2009; Cole, 2009) and higher levels of physical strain and job turnover intentions (Baker, 2016; Salvaggio *et al.*, 2011). Hierarchical workplace romances cause distrust and lead to less solidarity and turnover among coworkers and morale issues in the office (Horan and Chory, 2009, 2013; Malachowski *et al.*, 2012). When a workplace romance turns sour, there is risk of textual harassment (Mainiero and Jones, 2013).

However, consensual romances between peers at the same level are more favorably considered as there is less potential for disruption (Doll and Rosopa, 2015; Horan and Chory, 2009; Mainiero, 1989; Pierce *et al.*, 1996; Malachowski *et al.*, 2012). Horan and Chory (2009) found peer-to-peer romances did not elicit the same concerns as hierarchical romances concerning trust, deception or morale in the form of workplace solidarity. Peer-to-peer romantic workplace liaisons can have positive outcomes such as increased job involvement, engagement and work motivation among romantic participants (Pierce *et al.*, 1996; Powell and Foley, 1998) as well as creativity and innovation (Griskevicius *et al.*, 2006). Overall, peer-to-peer romances are favorably considered by observers of the romance as conflicts of interest are avoided (Horan and Chory, 2009).

Passive leadership and workplace culture

While it is the law that employers must follow a sexual harassment policy and investigate claims of harassment, misconduct and abuse, employers have been reluctant to establish policies concerning consensual workplace romance. Until recently, workplace policies concerning consensual workplace romances have fallen into the category of “passive leadership” (Bass, 1990; Lee, 2016). Passive leadership is a *laissez-faire* style of leadership characterized by avoiding decisions, failing to follow up and refusing to intervene until serious issues arise (Lee, 2016). Passive or indifferent leaders are unlikely to punish or correct problematic behaviors (Bass, 1990). This lack of action, or looking the other way, fosters norms of silence that allows perpetrators to avoid consequences (Lee, 2016). Passive leadership is also associated with higher levels of interpersonal conflict, workplace incivility and bullying behaviors (Holtz and Harold, 2013; Hoel and Salin, 2003; Skogstad *et al.*, 2007).

Passive or apathetic leadership may be a critical factor in the proliferation of sexual harassment (Kelloway *et al.*, 2008; Lee, 2016; Quick and McFadyen, 2016). While prior research has examined the relationship of different styles of leadership with forms of workplace aggression (Holtz and Harold, 2013; Skogstad *et al.*, 2007) and the association of counterproductive work behaviors with initiating structure vs consideration leader leaders, the absence of strong leadership creates a climate for sexual harassment, especially in male-dominated organizations (Lee, 2016). Organizational leaders set the tone and provide social cues on workplace priorities and norms of behavior. Employers who are concerned about privacy issues (“not my business what consenting adults do”) allow managers to look the other way until a situation unfolds that is clearly abusive in the form of sexual harassment, where legally they must take action. Passive leadership may lead to a situation in which managers may be reluctant to intervene and contributes to a climate of ignorance and inaction.

Passive leadership is also associated with workplace incivility (e.g. yelling, ridiculing and intimidating) and increased hostility among coworkers (Harold and Holtz, 2015). According to a theory of workplace incivility (Andersson and Pearson, 1999), observing hostile behaviors deemed acceptable may foster more aggressive interpersonal interactions. This has been termed the “incivility spiral,” where mild violations of norms for respect can turn into increasingly intense aggressive behaviors over time. As hostile exchanges are observed by coworkers, norms for incivility are legitimized, leading to more intense responses, causing an exchange of increasingly hostile behaviors.

Under conditions of hostility, employees do not feel safe to report abuses for fears of retaliation. Ostracism has been acknowledged as both an outcome of disclosing sexual harassment and a barrier preventing targets from disclosing their abuse (Brown and Battle, 2020). The suppression of the truth, often over a period of years, results in victims coming forward only to be shunned and silenced (Brown and Battle, 2020). Fernando and Prasad (2019) recognized a form of “reluctant acquiescence” that occurs when organizational norms do not support disclosure; the system leads women, even highly educated academic women, to acquiesce and become silenced (Fernando and Prasad, 2019). Organizational silence may be the product of managers, human resource professionals and colleagues who develop discourses to persuade victims not to voice their discontent. Third-party actors prefer to maintain the status quo and discourage whistleblowing, except in very serious offenses that allow no excuse (Fernando and Prasad, 2019). Therefore, organizational silencing mechanisms may be directly a product of passive leadership that promotes an organizational culture of oppression (Lee, 2016).

