



Dissolved hierarchical workplace romances : effects of illicitness of the romance, existence of a workplace romance policy, and type of harassing behavior on responses to a sexual harassment complaint

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Applied Psychology

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Abstract:

An experiment was conducted in which the effects of a dissolved hierarchical workplace romance on raters' decisions about an ensuing sexual harassment complaint were examined from an ethical decision-making perspective. Characteristics of the dissolved romance (extramarital vs. nonextramarital), characteristics of the organizational culture (policy against workplace romance vs. no policy), and characteristics of the sexual harassment (hostile environment vs. quid pro quo) were manipulated in written vignettes describing a terminated workplace romance and a subsequent sexual harassment complaint. Results based on a sample of 258 members of the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) reveal that a harasser's behavior was rated as more immoral when (a) the dissolved romance was described as an extramarital affair as opposed to a nonextramarital affair, (b) the organization had as opposed to did not have a policy prohibiting workplace romance, and (c) the sexually harassing behavior was described as quid pro quo as opposed to hostile environment. The degree to which raters recognized that the harasser's behavior was immoral was, in turn, found to predict their attributions of responsibility such that the harasser was judged as more responsible than the complainant when his behavior was perceived as more immoral than when it was perceived as less immoral. Moreover, when raters judged the harasser as more responsible than the complainant, they recommended harsher personnel actions against the harasser than when the harasser was judged as less responsible. Overall, results are consistent with an ethical decision-making framework. The importance of understanding social-sexual behavior in the workplace is discussed from an ethical decision-making perspective and directions for future research are offered.

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ILLCITNESS OF THE ROMANCE, EXISTENCE OF A WORKPLACE ROMANCE  
POLICY, AND TYPE OF HARASSING BEHAVIOR ON RESPONSES TO A SEXUAL  
HARASSMENT COMPLAINT

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This thesis has been read by each member of the thesis committee and has been found to be satisfactory regarding content, English usage, format, citations, bibliographic style, and consistency, and is ready for submission to the College of Graduate Studies.

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## ABSTRACT

An experiment was conducted in which the effects of a dissolved hierarchical workplace romance on raters' decisions about an ensuing sexual harassment complaint were examined from an ethical decision-making perspective. Characteristics of the dissolved romance (extramarital vs. nonextramarital), characteristics of the organizational culture (policy against workplace romance vs. no policy), and characteristics of the sexual harassment (hostile environment vs. quid pro quo) were manipulated in written vignettes describing a terminated workplace romance and a subsequent sexual harassment complaint. Results based on a sample of 258 members of the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) reveal that a harasser's behavior was rated as more immoral when (a) the dissolved romance was described as an extramarital affair as opposed to a nonextramarital affair, (b) the organization had as opposed to did not have a policy prohibiting workplace romance, and (c) the sexually harassing behavior was described as quid pro quo as opposed to hostile environment. The degree to which raters recognized that the harasser's behavior was immoral was, in turn, found to predict their attributions of responsibility such that the harasser was judged as more responsible than the complainant when his behavior was perceived as more immoral than when it was perceived as less immoral. Moreover, when raters judged the harasser as more responsible than the complainant, they recommended harsher personnel actions against the harasser than when the harasser was judged as less responsible. Overall, results are consistent with an ethical decision-making framework. The importance of understanding social-sexual behavior in the workplace is discussed from an ethical decision-making perspective and directions for future research are offered.

## INTRODUCTION

### Workplace Romance and Sexual Harassment

Workplace romances have become commonplace in organizations as a result of factors such as the use of co-ed work teams and extended work shifts. In addition, the later age for marriage, the higher proportion of unmarried persons, and the high divorce rate each serve to create an ever-replenishing courtship pool at work (Hochschild, 1996). Workplace romance (WR) is defined as a mutually desired relationship involving physical attraction between two employees of the same organization (Cleveland, Stockdale, & Murphy, 2000; Pierce, 1998; Pierce, Byrne, & Aguinis, 1996; Powell & Foley, 1998). Workplace romance represents approximately 33% of all romantic relationships in the United States (Bureau of National Affairs, 1988) and the frequency of WR has remained stable or increased in recent years (Society for Human Resource Management [SHRM], 1998).

Much of the research on WR has focused on the impact such relationships can have on organizations. For example, coworkers' awareness of and reactions to a WR, as well as their preferences for management intervention in response to such a relationship, have been investigated (Foley & Powell, 1999; Quinn, 1977). One important area of study that has evolved from WR research is the link between dissolved workplace romances and subsequent sexually harassing behavior (Pierce & Aguinis, 1997; Pierce, Aguinis, & Adams, 2000; Summers & Myklebust, 1992). In contrast to WR, sexual

harassment (SH) is defined as unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other physical and verbal conduct of a sexual nature that is unwanted (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 1993). Given that nearly 50% of workplace romances dissolve (Henry, 1995) and that 24% of organizational claims of SH are a direct result of dissolved WRs (SHRM, 1998), the link between WR and SH and its subsequent impact on organizations is a valid and important area of research.

In a landmark study, Summers and Myklebust (1992) found that a prior history of workplace romance affects judgments of responsibility and recommended personnel actions regarding a subsequent sexual harassment claim. More specifically, a prior history of workplace romance between a male accused and a female complainant resulted in more favorable judgments and recommended personnel actions regarding the accused and less favorable judgments and recommended actions regarding the complainant. In addition, there is some evidence that a prior romantic relationship may undermine the credibility of a SH plaintiff in the legal system (Shultz, 1998). Further, certain characteristics of a prior romance, such as the type of professional reporting relationship and type of romance between participants, have been found to affect third-party judgments of responsibility and recommended personnel actions (Pierce, Aguinis, & Adams, 2000). To summarize, it appears that under certain circumstances surrounding a dissolved WR, raters may not make decisions based solely on the behavior of the harasser when evaluating a sexual harassment complaint.

