

ETHICAL DECISION MAKING ABOUT SEXUAL HARASSMENT COMPLAINTS  
THAT STEM FROM DISSOLVED WORKPLACE ROMANCES:  
A POLICY-CAPTURING APPROACH

by

Paul Lee Jessen

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Dr. Jennifer G. Boldry, Committee Chair

Approved for the Department of Psychology

Dr. Wesley C. Lynch, Psychology Department Head

Approved for the College of Graduate Studies

Dr. Bruce R. McLeod , Dean of College of Graduate Studies

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Paul Jessen

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## ABSTRACT

An experiment was conducted to examine the degree to which Jones' (1991) ethical decision-making model is an appropriate theoretical perspective from which to interpret raters' varying responses to a sexual harassment claim that stems from a dissolved workplace romance. The policy capturing methodology was used with 40 study participants to assess the significance of features of a dissolved workplace romance and sexual harassment situation in predicting participants' responses to a sexual harassment claim. Results revealed that Jones' (1991) ethical decision-making model is appropriate for describing the underlying social-cognitive process for observers responding to a sexual harassment claim that stems from a dissolved workplace romance. Results also suggest that certain features of a workplace romance/sexual harassment scenario are weighted more heavily by observers than other features. Future research, alternative explanations, and implications for policy formation, training programs, and sexual harassment investigations are discussed.

## INTRODUCTION

The formation of workplace romances and their effect on both the participants of such liaisons and the institutions in which they occur has been thoroughly examined in previous research (e.g., Pierce, 1998; Pierce & Aguinis, 2003; Powell & Foley, 1998). How people perceive and evaluate sexual harassment has also been independently studied (e.g., O'Connor et al., 2004; York, 1989; Wiener et al., 1997, 2004), but only recently have social scientists begun to question whether responses to sexual harassment claims may actually be influenced by a prior workplace romance (e.g., Pierce & Aguinis, 1997, 2001; Pierce et al., 2004; Summers & Myklebust, 1992). Consider the fact that 24% of 617 human resource professionals, 26% of 466 human resource professionals, and 31% of other employees surveyed reported that sexual harassment claims occurred in their organizations as a direct result of workplace romances (Society for Human Resource Management, 1998, 2002). Consider also that federal courts have recently supported sexual harassment claims that involved dissolved workplace romances (e.g. *Jones v. Keith*, 2002; *McDonough v. Smith*, 2001), and one can clearly see there is a concern that workplace romances may foster conditions conducive to sexual harassment.

Even more concerning is the possibility that sexual harassment investigations that stem from dissolved workplace romances may be biased and/or unfairly influenced by knowledge of the accused's and complainant's prior romantic status. As previous research suggests, individuals responding to sexual harassment cases can be influenced by factors outside the case such as the legal standard used in a case (reasonable person vs. reasonable woman) and by the behavior of a complainant in prior, *unrelated*, sexual

harassment cases (Perry, Kulik, & Bourhis, 2004; Wiener & Hurt, 2000; Wiener et al., 1997, 2004). Other research indicates that knowledge of how a victim reacted to the sexual harassing behavior can influence responses to said behavior (Smirles, 2004; York, 1989), and that what medium information regarding the sexual harassment incident is delivered in affects responses (O'Connor et al., 2004). Rater characteristics such as gender, age, and gender role attitudes, including hostile and ambivalent sexism attitudes, also appear to influence sexual harassment responses (O'Connor et al., 2004; Smirles, 2004; Wiener & Hurt, 2000; and Wiener et al., 1997). It is clear that factors outside the case play a role when people respond to a sexual harassment claim. It should not be surprising, then, that knowledge of a dissolved workplace romance can also affect responses to sexual harassment claims (Pierce & Aguinis, 1997, 2001; Pierce, Aguinis, & Adams, 2000; Pierce et al., 2004; Summers & Myklebust, 1992). By utilizing an ethical decision making model, the current research examines why, and to what extent, features of a dissolved workplace romance and sexually harassing behavior affect responses to subsequent sexual harassment accusations.