The #MeToo phenomenon has prompted victims to disclose their experiences of assault, misconduct or harassment through social media to rebel against organizational silencing and expose perpetrators and their enablers. [Kiplinger et al. \(2019\)](#) completed a cross-sectional survey from 500 women in September 2016 and September 2018 and documented that while there were reduced complaints of sexual harassment in the form of unwanted sexual attention and sexual coercion in 2018, gender role harassment had increased. Sexual harassment creates a climate of intimidation and repression; a woman who is sexually harassed often experiences the same psychological victimization as those who were raped, battered or experienced other gender-related crimes, questioning her self-worth and blaming herself ([MacKinnon, 1979](#)). The women studied in the [Kiplinger et al.'s \(2019\)](#) study noted that the #MeToo movement had empowered them to speak out and identify harassment as warranted. [Leopold et al. \(2019\)](#) suggest that the #MeToo movement has done more for changing norms and increasing awareness about sexual harassment than decades of laws and corporate policy.

Imbalanced power relations

Lost in the dialogue around the disclosure of sexual misconduct and harassment in the #MeToo era is the fact that most harassment scenarios occur as a result of imbalanced power relations, often in the context of a direct reporting or hierarchical relation [the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) Report of the Task Force on Sexual Harassment, 2016]. This is because imbalanced power relations create opportunistic mechanisms for the abuse of power such that power can be traded for sex. Rather than looking the other way, organizational leaders must pay attention how power imbalances in consensual workplace romances may allow for not only sexual harassment but also manipulation.

The mechanisms that underlie power relations in organizations are twofold: those in power can confer status and favoritism over those with lesser status; but by the same mechanism, those with lesser status may use favors as a means of manipulation of a higher power target. [DiTomasso \(1989\)](#) and [MacKinnon \(1979\)](#) both noted that sex can become a medium by which manipulation and domination behaviors are displayed. Both authors conceptualized that social influence behaviors associated with sexuality take place in organizations.

Resource dependence theory scholars and those who study the economics of sexual behavior have explicitly studied the bases of power across hierarchical relations ([Popovich and Warren, 2009](#)). [Mainiero \(1986, 1989\)](#) theorized that the reason peer romances are viewed favorably, while hierarchical romances foster distrust results from the asymmetry of power is that employees fear sex can be traded for power and advancement. Third-party observers may perceive hierarchical workplace romances to unfairly benefit the lower-status partner in an exchange of personal/sexual resources with higher ups ([Mainiero, 1986](#)). [Philaretou and Young \(2007\)](#) second this hypothesis with the argument that there is an exchange of resources across domains – men may offer women tangible assets (e.g. money, career advancement) along with favors and compliments for sexual attention.

[Baumeister and Vohs \(2004\)](#) also identified sexuality as a resource that can be offered in exchange for other favors. They argue an economic hypothesis that among heterosexuals, a community can be analyzed as a marketplace in which men seek to acquire sex from women by offering other resources, such as money or status, in exchange. [Baumeister et al. \(2017\)](#) further detail sexual economics theory as a marketplace transaction where sexual resources and other material resources are exchanged among heterosexual partners. It has long been noted that power inspires romantic desire; exchanges of sex and power form the foundation

of evolutionary and social psychology scholarship (Eastwick *et al.*, 2013; Martin, 2005; Meier and Dionne, 2009) despite Rudman's (2017) critique of sexual economics.

Opportunity for sexual hubris and exploitation

Sexual hubris. Sexual hubris, defined as an opportunistic mindset that allows the powerful to abuse their power to acquire sexual liaisons, and its opposite *sexploitation*, defined as a lower power participant using sexuality to gain advantage and favor from an upper-level power target, are dual opportunistic outcomes of an imbalanced power relation. Sexual hubris may increase the likelihood for sexual harassment such that a mindset occurs on the part of the dominant coalition that results in feelings of entitlement. Sexploitation is a micromanipulation tactic (Gomes *et al.*, 2006) designed to create favoritism that excludes others from the power relation. Both concepts will be addressed in this section to further research on these topics.