### Conceptual Background and Hypotheses

One potential explanation for the differential responses regarding SH complaints that stem from a dissolved WR may be provided from an ethical decision-making perspective (Bowes-Sperry & Powell, 1999; Jones, 1991; O'Leary-Kelly & Bowes-Sperry, 2001). Within this framework, any issue that imposes harm upon another may be considered a moral issue. If the issue is high in what Jones (1991) refers to as moral intensity, individuals are likely to progress through stages of ethical decision-making. These stages, which activate an individual's ethics schema, are recognizing the issue as moral, making a moral decision about the issue, establishing intentions to behave in accordance with the moral decision, and engaging in moral behavior (Bowes-Sperry & Powell, 1999; O'Leary-Kelly & Bowes-Sperry, 2001; Rest, 1986). Inclusive in an ethical decision-making perspective is the idea that the degree of moral intensity one perceives is contingent upon certain characteristics of the phenomenon in question (Barnett, 2001; Jones, 1991; O'Leary-Kelly & Bowes-Sperry, 2001). Following this perspective, it is conceivable that not all instances of sexual harassment are perceived as equally morally wrong, especially if certain attributes of the scenario in question lead one to minimize the incident and, subsequently, to perceive the overall event as low in moral intensity. The previously cited studies in which participants were found to make differential judgments and recommended actions despite being presented with similar sexually harassing behaviors (e.g., Pierce, Aguinis, & Adams, 2000; Summers & Myklebust, 1992) may

reflect the fact that certain characteristics of the presented vignettes led third-party observers to perceive the issue as low in moral intensity.

The present study serves as an extension of Summers and Myklebust (1992) and Pierce, Aguinis, and Adams (2000), in which raters were found to make differential attributions of responsibility and recommended actions regarding a sexual harassment complaint stemming from a dissolved WR. The purpose of the present study was to examine the underlying social-cognitive processes involved in decisions regarding a sexual harassment complaint following a dissolved WR. It is conceivable that the nature of the progression through the stages of ethical decision making depends upon the recognition of the morality of an issue. In other words, if raters are less likely to recognize that a harasser's behavior is immoral, they may also be less likely to attribute responsibility to the harasser and to desire that the harasser be disciplined. Conversely, raters who recognize that a harasser's behavior is immoral are perhaps more likely to judge him as responsible and to establish intentions to behave in accordance with those judgments via recommendations of disciplinary actions. Thus, the present study examined whether certain characteristics of a dissolved WR and type of sexually harassing behavior influence the degree to which raters' recognize the ethicality of the issue and whether these perceptions influence attributions of responsibility and recommended personnel actions regarding a sexual harassment complaint.

More specifically, this study examined whether characteristics of the dissolved WR (extramarital vs. nonextramarital), characteristics of organizational culture (WR policy vs. no policy), and characteristics of the sexually harassing behavior (hostile

environment vs. quid pro quo) influence the level of recognition of the morality of the issue and whether such recognition, in turn, predicts judgments of responsibility which, in turn, should predict recommended personnel actions (cf. Barnett, 2001). All vignettes were expected to be recognized as involving a moral issue because of the sexual harassment component involved. However, it was anticipated that the extent to which raters recognized the harasser's behavior as immoral would be differentially influenced by the characteristics surrounding each vignette and thus any decisions associated with the depicted scenario. For example, if the sexually harassing behavior was blatant, such as in quid pro quo harassment, raters were expected to recognize that the behavior was immoral and to make ensuing decisions accordingly. Similarly, if the WR should never have occurred in the first place, such as in an extramarital affair or in the case where an organizational policy against WR was in place, raters were expected to recognize the ethical implications of the behavior and to make subsequent moral decisions. Thus, raters were expected to judge the harasser as more responsible and to recommend harsher personnel actions against the harasser when his behavior was recognized as immoral compared to those situations in which the behavior was less likely to be recognized as immoral.

Situational constants throughout all vignettes were hierarchical and heterosexual conditions in which the accused was always a male supervisor and the complainant was always a female subordinate. The rationale for these constants is twofold. First, prior research indicates that hierarchical romances are more common than lateral romances (e.g., Dillard & Wittemen, 1985; Dillard, Hale, & Segrin, 1994; Quinn, 1977) and that

men are more likely to harass and women are more likely to be harassed (Gutek, 1985; U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board [USMSPB], 1994). Second, the inherent power differential in a hierarchical romance may increase the likelihood of sexual harassment upon dissolution of the romance (Pierce & Aguinis, 2001). In addition, unlike previous research on this topic, participants were asked to rate the extent to which they believed the accused's behavior represents a moral issue. These measures were included to assess the extent to which the social-cognitive processes involved in decisions concerning a sexual harassment complaint could be explained within an ethical decision-making framework. Lastly, raters' perceptions as to whether the behavior was SH were also measured to provide evidence that raters indeed make differential decisions despite perceiving that the behavior is sexual harassment.

In summary, the goal of the present experiment was to explain the social-cognitive processes underlying decisions regarding a dissolved workplace romance/sexual harassment scenario within an ethical decision-making framework. The characteristics that are hypothesized to activate raters' ethics schemas and thus influence the degree to which the harassment is recognized as immoral are discussed next.

#### Extramarital vs. Nonextramarital Workplace Romance

Participants involved in extramarital liaisons are perceived negatively regardless of their gender or whether either participant is in love with the third party (Hartnett & Wollman, 1979). Similarly, managers have reported that they would respond negatively to a WR if one or both of the participants were married to a third party (Brown &

Allgeier, 1995). Further, participants asked to evaluate 71 WR profiles perceived most negatively those characterized as extramarital affairs (Brown & Allgeier, 1996). Despite the fact that a large percentage of the population participates in extramarital affairs, strong norms for marital fidelity still exist (Pittman, 1989). And, although organizations may have little influence over the personal morality of their employees, workplace norms may affect coworker evaluations of the romance in question (Brown & Allgeier, 1996).

Foley and Powell (1999) proposed that coworkers prefer managerial intervention when the WR in question represents a conflict of interest or a disruption to the workgroup. An extramarital WR could be expected to violate a sense of justice in the workplace. Indeed, workplace romances characterized as extramarital affairs have been found to correlate with negative changes in the social climate of the work environment (Dillard, Hale, & Segrin, 1994). The ethical judgments that follow the awareness of such a liaison may affect employee morale and tensions, resulting in deterioration in the work environment.

The evidence demonstrating that illicit romances are perceived negatively across a wide variety of research settings indicates that there is collective agreement that such behavior is immoral. From an ethical decision-making perspective, the widespread social consensus regarding the inappropriateness of illicit affairs should lead third-party observers to recognize that any issue associated with the WR is an ethical one. Thus, if a sexual harassment scenario involves a prior illicit affair between the two participants, a greater perceived degree of moral intensity could be expected to follow the initial

recognition of the morality inherent in the sexual harassment complaint, leading to the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1.