### Ethical Decision Making

The current research examined the degree to which Jones' (1991) issue-contingent Ethical Decision-Making Model (EDM) explains the relationship between differential responses to sexual harassment claims and features of a dissolved workplace romance/sexual harassment scenario. The EDM has been applied in previous research examining sexual harassment responses and workplace romances (Bowes-Sperry & Powell, 1999; O'Leary-Kelly & Bowes-Sperry, 2001; Pierce et al., 2004) and is regarded

as a parsimonious synthesis of previous theories of ethical decision-making (Street et al., 2001). The EDM is an issue-contingent, four-stage process that proposes to explain how individuals make decisions about ethical issues (Jones, 1991). According to the EDM, decisions which have consequences that may harm or benefit another person involve a moral component and differ systematically in relation to the characteristics of the issue itself. Jones collectively referred to these characteristics as the “moral intensity” of an issue. The moral intensity construct is made up of six components: magnitude of consequences, social consensus, probability of effect, temporal immediacy, proximity, and concentration of effect. Previous research indicates that the moral intensity of an issue effects decision makers’ recognition of situations as ethical in nature which, in turn, effects decision makers’ intended actions to deal with, or intervene in, said situations (Bowes-Sperry & Powell, 1999; Pierce & Aguinis, in press; Pierce et al., 2004).

To illustrate, Pierce et al. (2004) varied the features of a dissolved workplace romance, the sexual harassing behavior, and the organizational environment that surrounded a sexual harassment claim. Specifically, participants responded to a sexual harassment claim that followed a dissolved workplace romance in which the targets had either a genuine, love related motive for being involved with one another, or a utilitarian, job related motive for being involved with one another (Pierce et al., 2004). The dissolved workplace romance also occurred between participants with either an organizationally direct reporting relationship or participants with an organizationally indirect reporting relationship (e.g., a supervisor and subordinate in the same department, or a supervisor and subordinate in different departments). Romances involving

utilitarian, job related motives, and romances between participants with an organizationally direct reporting relationship are more likely to adversely affect coworkers in terms of time off, pay, and other benefits, and according to Jones (1991) these types of social-sexual behavior should have a higher moral intensity due to the “magnitude of consequences.” Similarly, Pierce et al. (2004) manipulated the type of sexual harassment such that participants were responding to sexual harassment behavior that was either quid pro quo in nature or hostile work environment. Because quid pro quo sexual harassment is perceived as more deliberate with some amount of malicious intentionality (Fitzgerald, Gelfand, Drasgow, 1995), this type of social-sexual behavior should also have greater moral intensity due its severity, or “magnitude of consequences.” In addition, participants responded to a sexual harassment claim that stemmed from a dissolved workplace romance in which the romance did, or did not, constitute an act of adultery and in which there was, or was not, an organizational policy prohibiting workplace romance. According to Jones (1991), because extramarital romances are socially taboo, and organizational policies represent and guide workgroup norms, these types of workplace romances should have a higher moral intensity due to “social consensus.” As predicted by the EDM, Pierce et al.’s (2004) results indicate that subjects who attributed more responsibility for the sexual harassment claim to the accused also recommended more severe personnel actions for the accused. Moreover, subjects’ recognition of the accused’s behavior as unethical predicted subjects’ attributions of responsibility, which, as before, predicted subjects’ recommended personnel actions (Pierce et al., 2004). This research clearly suggests the explanatory

power of the EDM in understanding observers' responses to sexual harassment claims that stem from dissolved workplace romances. Tests of alternative path-analytic models that did not include the mediating variable of ethical recognition had significantly worse fit indices (Pierce et al., 2004). To date, however, it is unclear which features of dissolved workplace romances raters weight more heavily than other features when responding to sexual harassment claims.

### Policy-Capturing Methodology

The current research employed the policy-capturing methodology to assess the differential weighting decision makers give to the available information in a sexual harassment situation (Karren & Barringer, 2002). Policy capturing is a within-subjects regression-based method in which participants receive all levels of all independent variables. Participants' responses are analyzed individually to compare and contrast individual decision-making policies for idiographic analyses (Aiman-Smith, Scullen, & Barr, 2002; Cooksey, 1996; Wiederman, 1999).

The independent variables in policy capturing are called cues. Cues are frequently embedded in written vignettes such that participants read a series of short scenarios in which one or more details in each scenario are different (e.g., Brown & Allgeier, 1996; York, 1989; see also Karren and Barringer, 2002). Participants then respond to a measure(s) designed to access the dependent variable. It is desirable to fully cross all levels of the independent variables, such that they are orthogonal, to accurately evaluate their independent effects (Martocchio & Judge, 1994). In a full factorial approach care must be taken (a) to keep in mind the number of scenarios participants are