The powerful are generally more confident, self-assured, assertive and impulsive than those who are powerless (Anderson and Berdahl, 2002; Galinsky *et al.*, 2009; Lammers *et al.*, 2012; Magee *et al.*, 2007). Power increases confidence and has transformative effects on individuals' psychological states (Keltner *et al.*, 2003) such that the powerful see the world, themselves, and other people in a different manner and act differently than individuals who lack power. Increased confidence on the part of the powerful allows them to focus attention on physically attractive others, and power and status increase romantic approach behavior (Eastwick *et al.*, 2013; Meier and Dionne, 2009). Through a series of five confederate studies, it was documented that power increases risk-taking (Anderson and Galinsky, 2006), and regardless of gender, power increased the propensity for risk-taking behaviors among those who feel confident and successful (See *et al.*, 2011).

Power seems to be an aphrodisiac of some sort; questionable moral behavior and the pursuit of sexual desire distort the morality of those in powerful positions, often leading to their political or corporate downfall as their judgment is questioned (Martin, 2005). This has been termed the "power paradox" (Keltner, 2016) that the acquisition of power causes a paradoxical loss of sensitivity to the processes that put us in power in the first place. Subjects under the influence of power become more impulsive, less risk aware and less adept at seeing things from an alternative perspective. The power paradox illustrates how sex, power and the systems that enable men like Harvey Weinstein to sexually assault women for decades without detection; those in power protect powerful targets, while the powerless are silenced (Keltner, 2016, 2018).

Research in the field of neuroscience suggests that power changes the motor resonance in the brain, such that the powerful, as members of the dominant coalition, neglect the powerless and are oblivious to their concerns (Hogeveen *et al.*, 2014). MRI resonance imaging shows that those in power have a duller, less pronounced vagus nerve response that tracks compassion and empathy in the brain. When the brains of the powerful and powerless are compared, feelings of empathy and compassion are lowered among those in powerful positions, while the powerless experience greater threats, higher cortisol levels, greater sympathetic autonomic nervous system activation and higher blood pressure under conditions of threat from the powerful predator.

Power may cause myopia and a lack of empathy such that the powerful protect those around them of similar status and develop tunnel vision in a way that causes them to become less sensitive to the actions of others (Keltner, 2016). Owen and Davidson (2009) refer to this as "hubris syndrome," a disorder of the possession of power, particularly power which has been associated with overwhelming success, held for a period of years with minimal constraint on the leader. Clinical features of hubris syndrome include manifest

contempt for others, loss of contact with reality, restless or reckless actions and displays of incompetence.

The increased confidence, or hubris, experienced by those in power, coupled with the willingness for risk, allows for predatory behaviors where a higher-status individual may elicit sexual favors from a lower-status individual as a measure of entitlement. For example, in the case of *Meritor Savings Bank v Vinson* (1986), in which Michelle Vinson filed suit against the bank under Title VII, Vinson claimed she had been forced to have sexual relations with her boss, Sidney Taylor, while he locked her in a bank vault and raped her several times. She had not disclosed the harassment owing to fear of reprisal. Many victims in powerless positions are silenced owing to fears of retaliation (Cortina and Magley, 2003; Fernando and Prasad, 2019).

This line of thinking is in accordance with MacKinnon's theory of sexual harassment (1979) that hypothesized dominant constructions of heteronormative masculinity shape the harassment experiences of women and that harassment functions as a generalized display of power and dominance (MacKinnon, 1979). Those who speak up often are seen as whistleblowers that threaten group cohesion of the power hierarchy (Sumanth *et al.*, 2011). For example, at *JP Morgan Chase* (2020), women who were sexually harassed were purposefully ostracized for refusing to participate in a harsh masculine climate that fostered harassment and suffered social and economic consequences. Such cases show that scholars recognize how the systems of organizational power and passive leadership on the part of the dominant coalition shape the climate and permissiveness of harassment and, at the same time, silence victims.

This discussion of the concept of sexual hubris leads to the following propositions that frame this conceptual review.

- P1. Sexual hubris, defined as an opportunistic mindset that allows the powerful to abuse their power to acquire sexual favors, results from an imbalance of power where members of the dominant coalition believe that sexual relations can be traded for power and advancement.
- P2. Sexual hubris is strongly related to incidents of sexual harassment.