Raters will recognize a harasser's behavior as more immoral when the dissolved workplace romance is extramarital as opposed to nonextramarital.

Policy Prohibiting Workplace Romance versus No Policy

Organizational culture is the pattern of basic beliefs and ideas within a group that has worked well enough to be considered valid and therefore to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel (Schein, 1985). The culture within an organization develops as a result of shared learning and shared perceptions of daily practices among coworkers (Timmerman & Bajema, 2000). The norms shared by group members that guide employee behavior are developed, in part, by the reward/punishment system in place (Schein, 1985). These sanctions are a critical way by which one can determine the culture of an organization (Hulin et al., 1996). The reward/punishment system is a salient component of any organization and, thus, an expedient way for group members to learn important rules and the underlying assumptions of that organization's culture. In short, the culture of an organization, as partially determined by the sanction system in place, may be a powerful determinant of the behaviors engaged in by employees.

There is a growing consensus among researchers that organizational characteristics, such as the norms comprising that culture, are highly relevant in determining social-sexual behaviors in the workplace (Gelfand, Fitzgerald, & Drasgow, 1995; Hulin, Fitzgerald, & Drasgow, 1996; Pierce & Aguinis, 2001; Pryor, LaVite, & Stoller, 1993; Taylor & Conrad, 1992; Timmerman & Bajema, 2000; Williams, Guiffre & Dellinger, 1999). For example, the organizational incidence of SH claims has been associated with such factors as whether SH policies are enforced, the strength of such policies, and management tolerance toward SH (Hulin et al., 1996). In addition, the culture present within an organization may predict employee acceptance of WR (Brown & Allgeier, 1995; DeWine, Pearson & Yost, 1993; Dillard & Witteman, 1985; Solomon & Williams, 1997) as well as the actual formation of WR (Foley & Powell, 1999). Further, when determining the fairness of WR policies, third-party observers often take into account the impact that the WR has on the organization (Karl & Sutton, 2000).

From an ethical decision-making perspective, when third-party observers are confronted with a harassment claim following a workplace romance that was explicitly forbidden by an organization, they should identify the ethical implications of the issue. Thus, the initial recognition of the morality involved in the sexual harassment claim may be intensified upon revelation that the dissolved WR occurring prior to the claim was prohibited, leading to the following hypothesis:

## Hypothesis 2.

Raters will recognize a harasser's behavior following a dissolved workplace romance as more immoral when the organization has, as opposed to does not have, a policy forbidding workplace romance.

### Type of Sexual Harassment: Quid Pro Quo vs. Hostile Environment

Sexual harassment can be subdivided into two distinct categories, quid pro quo and hostile environment. Quid pro quo sexual harassment entails implicit or explicit threats or promises of job-related outcomes conditioned on sexual cooperation, and examples include sexual bribery and coercion (Hulin, Fitzgerald, & Drasgow, 1996). Hostile environment sexual harassment includes gender harassment, such as misogynic and derogatory remarks, and unwanted sexual attention (Gelfand, Fitzgerald & Drasgow, 1995). Hostile environment sexual harassment is a less blatant and more common form of SH than is quid pro quo harassment (Gelfand et al., 1995; USMSPB, 1994).

Although much social-sexual communication in the workplace may be left to individual interpretation, the explicit sexual messages found in quid pro quo harassment place greater interpretational constraint upon the target (Solomon & Williams, 1997). In other words, even if only implied, quid pro quo harassment leaves the target little subjective choice regarding how to interpret the harassment. Tata (1993) found that perceptual differences among participants of what is and is not sexually harassing behavior disappeared as vignette scenarios progressed from gender harassment and seductive behaviors to sexual bribery and sexual coercion. Undoubtedly, the ambiguity

surrounding a satisfactory definition of SH is due, in part, to both the immense continuum of behaviors that comprise SH and individual interpretation. However, there is no such ambiguity present with quid pro quo harassment (O'Donohue, Downs, & Yeater, 1998).

Third-party attributions of responsibility and punishment decisions take into account intentionality and coercion (Trevino, 1992). If the behavior in question is perceived as intentional, as would be expected with incidences of quid pro quo harassment, the decision maker is more likely to ascribe responsibility to the harasser and to prefer punishment. In accordance with an ethical decision-making perspective, behavior that involves the intentional crossing of accepted ethical boundaries should be recognized as immoral and thus influence subsequent attributions of responsibility and recommended personnel actions. Further, the perceived degree of moral intensity experienced in response to a particular behavior is influenced by the perceived degree of social consensus that the act is evil or good as well as the perceived magnitude or severity of consequences caused by that behavior (Barnett, 2001; Jones, 1991). Social agreement tends to be higher for actions that are legally prohibited and the serious consequences resulting from such behavior are more likely to prompt ethical reactions (Jones, 1991). In this context, the above evidence demonstrating that quid pro quo harassment is more likely to be identified as sexual harassment than hostile environment SH indicates that a high degree of social consensus, and thus moral intensity, will occur in situations involving quid pro quo harassment. In addition, because quid pro quo harassment entails obvious threats to the victim's career-related opportunities, the

potential harmful effects resulting from quid pro quo harassment should be more easily identified compared to hostile environment, thereby increasing perceptions of moral intensity.

In short, the lack of interpretational ambiguity and the intentional crossing of accepted ethical boundaries should influence perceptions of moral intensity that should increase the degree to which raters recognize the behavior as immoral leading to the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3.

Raters will recognize a harasser's behavior as more immoral when the sexually harassing behavior is quid pro quo as opposed to hostile environment harassment.

Recognition of Harassment as Immoral, Attributions of  
Responsibility, and Recommended Personnel Actions

From an ethical decision-making perspective, recognition of the morality concerning a given issue should result in corresponding ethical judgments (Jones, 1991). In other words, upon recognizing that an issue involves a moral component (another was harmed or benefited), attributions of responsibility concerning that issue should be in accordance with this recognition (the behaviors involved in the situation are judged accordingly as appropriate or inappropriate). Also inclusive in an ethical decision-making framework is the idea that, following moral judgments of responsibility, people

establish intentions to behave in agreement with those judgments (Barnett, 2001; Jones, 1991).