being asked to read and evaluate, and (b) minimize intercorrelations and unrealistic variable combinations. The present research used a full factorial design and orthogonally crossed all independent variables. Full factorial designs have a distinct statistical advantage over nonorthogonal designs as well, because orthogonally crossed variables yield the most stable and unambiguous estimates of the regression coefficients (Aiman-Smith, Scullen, & Barr, 2002; Karren & Barringer, 2002). Additionally, policy capturing is less obtrusive than self-report measures that ask participants to report or rank order their decision criteria (Webster & Trevino, 1995; Wiederman, 1999). Research has also shown that although people often believe they have insight into their own decision making processes, they are rarely accurate (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977). Researchers can use policy capturing to study decision making by having participants actually make decisions. Policy capturing, as a within-subjects experimental design, also allows researchers to gather more reliable data and reduce standard errors (Aiman-Smith, Scullen, & Barr, 2002). Because participants are contributing more than just a single observation, policy capturing studies can achieve a higher level of power (Cooksey, 1996) and reduce the probability of making Type II errors (Karren & Barringer, 2002) compared to studies that do not use a policy-capturing approach.

### Hypotheses

By examining the weighting of cues and the decision-making policies of individuals responding to a sexual harassment claim, the goal of the present exploratory study was to extend the preliminary conclusions of Pierce et al. (2004). It is hypothesized that evidence can be obtained that Jones' (1991) Ethical Decision-Making

Model is an appropriate theoretical perspective from which to interpret previous findings. If the EDM (Jones, 1991) is the underlying social-cognitive process for differential standard setting, as suggested in previous research (Pierce, Aguinis, & Adams, 2000; Pierce et al., 2004; Summers & Myklebust, 1992), then it is hypothesized that cues which vary in moral intensity will be significant predictors of participants' recognition of social-sexual behavior as unethical and their recommended actions.

The present research used (a) reporting relationship (hierarchical v. lateral), (b) illicitness of the workplace romance (extramarital v. nonextramarital), (c) type of sexual harassment (quid pro quo v. hostile work environment), and (d) coworkers' job performance consequences (coworkers' job performance negatively affected v. coworkers' job performance not at all affected) as independent variables or cues. Previous research recommends using cues in a policy-capturing study that have some demonstrable external validity (Cooksey, 1996; Karren & Barringer, 2002). For example, in choosing cues and cue levels, York (1989) reviewed a large number of past sexual harassment court cases to isolate factors that appeared to have an effect on raters' judgments. Consequently, the independent variables in the present research were based on previous work suggesting these variables have an effect on decision makers' responses to sexual harassment claims and decision makers' perceived moral intensity of dissolved workplace romance/sexual harassment scenarios. (Pierce, Aguinis, & Adams, 2000; Pierce et al., 2004).

Coworkers' job performance consequences was an independent variable included in the present study that has not been examined in previous workplace romance-sexual

harassment research. To manipulate coworkers' performance consequences, participants read about a dissolved workplace romance that either negatively affected other employees' job performance or had no effect on other employees' job performance. The decision to include this independent variable followed from Jones' (1991) work on moral intensity and ethical decision-making. ). The reason for manipulating the reporting relationship and workplace romance motive in previous research (Pierce et al., 2004) was because individuals not involved in the romance may be adversely affected. According to Jones, the more people affected by an act, the greater the magnitude of consequences and the greater the moral intensity of the situation. It is hypothesized, then, in those hypothetical sexual harassment claims that stem from a dissolved workplace romance that *expressly* affect coworkers' job performance negatively, that raters should respond to the behavior more harshly.

The present research contributes to the existing literature on responses to sexual harassment claims and workplace romances by using the policy-capturing methodology to assess the *differential weighting* raters give to features of dissolved workplace romances and features of the sexual harassment behavior that precede sexual harassment complaints.

## METHOD

### Overview

The current research used a 2 (reporting relationship: hierarchical vs. lateral) x 2 (illicitness of workplace romance: extramarital vs. nonextramarital) x 2 (coworkers' performance consequences: negatively affected vs. not affected) x 2 (type of harassment: quid pro quo vs. hostile work environment) within-subjects design. The present study used a full factorial approach so that participants were presented with all levels of all cues in all combinations resulting in 16 different vignettes. The presentation of the vignettes was randomized such that each participant received a different order of all the independent variable combinations.

### Participants

Forty students (20 males and 20 females) were randomly selected from the Introductory Psychology and Introductory Communications courses at Montana State University to participate in this experiment. Participants' age ranged from 18 to 38 years old ( $M = 20.1$ ,  $SD = 3.7$ ), and all participants were registered voters. Ninety-two percent of participants were white, 5% Hispanic, and 3% other. Ninety-two percent of participants were single, and 63% were either employed part or full time. Participants earned partial course credit for their participation in the experiment.