Sexploitation. Sexploitation is a micromanipulation tactic designed to advance power resulting from sexual relations that occur across the hierarchy. The lower-level status individual has an opportunity to trade sexual favors for power. The popular press articulates use of sexuality as a source of power for women (Hakim, 2011), but scholars have been reticent to discuss the use of sexuality as an instrumental tool of social influence (Glick *et al.*, 2015; Kray *et al.*, 2012; Watkins *et al.*, 2013). Use of sexuality as a social influence strategy may be more prevalent than expected. One of DiTommaso's (1989) conclusions in her study of a manufacturing firm was that women in that firm used their sexuality to negotiate easier jobs or advancement. Ely's (1995) study of female lawyers found evidence that women in male-dominated organizations engaged in sexual performances during their interactions with men because of the understanding that men enjoy women's sexualized performances. Such acts may be termed as *sexploitation* in the workplace, as they are manipulative acts associated with the use of sexuality designed to exploit one's assets to gain favor and influence others.

It is not necessarily surprising that women may benefit from having intimate relationships with those who hold power; some researchers contend this is a "secret weapon" for women of lower status (Glick *et al.*, 2015; Gomes *et al.*, 2006; Harris and Ogbonna, 2006; Kray *et al.*, 2012; Watkins *et al.*, 2013). Harris and Ogbonna (2006) documented five main

strategies (obligation creation and exploitation, personal status enhancement, information acquisition and control, similarity exploitation and proactive vertical alignment) among 112 employees in a large financial services organization that led to career enhancement. The authors noted that women in their study were unopposed to using “feminine wiles” in the form of flirtation, teasing and sexual suggestions to achieve favors from men in the dominant coalition.

Sexual performances, or use of sexual influence tactics, are defined as behavior that is imbued with sexual intent, content or meaning by its performers, observers or both that is intended to influence a target person in some way (Watkins *et al.*, 2013). This may encompass aspects of sexuality, defined as a continuum of sexual expression, from feelings of sexual interest to flirtations to sexual acts that are undertaken voluntarily or as a result of workplace coercion (Gutek, 1985, p. 153; Kray and Locke, 2008; Kray *et al.*, 2012). It has also been described as including elements of power relations, gender construction and social and self-definition. Watkins *et al.* (2013) identified strategic sexual performances as influence tactics that could involve, but not be limited to, winking, flirtatious touching, sexual banter, light touching, sexual conversations, wearing seductive attire, long gazes or intense eye contact, leaning in, complimenting on physical features, whispering, sharing a sexual joke, looking someone up and down and playful teasing.

To be clear, women should never feel compelled to create sexual performances or use their sexuality to secure advancement. Such actions fall under the *quid pro quo* doctrine and may be a consequence of a HWE. But the promise of sexuality or subtle sexual performances such as flirtation (Baumeister and Vohs, 2004; Burke and Keen, 1992; Hakim, 2011; Kray and Locke, 2008; Kray *et al.*, 2012; Watkins *et al.*, 2013) offers an opportunity to rebalance the power relation by making heterosexual men feel more masculine, potent and desirable. In exchange, men may offer women tangible assets (e.g. money, advancement) along with favors and compliments (Philaretou and Young, 2007).

A 2012 survey by the Center for Work-Life Policy (Hewlett, 2010) pointed out that sexual liaisons across the hierarchy are common. In total, 34% of executive women reported that they knew a female coworker who had an affair with her boss; 15% of women at the director level or above said that they had such an affair themselves; 37% of those who knew of an affair believed that the woman received a “career boost as a consequence”; and 70% of women lost respect for a leader who had an affair. These cases are played out in the media where reports of termination, such as the recent termination of a McDonald’s CEO, result from inappropriate consensual workplace romances that cross power relations (*The New York Times*, November 8, 2019).

However, research has shown that the use of sexual power can backfire as women tend to have lower salary and status (Bradley *et al.*, 2005). Among 164 female business school graduates, over 50% said that they used various forms of flirting as a tool to get ahead. But women who did *not* flirt were promoted three times more in their career, while women who flirted were promoted less. Those who did not flirt at work reported earning more money than those who did flirt.