From an organizational justice standpoint, employees tend to evaluate the fairness of both the process and the distribution of justice within an organization (Greenberg, 1987). In situations involving perceived injustice in the workplace, employees experience the greatest perception of fairness when the severity of the preferred action and the severity of the actual action are congruent (Foley & Powell, 1999). Violations of more important rules, and rules that have been consensually validated by a majority of employees, can be expected to motivate the strongest punitive evaluations (Trevino, 1992). A compounding of this phenomenon could be expected if the violation has an inherent moral component such that there is a greater likelihood of recognizing the issue as immoral.

In the present study, based on an ethical decision-making framework, the degree to which behaviors are recognized as immoral is expected to predict attributions of responsibility such that when the harasser's behavior is perceived to be more immoral, raters are expected to judge the harasser as more responsible than the complainant for the harassment than when the harasser's behavior is perceived to be less immoral. In essence, the recognition of an issue as immoral is expected to serve as a mediator between the moral characteristics surrounding the dissolved romance/sexual harassment complaint and subsequent attributions of responsibility. Further, raters who judge the harasser as more responsible are expected to establish intentions to behave in a manner consistent with those judgments in that they are expected to recommend harsher

personnel actions for the harasser compared to raters who judge the harasser as less responsible for the complaint. More specifically, raters who judge the harasser as more responsible for the harassment are expected to recommend disciplinary personnel actions as opposed to company-funded counseling and social support, leading to the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 4.

Raters' degree of recognition of the harassment as immoral will predict positively their overall judgment of responsibility for the harassing behavior such that raters' who recognize the accused's behavior as unethical will attribute more responsibility to the accused than the complainant. Alternatively, raters who do not recognize the accused's behavior as unethical will attribute either an equal or approximately equal amount of responsibility to the accused and complainant or more responsibility to the complainant than the accused.

Hypothesis 5.

Raters will recommend that harsh personnel actions be taken toward a male accused of sexual harassment, and that lenient personnel actions be taken toward a female complainant, when they judge the accused as being more responsible than the complainant for the harassing behavior. Alternatively, raters will recommend that less harsh personnel actions be taken toward a male accused of sexual harassment, and that less lenient personnel actions be taken toward a female complainant, when they judge both the accused and complainant as being responsible for the harassing behavior.

## METHOD

### Participants

Participants consisted of 258 SHRM members from 10 chapters in the Rocky Mountain and Pacific Northwest regions of the U.S. Demographics of the participants are as follows: 22% men; 94% whites, 2% Latinos, and 2% African Americans; 22% single, 66% married, and 11% divorced. Age of the participants ranged from 19 to 60 years ( $M$  [ $SD$ ] = 41.3 [9.2]), tenure in their organization ranged from 1 to 29 years ( $M$  [ $SD$ ] = 6.1 [5.9] years), and 96% were employed full time. A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) indicated that participants' SHRM chapter, sex, ethnicity, marital status, and employment status did not have any main or interactive effects on their degree of perceived moral intensity, attributions of responsibility, or recommended personnel actions ( $ps > .05$ ). Moreover, participants' age and tenure in the organization did not correlate with their degree of recognition of the harassment as immoral or recommended personnel actions ( $ps > .05$ ).

### Design and Procedure

Questionnaires were administered to and collected from 258 SHRM members during one of their monthly chapter meetings as part of a study on "relationships in the workplace." Participation was voluntary and responses were made anonymously. Representative examples of their job titles include human resource officer/specialist, human resource manager/director, personnel supervisor, employee relations supervisor,

training and development director, labor relations director, executive director, chief executive officer, vice president, employment services coordinator, human resource consultant, general manager, and office manager. The questionnaires included a written vignette describing a dissolved workplace romance and a subsequent sexual harassment complaint, manipulation check and background information questions, and measures of study variables and participants' demographics.

Each participant read a vignette that depicted two employees, Keith and Sara, who were previously involved for three years in a direct-reporting, hierarchical relationship (Keith and Sara were in the same department and Keith was Sara's supervisor). The vignettes indicated that the two employees were previously involved in either an extramarital (both Keith and Sara were married to someone else) or nonextramarital (both Keith and Sara were single) workplace romance and both Keith and Sara were well aware of the fact that their company either did or did not have a written policy that prohibited romantic relationships between employees. Vignettes further revealed that a few weeks after their romance terminated, Sara accused Keith of sexually harassing her at work and reported her complaint to upper-level management. Sara's complaint was either (a) that even after being repeatedly asked to stop, Keith persisted in rubbing her neck and shoulders at work and telling her sexual jokes that she found offensive (hostile work environment); or (b) Keith informed her that her employment would be terminated unless she continued to have a romantic relationship with him (*quid pro quo*).

In sum, each participant was randomly assigned to read one of 8 vignettes in a 2 (illicitness of workplace romance: extramarital vs. nonextramarital) x 2 (presence of a workplace romance policy: policy vs. no policy) x 2 (type of sexually harassing behavior: hostile environment vs. quid pro quo) between-subjects experiment.

### Measures

#### Manipulation checks.

Prior to the measures of the study variables, three items were used to assess whether illicitness of the workplace romance, presence of a workplace romance policy, and type of sexually harassing behavior were manipulated successfully. Three additional items were used to determine whether participants accurately perceived descriptive background information presented in the vignette.

#### Recognition of harassment as immoral.

Participants were asked to rate the degree to which they believed that Keith's sexually harassing behavior was unethical and, thus, constituted a moral issue. The following items were used: "Keith's behavior with Sara is unethical" and "Keith's behavior with Sara is immoral" (1=strongly disagree 4=neither agree nor disagree 7=strongly agree; items adapted from Bowes-Sperry & Powell, 1999).

#### Attributions of responsibility.

Participants were asked to indicate their agreement with 18 statements describing potential reasons for Sara's sexual harassment complaint (1=strongly disagree, 4=neither

agree nor disagree, 7=strongly agree; items are from Summers, 1991, 1996, and Summers & Myklebust, 1992). Nine items involved judgments of the accused (e.g., "Keith is responsible for the sexual harassment complaint") and nine items involved judgments of the complainant (e.g., "Sara is responsible for creating the sexual harassment situation"). The two factors underlying the items represent the following attributions of responsibility: judgment of the accused (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .80$ ) and judgment of the complainant (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .86$ ). An index of raters' overall attribution of responsibility was computed by subtracting their judgment of complainant scores ( $M = 3.28$ ,  $SD = 1.02$ ) from their judgment of accused scores ( $M = 4.34$ ,  $SD = 0.89$ ). Positive scores indicate that the accused was judged as more responsible than the complainant, whereas negative scores indicate that the complainant was judged as more responsible than the accused for the harassing behavior.