### Materials

Participants were presented with stimulus packets containing instructions for the study, demographics questions, and seventeen questionnaires (including a duplicate

questionnaire to assess reliability). The questionnaires were composed of vignettes depicting a dissolved workplace romance and subsequent sexual harassment complaint, manipulation check questions, and dependent measures. Each participant read a vignette that depicted two employees, Keith and Sara, who were previously involved over the past year in either a hierarchically reporting (Keith is Sara's supervisor) or a laterally reporting (Keith and Sara are peers in the same department) workplace romance. Keith and Sara were described as either being involved in a nonextramarital (both Keith and Sara were single) or extramarital (both Keith and Sara were married to someone else) relationship. In addition, since Keith and Sara became involved, Keith's and Sara's coworkers' job performance was either negatively affected or not at all affected. The vignettes then indicated that a few weeks after their romance ended, Sara accused Keith of sexually harassing her at work and reported her complaint to upper management. The nature of Sara's complaint was depicted as either hostile work environment (Keith persisted in rubbing Sara's neck and shoulders at work and telling her sexual jokes that she found offensive even after being repeatedly asked to stop) or quid pro quo (Keith informed Sara that he would get her fired unless she continued to have romantic relations with him) sexual harassment. The order of presentation of vignettes was randomized beforehand such that each participant read a different order of scenarios. The vignette profile with all cues and cue levels appears in Appendix A.

### Measures

On the next page of the each questionnaire, prior to the measures, four items were used to assess whether reporting relationship, illicitness of romance, coworker's

performance consequences, and type of sexual harassment were manipulated successfully for each vignette. The dependent variables used were adapted from previous workplace romance and sexual harassment research (Bowes-Sperry & Powell, 1999; Pierce, Aguinis, & Adams, 2000; Pierce et al., 2004; Summers, 1991, 1996; Summers & Myklebust, 1992). Specifically, participants indicated their agreement with two items assessing the degree to which they believe the accused's social-sexual behavior is unethical and harmful, and one item assessing the degree to which participants believed the scenario constituted a case of sexual harassment (1 = *strongly disagree*, 4 = *neither agree nor disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). Participants also indicated the appropriateness of six personnel actions ranging from ignoring or doing nothing about the situation, to remedial action, to taking punitive disciplinary action against the accused (1 = *not appropriate*, 4 = *moderately appropriate*, 7 = *very appropriate*). In previous research, Cronbach's alphas for the measures ranged from .72. to .91, and the measures had acceptable reliability and validity properties (Pierce, Aguinis, & Adams, 2000; Pierce et al., 2004; Summers, 1991; Summers & Myklebust, 1992). Additionally, one item was used that asked participants to award a monetary reward to the complainant for the harassing experience (1 = *no monetary reward*, 4 = *\$250,000 to \$499,999*, 7 = *\$1,000,000 or more*) (Gowan & Zimmermann, 1996; Gutek et al., 1999; O'Connor et al., 2004). The monetary reward item was included under the premise that, like recommended personnel actions, monetary compensation is a type of action or intervention that can be taken by decision makers in response to moral issues—especially in legal cases. Collectively, the dependent variables in the present study are designed to

measure participants' *responses* to a sexual harassment claim that follows the dissolution of a workplace romance. As in previous research (Pierce et al., 2004), however, participants' evaluation of the social-sexual behavior as constituting sexual harassment was also included as a control dependent variable.

It is important to note that the dependent measures used here were a condensed form of those used in previous research (Bowes-Sperry & Powell, 1999; Gowan & Zimmermann, 1996; Gutek et al., 1999; O'Connor et al., 2004; Pierce, Aguinis, & Adams, 2000; Pierce et al., 2004; Summers, 1991, 1996; Summers & Myklebust, 1992). The dependent measures were as concise as possible and represented only those items previous research had demonstrated were the most empirically reliable and valid because participant fatigue is always a concern in policy capturing studies. A complete list of the dependent variable items is provided in Appendix B.

### Procedure

Participants completed the measures individually in groups of 10 at a time. After signing consent forms, the experimenter handed each participant a closed packet containing the aforementioned materials. Each participant opened his or her packet and the experimenter read over the instructions for the study with the participants. Participants were informed that all of the scenarios they were about to read were intentionally very similar to one another, but that they should do their best to consider carefully each situation on an individual basis. At the end of the packet, participants found thank you letters with debriefing explanations and contact information. The duration of the entire experiment was just under one hour, and all of the participants were

asked to stay until everyone had finished and all questions and concerns about the experiment had been addressed.