Berdahl and Aquino (2009) agree that sexual behavior at work may have negative consequences. They found that workers who frequently were exposed to sexual workplace behavior that was manipulative or inappropriate were more likely to experience job withdrawal and that exposure to sexual behavior at work predicted negative employee work and psychological well-being, even for those employees who said they enjoyed sexual banter. Berdahl and Aquino (2009) describe negative sexual behavior at work as a “stealth poison” that is unconsciously linked to unpleasant experiences and leads to negative workplace attitudes, expressed in less job satisfaction.

The above discussion on sexploitation results in the following propositions:

P3. Sexploitation, defined as a micromanipulation tactic designed to increase one's power through sexual favors or flirting, results from imbalanced power relations where sex can be traded for power and advancement.

P4. Consensual workplace romances that cross hierarchy are subject to claims of manipulation, conflicts of interest, unfairness and harassment.

Call to action: workplace policies for consensual workplace romances

Therefore, a call to action is needed. It is time to sound the alarm, while most human resource professionals follow the letter of the law on sexual harassment policies, they have neglected consensual romance policies owing to privacy concerns and a sense of futility in policing such liaisons (Boyd, 2010). Passive leadership is insufficient; any romance that crosses the hierarchy has the potential for favoritism and disruption of power relations. Sexual hubris, which may lead to a loss of judgment on the part of the executive, and sexploitation, which may be initially unintentional but eventually manipulative, create morale problems among coworkers, raise questions of unfairness and conflicts of interest and may result in sexual harassment once the romance is concluded.

Organizational leaders must develop consensual romance policies to stand alongside sexual harassment policies. Employers should avoid the risks of future harassment claims if a consensual hierarchical romance turns sour. Accusations of favoritism can depress work group morale and cause disruption to the workplace in romances where a supervisor dates a subordinate in a hierarchical romance, albeit consensual.

According to the Society of Human Resource Management (see shrm.org), a consensual workplace romance or dating policy should include statements about the following:

- the policy's goal of upholding appropriate boundaries between personal and business relationships;
- the employer's decision whether to prohibit or just discourage fraternization between managers and subordinates;
- the requirement to report participation in such relationships, including those with vendors and other business associates;
- the employer's right to modify reporting structures, such as transferring a boss who is in a relationship with a subordinate; and
- the employer's anti-harassment policy and routes for claims.

Mainiero and Jones (2013) recommend that human resource professionals should coach organizational members on the following:

- the appropriate or inappropriate ways to pursue workplace relationships, casual or otherwise;
- appropriate communication standards within those relationships; and
- the ethical use of digital technology including social media outside the workplace.

Claims of sexual harassment must be investigated if either party indicates adverse effects once the romance concludes.

Policies concerning consensual workplace romance are also necessary to protect firms from liability (Amaral, 2006; Bercovici, 2007; Lickey *et al.*, 2009; Pierce and Aguinis, 2009). Legal experts widely recommend that human resource professionals be trained in how to counsel employees involved in workplace romances and to take action to manage the risks and rewards as well as maintain coworker morale. The Society for Human Resource Management has a sample workplace romance policy for review by employers with the intention of limiting liability (www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/tools-and-samples/policies/pages/cms_006713.aspx).

To eliminate confusion and corporate liability from a workplace romance vs a scenario that turns into harassment, “love contracts” or “cupid contracts” are a way in which romance in the workplace can be legislated (Amaral, 2006; Eidelhoch and Russell, 1998). Both parties involved in a romance sign consensual workplace romance contracts or agreements that specify and acknowledge the following:

- their workplace romance is consensual, voluntary, welcome and unrelated to their professional relationship at work; and
- each employee is free to end the romance at any time without coercion, prejudice or any job-related consequences.

Because workplace romances can lead to accusations of poor judgment, breaches of ethics, favoritism, lost productivity, decreases in employee morale and sexual harassment, an agreement that specifies aspects of the relationship and the conditions under which the firm may take action with respect for privacy rights is welcome (see www.shrm.org/hr-today/news/hr-magazine/pages/2tyler-love%20contracts.aspx for a sample “love contract” for consensual workplace romance).