#### Personnel actions.

Participants were asked to rate the appropriateness of 13 personnel actions that could be taken in response to Sara's sexual harassment complaint (1=not appropriate, 4=moderately appropriate, 7=very appropriate; items are from Summers, 1991, 1996, and Summers & Myklebust, 1992). Three items involved rating whether it was appropriate to ignore/drop the issue. Six items involved rating the appropriateness of disciplinary actions toward the accused (e.g., written reprimand, suspension, transfer, termination). Two items involved rating whether it was appropriate to provide the accused and complainant with social support and sympathy. The remaining two items involved the

appropriateness of company-funded counseling. The four factors underlying the items represent the following recommended personnel actions: (a) ignore/drop issue, (b) discipline, (c) social support and sympathy, and (d) company-funded counseling.

## RESULTS

Table 1 reports means, standard deviations, correlations, and reliability estimates for each of the study variables.

### Manipulation Checks

One hundred percent of the participants accurately reported the illicitness of Keith and Sara's romance, 99% accurately reported whether or not there was a workplace romance policy, and 100% accurately reported the type of sexually harassing behavior. Thus, the three independent variables were manipulated successfully. Also, 100% of the participants correctly indicated where Keith and Sara were employed, 99% correctly indicated that Keith and Sara had been dating for three years, and 100% correctly indicated that Keith and Sara's supervisor-subordinate relationship was direct reporting.

### Test of a Hypothesized Model

To test Hypotheses 1 through 5, a single-indicator, path-analytic model was examined that specified (a) illicitness of the workplace romance (extramarital vs. nonextramarital), presence of a workplace romance policy (policy vs. no policy), and type of sexually harassing behavior (hostile work environment vs. quid pro quo) as predictors of recognition of the harassment as immoral; (b) raters' recognition of the harassment as immoral as a predictor of their overall attribution of responsibility; and (c) raters' overall attribution of responsibility as a predictor of each of the four personnel

**Table 1**

Means, Standard Deviations, Correlations, and Reliability Estimates for Independent<sup>a</sup>, Mediator<sup>b,c</sup>, and Outcome<sup>d</sup> Variables

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Workplace Romance Characteristics <sup>a</sup>											
1. Illicitness of romance	1.51	0.50	---								
2. Presence of romance policy	1.52	0.50	.01	---							
3. Type of sexually harassing behavior	1.48	0.50	.03	.08	---						
Recognition of Harassment as a Moral Issue <sup>b</sup>											
4. Recognition of harassment as immoral	4.78	1.44	-.16**	-.15*	.10	(.71)					
Attribution of Responsibility											
5. Overall judgment of responsibility <sup>c</sup>	1.08	1.48	-.06	.03	-.17**	.35***	---				
Personnel Actions <sup>d</sup>											
6. Ignore/Drop issue	1.15	0.52	-.17**	-.16*	.04	.03	-.20**	(.80)			
7. Discipline	2.61	1.33	-.07	-.11	.00	.42***	.37***	.05	(.78)		
8. Social support & sympathy	2.32	1.74	.04	-.04	-.09	.08	.02	.14*	.33***	(.90)	
9. Company-funded counseling	4.17	2.25	-.04	.01	.03	.20**	.25***	.02	.32***	.24***	(.98)

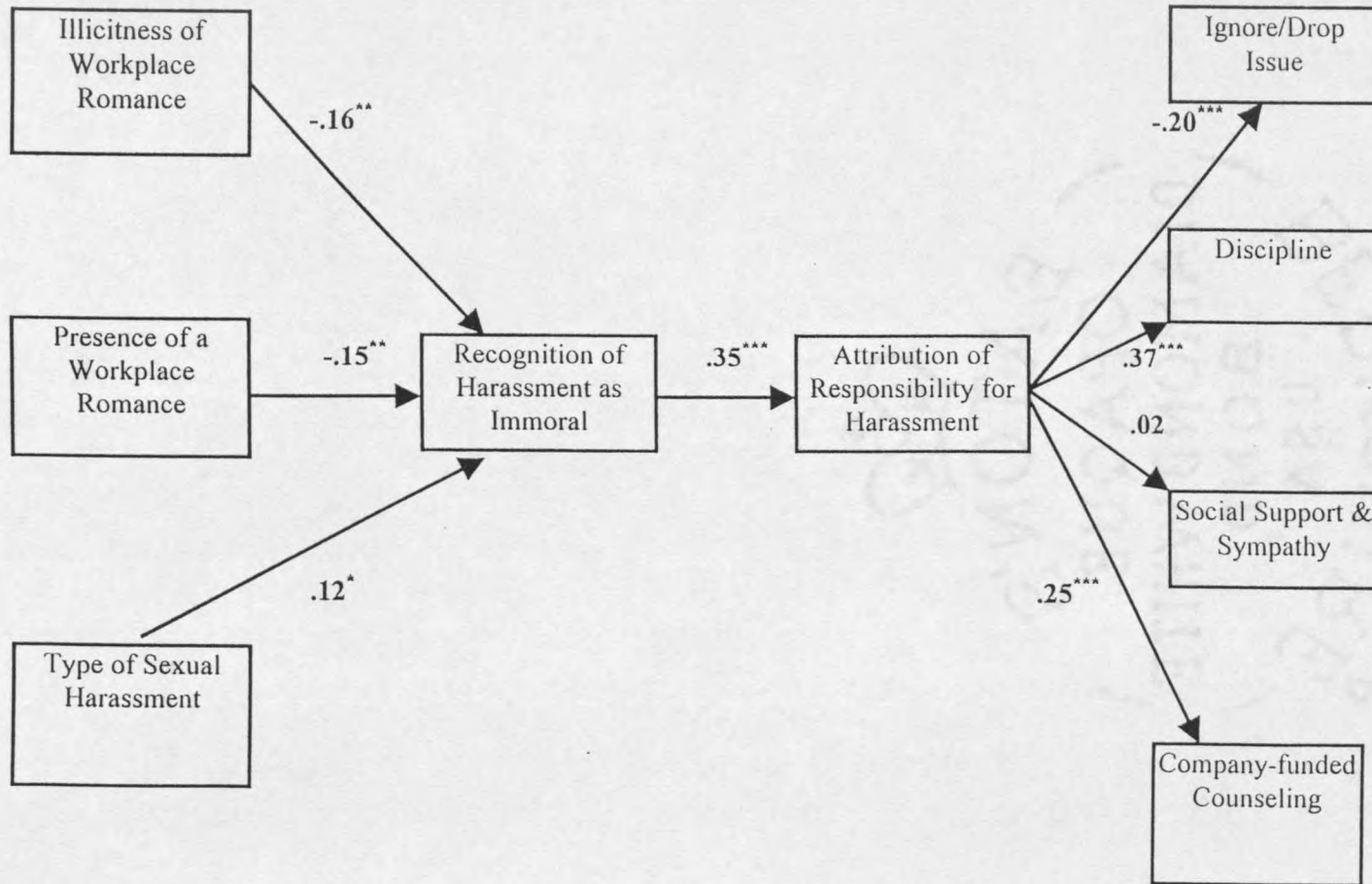
Note. *N* ranged from 250 to 258. Cronbach's alphas are in parentheses on the main diagonal. <sup>a</sup> Illicitness of the workplace romance was coded 1 = *extramarital* and 2 = *nonextramarital*; presence of a workplace romance policy was coded 1 = *policy* and 2 = *no policy*; type of sexually harassing behavior was coded 1 = *hostile environment* and 2 = *quid pro quo*. <sup>b</sup> Greater scores indicate that the accused's behavior was perceived as immoral. <sup>c</sup> Computed by subtracting raters' judgment of complainant scores from their judgment of accused scores. Thus, positive scores indicate that the accused was judged as more responsible than the complainant, whereas negative scores indicate that the complainant was judged as more responsible than the accused for the harassing behavior. <sup>d</sup> Greater scores indicate that a personnel action was considered appropriate. \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$