## RESULTS

The sexual harassment control dependent variable was analyzed first to establish whether participants evaluated the scenarios as constituting cases of sexual harassment ( $M = 5.81$ ,  $Mdn = 6$ ). On a 7-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 4 = *neither agree nor disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*), responses to the sexual harassment judgment item were well above the mid-point of the scale with 85% of participants somewhat agreeing, agreeing, or strongly agreeing that all of the scenarios they read constituted a case of sexual harassment. Estimates of participants' reliability were then conducted. As a measure of how consistent participants were applying their decision making policies to the situations, participants' responses on the one original and the one duplicate scenario were correlated (Pearson  $r = .93$ , intraclass  $r = .93$ ,  $ps < .05$ ). In terms of the manipulation checks, across all 680 vignettes read by participants, 95% of participants correctly indicated the nature of Keith and Sara's reporting relationship, 95% accurately reported the marital status of Keith and Sara, 94% accurately reported the effect Keith and Sara's romance had on their coworkers' job performance, and 97% accurately reported which kind of sexual harassment Sara claimed had occurred. The four independent variables were thus manipulated successfully.

Simultaneous entry ordinary-least-squares regression analyses were performed to calculate the weight each participant gave to each cue for recognition of the social-sexual behavior as an ethical issue and recommended actions. Responses to two items used to assess participants' ethical recognition of the situation were averaged into a composite score and regressed onto the cues. Responses to an item used to assess participants'

recommendation that nothing be done about the situation was regressed onto the cues. Responses to an item used to assess participants' recommendation that remedial disciplinary action be taken against the accused and complainant was regressed onto the cues. Responses to four items used to assess participants' recommendation that punitive action be taken against the accused were averaged into a composite score and regressed onto the cues. Responses to an item used to assess participants' recommendation of a monetary damage award to the complainant were also regressed onto the cues.

Table 1 represents the number and percentage of participants for whom who each cue was a significant predictor of their responses to each dependent variable, such that each significant cue predicted the degree to which participants' agreed with an item or the appropriateness of a personnel action. As an indication of the importance of each cue in responding to sexual harassment complaints that stem from dissolved workplace romances, the frequency with which a cue was a significant predictor for each dependent variable across participants was tabulated. The most frequent significant predictor of participants' recognition of the situation as ethical in nature was (a) the type of sexual harassment depicted, followed, in order, by (b) the reporting relationship of the targets, (c) the effect the workplace romance had on coworkers' job performance, and (d) the marital status of the accused and complainant. Only one cue, the reporting relationship of the targets, was significant for only one participant in recommending that nothing should be done about the sexual harassment situation. Ninety-eight percent of the participants agreed that something should be done about the sexual harassment situation—further evidence that participants' perceived the hypothetical situation as constituting a case of

sexual harassment. In recommending remedial discipline, such as company-funded counseling, the most frequently used cue that was significant for participants was (a) the marital status of the targets, followed by (b) the type of sexual harassment that had occurred, and c) the reporting relationship of the accused and complainant. The effect of the accused's and complainant's workplace romance on their coworkers' job performance was not significant to any participants in recommending remedial discipline. In recommending a course of punitive discipline such as suspending, transferring, or terminating the accused, 25% of participants significantly used (a) the type of sexual harassment cue, followed closely by 22.5% of participants significantly using (b) the reporting relationship cue, followed by (c) the marital status of the accused and complainant and (d) the workplace romance's effect on coworkers' job performance. With respect to recommending a monetary damage award, (a) the type of sexual harassment was the most frequently occurring significant predictor for participants, followed by (b) the reporting relationship, and (c) marital status. The workplace romance's effect on coworkers' job performance was not a significant predictor of monetary damage awards for any participant.

Table 1. Idiographic Analyses: Number and Percentage of Participants Who Significantly Used Each Cue for Each Dependent Variable

		Dependent Variable				
		Recognition of ethical issue	No personnel action (ignore/drop issue)	Remedial personnel action (counseling)	Punitive personnel action (discipline)	Monetary damage award
Cue	Reporting relationship	n = 5 12.5%	n = 1 2.5%	n = 1 2.5%	n = 9 22.5%	n = 3 7.5%
	Marital status	n = 3 7.5%	n = 0	n = 4 10%	n = 4 10%	n = 2 5%
	Effect on coworkers' job performance	n = 4 10%	n = 0	n = 0	n = 2 5%	n = 0
	Type of sexual harassment	n = 9 22.5%	n = 0	n = 3 7.5%	n = 10 25%	n = 4 10%

Note.  $N = 40$ . Each predictor had a significant beta weight ( $\beta$ ) for each participant at the  $p < .05$  level.