Consensual workplace romance contracts should be used to supplement a firm’s anti-harassment policy and not in place of a policy itself. The key elements – that the relationship is consensual, that it does not involve a direct reporting relationship, that disputes will be solved through arbitration and that either employee can end the relationship without fear of work-related retaliation – provide the employer with an opportunity to minimize liability should sexual harassment take place or should the romance turn sour. All policies should include an obligation of both participants to inform human resources and for other observers and employees to do so as well (Amaral, 2006; Mainiero and Jones, 2013).

In addition to policy, organizational leaders bear responsibility to monitor and change organizational norms so that civil and respectful behavior is encouraged. As stated by Bergman and Henning (2008), sexual harassment is a leadership problem. In the past, the responsibility was on the shoulders of the victim to come forward with claims of abuse. Instead, all bystanders (employees) should feel comfortable reporting on situations that cross lines of professionalism. Workplace civility training focuses on changing the cultural norms via policies and climate. The training is aimed at reducing harassment issues by increasing respectful dialogue among coworkers (Bergman *et al.*, 2002). When leadership makes an honest and reasonable effort to stop harassment and increase respect, changes can be made to organizational cultural norms so that victims’ rights are respected and reinforced (Shields *et al.*, 2011).

Nagy and Curl-Nagy (2019) discuss several models of civility training that focus on enhancing respect among all members of a workgroup. Such training begins by having a particular workgroup define what it means to treat each member with respect and dignity. Shields *et al.* (2011) discuss workshop activity for gender equity simulation, a role play simulation, in which employees discover how to respect and be civil toward others. By agreeing on what constitutes respectful behavior and holding each other accountable,

employees are empowered to police themselves when a workplace behavior crosses lines and report to management.

The EEOC report from the Task Force on Sexual Harassment (2016) states that to prevent sexual harassment, a change in culture must take place, and culture changes do not happen rapidly (see report from the Task Force on Sexual Harassment, 2016, at www.eeoc.gov). In the case of Uber, where multiple allegations of harassment were claimed while Travis Kalanik was the CEO, the new set of leaders took action to investigate harassment through external investigators and also to how the former climate under Kalanik fostered and tolerated inappropriate sexual behaviors (*The New York Times*, Travis Kalanik, June 21, 2018). Employees at Google and Uber are demanding answers as to why executives at both firms have received enormous pay packages upon termination when found to be guilty of harassment (*The New York Times*, Andy Rubin, October 25, 2018). Employees are rising up and demanding action given #MeToo revelations.

In the military, a clear and consistent anti-harassment message from organizational leaders combined with civility training has led to success (Buchanan *et al.*, 2014). Organizational leaders should regularly conduct confidential assessments of sexual harassing behaviors and the climate for retaliation to monitor and examine in-civil behaviors that lead to suppression and silence. A positive climate decreases sexual harassment rates, reduces retaliation against those who do confront and report harassment and improves the psychological outcomes of victims (Willness *et al.*, 2007). In their study of the military of 9,725 military women, Buchanan *et al.* (2014) found when leaders are firm and consistent in conveying that harassment will not be tolerated, individuals report experiencing less harassment. A strong anti-harassment message from leadership also encourages reporting of harassment incidents. In the military, surveys of sexual harassment occur regularly. Employers can and should actively present surveys of sexual harassment on a regular basis to alert human resource professionals to issues of incivility, HWE and *quid pro quo* incidents of sexual harassment to determine the extent of the problem in certain units, similar to military enforcement of sexual harassment policies.

Conclusion

Teasing out all the variables associated with sexuality, power, gender, manipulation and domination involves separating out gender, sex and power relations from hierarchy. Organizational leaders must enact policies and training that support disclosure of abuse rather than closet suppression and silence. Rather focusing on privacy rights, organizational leaders must recognize the very damaging potential of imbalanced power relations in consensual hierarchical workplace romances through the potential for sexual hubris and exploitation. These dual concepts explain a mechanism for abusive, predatory or manipulative power relations that can result from imbalances of power and sexual relations. Organizational leaders must develop consensual romance policies to stand alongside sexual harassment policies. In addition, taking a lesson from the military, leaders must provide a clear and consistent anti-harassment message that includes changes in the climate for civility and introduces positive, effective and supportive leadership to combat organizational silence and victim oppression. In the #MeToo era, it is time for firms to take action.

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