actions (see Figure 1). The path analysis was conducted using Amos 4.0 with raw data as input and maximum likelihood estimation.

In support of Hypothesis 1, there was a main effect of illicitness of the workplace romance on raters' recognition of the harassment as immoral ( $\beta = -.16, p < .01$ ). As expected, the means shown in Table 2 indicate that when the dissolved workplace romance was described as an extramarital relationship, raters were more likely to perceive the accused's harassing behavior as immoral ( $M = 5.02$ ) than when the dissolved workplace romance was described as a nonextramarital relationship ( $M = 4.55$ ).

In support of Hypothesis 2, there was a main effect of presence of a workplace romance policy on raters' recognition of the harassment as immoral ( $\beta = -.15, p < .01$ ). As expected, the means shown in Table 2 indicate that the accused's behavior was perceived as more immoral when it occurred in an organization that had a policy prohibiting workplace romance ( $M = 5.00$ ) than when there was no policy present ( $M = 4.57$ ).

In support of Hypothesis 3, there was a main effect of type of sexually harassing behavior on raters' recognition of the harassment as immoral ( $\beta = .12, p < .05$ ). As expected, the means shown in Table 2 indicate that the accused's behavior was perceived as more immoral when the sexually harassing behavior was described as quid pro quo harassment ( $M = 4.93$ ) than when the behavior was described as hostile environment harassment ( $M = 4.64$ ).



**Figure 1.** Completely standardized path-analytic solution for independent, mediator, and outcome variables. Each endogenous variable was modeled with an error term. \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

**Table 2**

Means and Standard Deviations for Mediator <sup>a, b</sup> and Outcome <sup>c</sup> Variables by Illicitness of the Workplace Romance, Presence of a Workplace Romance Policy, and Type of Sexually Harassing Behavior

Variable	Illicitness of Romance				Romance Policy				Harassment Type			
	Extramarital		Nonextramarital		Policy		No policy		HWE		QPQ	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
	Recognition of Harassment as Immoral <sup>a</sup>											
1. Recognition	5.02	1.42	4.55	1.43	5.00	1.34	4.57	1.51	4.64	1.42	4.93	1.45
	Attribution of Responsibility <sup>b</sup>											
2. Overall judgment	1.16	1.53	1.00	1.44	1.03	1.37	1.12	1.58	1.32	1.51	0.82	1.41
	Personnel Actions <sup>c</sup>											
3. Ignore/Drop issue	1.24	0.69	1.06	0.24	1.23	0.66	1.07	0.34	1.13	0.45	1.17	0.59
4. Discipline	2.70	1.31	2.52	1.35	2.76	1.38	2.46	1.28	2.61	1.14	2.60	1.51
5. Social support	2.24	1.79	2.39	1.70	2.39	1.76	2.25	1.74	2.46	1.83	2.16	1.65
6. Counseling	4.25	2.26	4.09	2.24	4.14	2.29	4.19	2.22	4.11	2.22	4.24	2.28

*Note.* *N* ranged from 250 to 255. HWE = hostile work environment; QPQ = Quid pro quo. <sup>a</sup> Greater scores indicate that the accused's behavior was perceived as immoral. <sup>b</sup> Positive scores indicate that the accused was judged as more responsible than the complainant, whereas negative scores indicate that the complainant was judged as more responsible than the accused for the harassing behavior. <sup>c</sup> Greater scores indicate that a personnel action was considered appropriate.

In support of Hypothesis 4, the extent to which the harasser's behavior was recognized as immoral predicted positively raters' overall attribution of responsibility for the sexually harassing behavior ( $\beta = .35, p < .001$ ). As expected, raters who perceived the accused's harassing behavior as immoral were more apt to judge him as more responsible than the complainant for the harassment. Conversely, raters who did not perceive the accused's harassing behavior as immoral were less apt to judge him as more responsible than the complainant for the harassment.

In support of Hypothesis 5, raters' overall attribution of responsibility predicted their recommended personnel actions with respect to "ignore/drop issue" ( $\beta = -.20, p < .001$ ), "discipline" ( $\beta = .37, p < .001$ ), and "company-funded counseling" ( $\beta = .25, p < .001$ ). As expected, raters who judged the accused as more responsible than the complainant for the harassment reported that it was less appropriate to ignore or drop the issue, more appropriate to discipline the accused, and more appropriate to provide company-funded counseling.