### Additional Analyses

Table 2 presents which cues were significant predictors and their corresponding beta weights for each dependent variable *across* participants, such that significant cues indicated participants' greater agreement with the items or the appropriateness of the personnel actions. For these additional analyses, participants' composite responses to each vignette were computed by averaging across participants to derive mean scores that were then regressed onto the cues. The effect of the accused's and complainant's workplace romance on their coworkers' job performance had the greatest beta weight across participants for recognition of the situation as ethical in nature ( $\beta = -.58, p < .05$ ) followed by the accused and complainant's reporting relationship ( $\beta = -.50, p < .05$ ). Similar to the idiographic analyses, the most heavily weighted cue across participants for recommendations regarding remedial action (e.g. counseling) was the accused's and

complainant's marital status ( $\beta = -.58, p < .05$ ). The accused's and complainant's reporting relationship ( $\beta = -.73, p < .05$ ) and type of sexual harassment ( $\beta = .48, p < .05$ ) were the most heavily weighted cues across participants for the punitive (e.g. terminate) recommendation, and the most heavily weighted cue for recommended monetary damage awards across participants was the reporting relationship of the accused and complainant ( $\beta = -.49, p < .05$ ).

Table 2. Additional Analyses: Beta Weights for Each Cue on Each Dependent Variable Collapsed Across Participants.

		Dependent Variable				
		Recognition of ethical issue	No personnel action (ignore/drop issue)	Remedial personnel action (counseling)	Punitive personnel action (discipline)	Monetary damage award
Cue	Reporting relationship	$\beta = -.50$	---	---	$\beta = -.73$	$\beta = -.49$
	Marital status	---	---	$\beta = -.58$	---	---
	Effect on coworkers' job performance	$\beta = -.58$	---	---	---	---
	Type of sexual harassment	---	---	---	$\beta = .48$	---

Note. All  $\beta$ s significant at the  $p < .05$  level.

## DISCUSSION

The aim of the present research was to extend earlier research (Pierce et al., 2004) suggesting the EDM (Jones, 1991) is an appropriate theoretical perspective from which to interpret findings that knowledge of features of a dissolved workplace romance and sexual harassment behavior effect observers' responses to an ensuing sexual harassment claim (Pierce, Aguinis, & Adams, 2000; Summers & Myklebust, 1992). Using the policy-capturing methodology, the present research rank ordered the importance of dissolved workplace romance and sexual harassment situation cues in determining how they influence observers' responses to a sexual harassment claim. Based on the aforementioned results, the hypothesis that the EDM is an accurate model for describing the differential responses of observers' to a sexual harassment claim that stems from a dissolved workplace romance has been supported. For both the idiographic and additional analyses, cues corresponding to components of the EDM's moral intensity construct were significant predictors of participants' recognition as an ethical issue and intended/recommended actions to intervene in the sexual harassment situation. Results are also the first to suggest that certain features in a sexual harassment situation that occur because of a workplace romance are more important to raters than other features. For example, in conducting both the idiographic and additional analyses, the most significant predictor of participants' recommendations for remedial action, such as the accused and complainant receiving company-funded counseling, was the marital statuses of the accused and complainant when they were involved with one another. As such, this research has important implications for organizations in terms of policy formations,

training programs, and the way human resources officers may investigate sexual harassment claims. Sexual harassment investigators should be trained to recognize this tendency they may have within themselves to be more lenient with the accused in recommending remedial discipline over punitive discipline when the accused and complainant were committing adultery. The current research also provides evidence for the appropriateness of using Jones' EDM to understand how observers consider and respond to sexual harassment claims, especially those that stem from a dissolved workplace romance. As stated in previous research, training coordinators should consider framing both workplace romances and sexual harassment in terms of their ethicality (Bowes-Sperry & Powell, 1999; O'Leary-Kelly & Bowes-Sperry, 2001; Pierce et al., 2004). If employees can be taught to recognize social-sexual behavior at work as involving a moral component, then perhaps they will be less likely to observe and dismiss behavior that may harm others and potentially cost the organization significant resources.

Moreover, with the inclusion of the monetary damage award dependent variable, the current research has some applicability to legal proceedings involving sexual harassment. Sexual harassment claims that are escalated to the courts have serious consequences both for the employees involved and for the organizations in which they occur, and this research gives some insight into responses and decisions similar to those a jury might make. For instance, it appears that the reporting relationship of the accused and complainant and the type of sexual harassment claimed are of the most importance to raters when deciding how much money the complainant should be awarded.

It is important to note, however, the limitations of the current research. For instance, participants were all from the undergraduate subject pool at Montana State University. In policy-capturing studies, it is generally recommended to use participants who are familiar and/or experienced with the decisions being examined (Aiman-Smith, Scullen, & Barr, 2002; Cooksey, 1996; Karren and Barringer, 2002; Webster & Trevino, 1995). The decision to use undergraduates in the present study, however, was twofold. First, we asked that all participants be registered voters; thus all of the participants were also potential jurors in the community who could very well be asked to evaluate a sexual harassment case. Second, other research suggests that differences between undergraduates and more experienced raters of sexual harassment cases are minimal (York, 1989). If anything, it appears that undergraduates may be less sensitive and an underestimation of an effect size in the population (O'Connor et al., 2004). It may be that the effects found in the present study are actually greater in the population at large.

“The paper people problem” is a common criticism of this type of research as well (Cooksey, 1996). Decisions, ethical or otherwise, made by individuals in real life are rarely as neatly packaged and constrained in terms of available information as those examined in the present research and other research using similar stimulus materials. While there may be an admittedly large number of additional factors and peripheral pieces of information that observers’ evaluate in making decisions regarding social-sexual behavior at work, in some instances, particularly those in the legal arena, the amount and nature of information available to decision-makers is strikingly similar. Moreover, as previous research suggests (Pierce, Aguinis, & Adams, 2000; Pierce et al.,

2004) the “paper people problem” may not be a problem at all, but rather a tool to be used by researchers to isolate variables to more clearly understand their effects.

Also, as with many studies examining sexual harassment claims, this research portrays a male accused of harassment and a female complainant. Because statistics suggest that female harassers and male victims are few and far in between in the population (see Smirles, 2004), little research is done examining alternative gender pairings. Still, with today’s dynamic workforce and changing workplace, it is important to echo the call for additional research regarding alternative gender pairings, including male/male and female/female combinations.

Interestingly, a number of participants did not weight any cues significantly in responding to the sexual harassment claim depicted. As the reliability estimate of participants’ consistency in applying their decision criteria suggests, many participants evaluated each sexual harassment situation in a nearly identical fashion—*regardless* of cues and cue levels. Consequently, it may be that many participants were not engaging in the ethical decision-making process at all. Jones’ (1991) EDM is a sequential four stage process that first requires recognition of the issue as moral in nature, and, according to recent research, a potential explanation of observers not engaging in the ethical decision-making process has do with the expenditure of cognitive effort by observers to recognize the moral issue (Street et al., 2001). Put another way, those participants who did not recognize the moral aspects of the situation because of some cognitive load or unwillingness to expend the necessary mental effort, likely did not engage in the ethical

decision-making process. Henceforth, it appears that many participants may have made their decisions on the basis of *nonmoral* considerations (see Street et al., 2001).

Insofar as *moral* considerations are concerned, however, recall that the moral intensity construct utilized in the present research is composed of six components. The current research, however, only manipulated two of those components—social consensus and magnitude of consequences. The temporal immediacy and probability of effect components were controlled for in the present study by depicting the workplace romance and sexual harassment claim as having already occurred, but more research certainly remains to be done to understand better the effects of moral intensity's various components. Proximity, for example, which is defined as the physical and/or social closeness of a target of (un)ethical behavior to the observer of said behavior, was not examined here. Empirical support for this component of moral intensity has been wanting (see Bowes-Sperry & Powell, 1999), despite suggestions the literature on attribution theory would make regarding defensive attributions, or like-self attributions for self-protective reasons (Smirles, 2004).

More research also remains to be done to understand completely how jury members may, or may not, respond to a sexual harassment claim that stems from dissolved workplace romance. While this study gives some insight into how raters in a judicial setting may respond to a sexual harassment claim that stems from a dissolved workplace romance insofar as a monetary damage award may be concerned, future research should have participants act as mock jurors and should simulate court proceedings. Differences in responses and weighting of cues may exist in a group-decision making context.

Additionally, future research should include the cognitive elaboration model, a hybrid of the elaboration likelihood model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1981, 1986) and ethical decision making model (Jones, 1991), proposed by Street et al. (2001). The role cognitive resources and attentional demands play in raters' recognition of moral issues needs to be examined. Human resources professionals and other managers who investigate sexual harassment claims are rarely in a position to devote their undivided attention to any one task, and it may very well be that investigators of sexual harassment claims, similar to many participants in the present study, are not engaging in the EDM—possibly to the detriment of the organization.