Results of the path analysis support the fit of the model shown in Figure 1 (Comparative fit index [CFI] & Incremental fit index [IFI] = .98, Normed fit index [NFI] = .97, Relative fit index [RFI] = .95, Tucker-Lewis index [TLI] = .96). The  $R^2$  for this model was .42, whereby the  $R^2$  was .24 for the four personnel actions, .12 for raters' overall attribution of responsibility, and .06 for raters' degree of recognition of harassment as immoral.

### Tests of Alternative Models

A single-indicator, path-analytic model was examined that specified illicitness of the workplace romance, presence of a workplace romance policy, and type of sexually harassing behavior as having direct effects on each of the four personnel actions. This model, which did not incorporate raters' recognition of the harassment as immoral or overall attributions of responsibility as mediators, revealed a main effect of illicitness of the workplace romance on the recommended personnel action "ignore/drop issue" ( $\beta = -.17, p < .05$ ) and a main effect of presence of a workplace romance policy on the recommended personnel action "ignore/drop issue" ( $\beta = -.16, p < .05$ ). Both of these main effects were, however, in the opposite direction as one might expect. All other direct effects were nonsignificant. The  $R^2$  for this direct-effects-only model was .09 for the four personnel actions, thereby indicating that the hypothesized mediational model accounts for an additional 15% of the variance in the personnel actions. In short, the hypothesized mediational model provides a significantly different fit compared to the direct-effects-only model ( $\chi^2 [19, N = 258] = 62.88, p < .001$ ). The direct-effects-only model had mixed fit indices in that some suggested acceptable fit (e.g., RFI = .94), whereas others suggested less than acceptable fit (e.g., Root Mean Square Error of Approximation [RMSEA] = .16).

Another single-indicator, path-analytic model was also examined that specified (a) illicitness of the workplace romance, presence of a workplace romance policy, and type of sexually harassing behavior as having direct effects on raters' overall attribution of

responsibility; and (b) raters' overall attribution of responsibility as a predictor of each of the four personnel actions. This model, which did not incorporate raters' recognition of the harassment as immoral as a mediator, revealed that illicitness of the romance and presence of a romance policy did not have main effects on raters' overall attribution of responsibility. There was, however, a main effect of type of sexually harassing behavior on raters' overall attribution of responsibility ( $\beta = -.17, p < .01$ ), but in the opposite direction as one might expect. Raters' overall attribution of responsibility predicted the four recommended personnel actions in a manner identical to the hypothesized model shown in Figure 1. Although this alternative model has acceptable fit indices, the hypothesized mediational model provides a significantly different fit ( $\chi^2 [7, N = 258] = 40.10, p < .001$ ).

### Perceived Sexual Harassment

To address a limitation of Summers and Mylebust's (1992) as well as Pierce et al.'s (2000) study, the extent to which raters' perceived that the accused's behavior constituted sexual harassment was measured. The following items were used: "Keith's behavior with Sara is an act of sexual harassment" and "Keith's behavior with Sara is sexually harassing despite the fact that they were previously involved with one another in a romantic relationship" (1 = *strongly disagree*, 4 = *neither agree nor disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). Raters responded consistently to these items (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .88$ ) and thus a mean composite score for each rater was computed. Overall, raters perceived Keith's behavior as constituting sexual harassment ( $M = 5.4, Mdn = 6, Mode = 7, SD =$

1.4). In fact, 92% of the respondents had mean scores that were at or above the scale's midpoint. An analysis of variance (ANOVA) further revealed that illicitness of the romance, presence of a workplace romance policy, type of harassing behavior, and rater sex did not yield main or interactive effects on raters' perceptions of whether Keith's behavior constitutes sexual harassment ( $ps > .20$ ). Thus, across all conditions, raters perceived the accused's behavior as constituting sexual harassment and yet they still varied with respect to their recognition of the harassment as immoral, attributions of responsibility, and recommendations regarding appropriate actions. Consequently, while some might argue that results of the present study are due to raters not perceiving certain scenarios as constituting sexual harassment, the measure of perceived sexual harassment indicates that this is not the case.

## DISCUSSION

### Summary of Results

The purpose of the present study was to examine whether individuals' decisions concerning a sexual harassment complaint that stems from a dissolved WR could be explained within an ethical decision-making framework. Results support Hypotheses 1-3 in that characteristics surrounding the SH complaint influenced recognition of the harasser's behavior as immoral. More specifically, raters were more likely to perceive the harasser's behavior as immoral when (a) the dissolved WR was described as an extramarital affair compared to a nonextramarital affair; (b) when the organization had a policy prohibiting WR versus no policy; and (c) when the sexually harassing behavior was described as quid pro quo harassment as opposed to hostile environment harassment. Results also support Hypothesis 4 in that the degree to which the harasser's behavior was recognized as immoral predicted raters' attributions of responsibility. Raters who perceived the harasser's behavior as more immoral were more likely to judge the harasser as more responsible than the complainant for the SH compared to raters who perceived the harasser's behavior as less immoral. Lastly, results also support Hypothesis 5 in that attributions of responsibility predicted recommended personnel actions. Raters who judged the harasser as more responsible than the complainant were more likely to recommend harsh personnel actions than were raters who judged the harasser as less responsible than the complainant.

Overall, in accordance with an ethical decision-making framework, the level of recognition of the harassment as immoral predicted judgments of responsibility which, in turn, predicted intentions to behave in a manner consistent with those judgments (Bowes-Sperry & Powell, 1999; Jones, 1991; O'Leary-Kelly & Bowes-Sperry, 2001). These results suggest that the activation of an ethics schema may serve as a mediator linking knowledge of characteristics surrounding a SH complaint to subsequent attributions of responsibility and, in turn, recommended actions concerning the complaint. Providing additional support for this interpretation was the fact that the characteristics surrounding the complaint were manipulated in such a way that varying degrees of moral intensity could be perceived. When characteristics surrounding the complaint clearly violated acceptable ethical boundaries (illicit WR, intentional disregard of organizational policy, and quid pro quo harassment), decision makers were more likely to perceive the issue as immoral and to make subsequent decisions in agreement with those perceptions. Further, despite overall agreement that the harasser's behavior did indeed constitute sexual harassment, raters made differential decisions depending upon the degree to which the harasser's behavior was perceived as immoral. This suggests that the social-cognitive processes involved in decisions concerning a SH complaint are not always accompanied by perceptions that the behavior is highly immoral and, in fact, appear to vary depending upon circumstances surrounding the complaint.

### Implications for Theory and Future Research

Past research has demonstrated that raters judge both a harasser and a complainant as similarly responsible for the complaint when they were previously involved in a WR (Summers & Myklebust, 1992) and when the participants had misaligned motives for engaging in the WR (Pierce et al., 2000). These results, as well as the present results, indicate that raters may be more likely to tolerate sexually harassing behavior under certain conditions. Pierce et al. (2000) suggested that differential responses to a SH complaint stemming from a dissolved WR may be due to the schematic representation of what raters' perceive to be a genuine, and thus appropriate, romance. Stated differently, various decision standards may be set and used in reaction to a SH complaint depending on a rater's evaluation of the dissolved romance.

While a schematic explanation is considered a necessary means by which to understand the differential standards used in decision-making processes, the present research indicates that such an interpretation may be better understood within an ethical decision-making framework. The counterintuitive findings that raters may set different standards for what is considered acceptable social-sexual behavior as reported by Summers and Myklebust, Pierce et al., and the present study becomes more clear within such a framework. As described by Jones (1991), the characteristics surrounding an issue, collectively called moral intensity, determine the nature of an individual's progression through the stages of ethical decision making. In other words, the perceived degree of moral intensity determines the degree to which an issue is recognized as

immoral and the extent to which attributions of responsibility, intentions to behave, and actual behavior are consistent with this recognition. In the present context, the extent to which raters recognize the immorality of a dissolved WR/SH scenario, attribute responsibility, and establish intentions to behave in a manner consistent with this recognition may be a function of the extent to which knowledge of characteristics surrounding the complaint influence perceptions of moral intensity. Thus, although an ethics schema is assumed to be activated by the inherent morality inclusive in a SH complaint, information about certain characteristics surrounding the complaint (e.g., a nonextramarital romance) may lead raters to minimize the moral implications, thereby lowering the standard that would normally be used in response to such a complaint. Further evidence for such an interpretation is reflected in the finding that reactions differed, not only depending on characteristics of the dissolved romance (illicitness and organizational policy), but also depending on characteristics of the complaint itself (type of harassing behavior).

Given that the current research did not encompass a complete test of the ethical decision-making framework, it is recommended that future research investigate the extent to which SH decisions following a dissolved WR are influenced by the components that comprise moral intensity. Although two of these components (magnitude of consequences and social consensus) were acknowledged to have some bearing on decision-making processes in the present study, they were not directly measured. For example, one might expect that raters asked to respond to a SH complaint involving same-sex participants would agree that others would perceive such an act to be

immoral (social consensus). However, perceptions concerning the severity of harm experienced by the victim (magnitude of consequences) might be of a lesser degree than a situation involving a male harasser and a female victim.

In addition, other characteristics surrounding a SH complaint that may influence moral intensity and, thus, the schematic processes involved in ethical decisions should be examined. For instance, the role of temporal immediacy, or the time between a moral action and its consequences, in predicting third-party reactions to a SH complaint is unknown. Because victim reactions to sexually harassing behavior often involve immediate coping behaviors that minimize harmful consequences, such as ignoring the behavior or joking about it, one could expect that the contingencies between sexually harassing behavior and its consequences are not always obvious to third-party observers (O'Leary-Kelly & Bowes-Sperry, 2001). Thus, decision makers in an organizational setting may often minimize the ethical implications surrounding a SH complaint because common victim responses obscure the temporal immediacy of such behavior. Research such as this could serve the twofold purpose of both adding to our existing knowledge of the components involved in perceived moral intensity regarding a SH complaint and to determine additional ways by which employers can enhance existing training programs by emphasizing the ethicality involved in sexually harassing behavior.

### Implications for Practice

While it is believed to be necessary to understand the social-cognitive processes underlying differential decisions regarding a sexual harassment complaint, it is believed to be equally important to understand the larger implications for organizations.

Employee perceptions of fairness, organizational vulnerability to litigation, and the potential for supervisors to engage in erroneous SH decisions are all important organizational factors that researchers and employers must consider. The present research suggests that organizational policies regarding sexual harassment may be well advised to stress the ethical components inherent in sexually harassing behavior to avoid decisions based upon characteristics surrounding the complaint rather than the illegal behavior itself. Organizational SH training programs could develop and incorporate material that emphasizes the harm done to victims of SH, as well as research demonstrating the harmful influence such behaviors can have on the organizational climate as a whole (Bowes-Sperry & Powell, 1999; O'Leary-Kelly & Bowes-Sperry, 2001). Training such as this could draw attention to the immorality inherent in sexual harassment. In addition, the importance of employee perceptions of fairness and the dangers entailed in making decisions about a SH complaint based on information other than the sexually harassing behavior itself could supplement existing management training programs (Trevino, 1992).

### Limitations

One potential shortcoming of the proposed study involves the use of vignettes. The majority of studies involving WR and the link between WR and SH have involved vignettes in which participants are asked to make decisions with limited third party information. However, the perceptions of third-party observers such as coworkers are important for several reasons. First, coworkers can unwittingly condone and continue organizational acceptance of inappropriate social-sexual behaviors. Second, coworker responses to the revelation of WR and SH can form a basis from which to determine how those involved in organizational or legal processes of justice might react and make decisions. Third, and perhaps most importantly, coworker perceptions of fairness in regards to both judgments of responsibility and the distribution of punishment among participants are critical organizational components (Trevino, 1992). Perceptions of unfairness among employees may influence important affective, attitudinal, and behavioral outcomes (Greenberg, 1987). In a more realistic sense, all claims of SH are judged by third-party observers and entail some degree of ambiguity with regard to judgments of responsibility and disciplinary decisions (Powell, 1993; Solomon & Williams, 1997). Limitations notwithstanding, written vignettes are a widely accepted method among researchers in industrial/organizational psychology and management (Murphy, Herr, Lockhart, & Maguire, 1986).

### Conclusion

There is a growing body of evidence indicating that knowledge of characteristics surrounding a dissolved workplace romance/sexual harassment scenario influences raters' decision-making processes. The present research extends these findings by introducing and providing support for an ethical decision-making framework as an explanation for the social-cognitive process through which such decisions are made. This study reveals that characteristics surrounding a dissolved workplace romance/sexual harassment scenario influence the degree to which raters recognize the sexually harassing behavior as immoral which, in turn, predicts their attributions of responsibility for the harassment which, in turn, predict their recommendations regarding the appropriateness of various personnel actions.

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