Finally, interesting and important insights will continue to be gained in future research by using the policy capturing methodology to assess inconsistencies, or discrepancies, in decision-makers' judgment policies. For example, previous research has not only asked participants' to make decisions in response to a hypothetical scenario and used the policy-capturing methodology to assess the decision criteria used therein, but has also asked participants to articulate and rank order what decision criteria they *think* they are using (York, 1989). It would be informative to study whether, and to what degree, sexual harassment investigators *think* their judgments and responses will be influenced by dissolved workplace romances.

In closing, it is important to reiterate that not all workplace romances have negative consequences. As previous research has demonstrated, many workplace romances have positive effects for organizations and, perhaps more importantly, for individuals (Pierce & Aguinis, 2003). With the knowledge that workplace romances may

foster conditions conducive to sexual harassment, the aim of current research is to understand better how workplace romances may influence responses to ensuing sexual harassment claims. It would be a mistake, however, for corporations to adopt strict anti-fraternization policies. With the appropriate training and development programs in place, and with sufficient understanding of how features of dissolved workplace romances may influence investigations into sexual harassment claims, organizations may be able to support, and benefit from, their employees natural inclinations to pursue romantic interests while proactively preventing sexual harassment.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

VIGNETTE PROFILE

## VIGNETTE PROFILE

Keith and Sara are employees of a large nationwide retailer. Keith **[has been an Assistant Manager for several years and supervises Sara along with many other employees; and Sara work together as peers in the same department]**. During the past year, Keith and Sara have been romantically involved with one another. With respect to their romantic relationship, **[both Keith and Sara were married to someone else at the time and, thus, were involved in an extramarital workplace romance; both Keith and Sara were single at the time and, thus, were involved in a nonextramarital workplace romance]**. Since Keith and Sara became romantically involved, **[many of their coworkers' job performance has been negatively affected and they have expressed their dissatisfaction with Keith's and Sara's romance; none of their coworkers' job performance has been affected by the romance]**.

Recently, Keith and Sara broke off their workplace romance. A few weeks after their romance ended, Sara accused Keith of sexually harassing her at work and reported her complaint to upper-level management. Sara claims 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; Keith informed her that he would get her fired from work unless she continued to have a romantic relationship with him]**.

Note. Text in bold contains different levels of each independent variable or cue.

APPENDIX B

DEPENDENT VARIABLE ITEMS

## DEPENDENT VARIABLE ITEMS

**Instructions:** In terms of the scenario you just read about Keith and Sara, please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each statement below by writing the number from the scale in the blank to the right of each item. Use the following scale for your responses:

1                      2                      3                      4                      5                      6                      7  
Strongly Disagree   Somewhat Disagree   Disagree   Neither   Somewhat Agree   Agree   Strongly Agree

1. Keith's harassing behavior is unethical. \_\_\_\_\_
2. Keith's harassing behavior is harmful. \_\_\_\_\_
3. Keith's behavior with Sara is an act of sexual harassment. \_\_\_\_\_

**Instructions:** Below are items that assess how you would respond to Sara's sexual harassment complaint. Please indicate the extent to which you think each response is appropriate by writing the number from the scale in the blank to the right of each item. Use the following scale for your responses:

1                      2                      3                      4                      5                      6                      7  
Strongly Disagree   Somewhat Disagree   Disagree   Neither   Somewhat Agree   Agree   Strongly Agree

1. Do nothing about Sara's sexual harassment complaint. \_\_\_\_\_
2. Provide Keith and Sara with company-funded counseling. \_\_\_\_\_
3. Give Keith a written reprimand in his personnel file. \_\_\_\_\_
4. Suspend Keith from work without pay. \_\_\_\_\_
5. Transfer Keith to another part of the organization. \_\_\_\_\_
6. Terminate Keith. \_\_\_\_\_

**Instructions:** Using the scale below, indicate the amount of money you think Sara should be awarded for experiencing Keith's sexually harassing behavior. Please select only one response.

- \_\_\_\_\_ no monetary award should be given to Sara despite Keith's sexually harassing behavior
- \_\_\_\_\_ \$99,999 or less
- \_\_\_\_\_ \$100,000 to \$249,999
- \_\_\_\_\_ \$250,000 to \$499,999
- \_\_\_\_\_ \$500,000 to \$749,999
- \_\_\_\_\_ \$750,000 to \$999,999
- \_\_\_\_\_ \$1,000,000 or more