Workplace Romances: "Going to Work Is Amazing and Really Fun"

Lars Goran Wallgren Tengberg[1] & Inga Tidefors[1]

[1] Department of Psychology, University of Gothenburg, Gothenburg, Sweden

Correspondence: Lars Goran Wallgren Tengberg, Department of Psychology, University of Gothenburg, Gothenburg, Sweden. Tel: 46-031-786-4269. E-mail: larsgoran.wallgren@psy.gu.se

Abstract

Much of the research on workplace romance has been conducted in the United States, and the focus has often been on negative consequences and risks for gender discrimination. The purpose of this study was to obtain an understanding of workplace romance through the point of view of those involved. Data were collected from five female participants and five male participants in separate focus groups; all participants had started a love affair at work. The thematic analysis of the transcripts showed that having a workplace romance was mostly a positive experience. However, all participants described the need to keep their romances secret for two main reasons: one, to avoid possible negative consequences, and the other, to enjoy feelings associated with a secret love affair. To some degree, the participants seemed to excuse themselves more readily than others whose behavior they thought was worse. When asked about workplace rules and policies, the participants wavered between expressing negative views and describing situations where rules could be needed.

Keywords: excitement, focus group study, secrecy, sexuality, workplace romance

1. Introduction

In his article, "Coping with Cupid", Quinn (1977) examined workplace romances, focusing on people's motives to engage in such relationships. Subsequent research has not closely addressed the issues raised by Quinn's research. Mainiero (1986) described workplace romances as the "new sexual revolution" and Parks (2006) claimed the phenomenon was relatively common. Powell's (2012) study, one of the few to address the consequences of workplace romances from an organizational perspective, attributed their increase to the steady increase in women in the workplace at all organizational levels, offering the example of the United States, where women grew from 39% in 1973 to 47% of the labor force in 2010. Many Western countries have experienced a similar development, and in Sweden today 82% of all women are employed (Statistics Sweden, 2012).

According to Powell and Foley (1998), managers of organizations and researchers in organizational psychology tend to be uncomfortable with discussing the topic of workplace romance and sexuality in a public forum; many researchers have no wish to be associated with the popular tabloid media's sensationalizing of romances, especially illicit ones that begin in the workplace. This resistance is less pronounced among researchers in the United States, where reportedly 90% of such research has been conducted (Boyd, 2010). However, the general theme in studies on workplace romance, especially in the United States, is often on negative consequences; positive experiences are seldom highlighted (Boyd, 2010; Wilson, 2015). Boyd explains that this harm-perspective may arise partly from a puritanical view of sexual relationships and partly from an increased focus on sexual harassment highlighted by the feminist movement. Zelizer (2009) wrote that many managers and employees may be wary of entering a workplace romance because the organization's policies and rules discourage, if not prohibit, workplace romances. Typically, such policies require, at minimum, that employees inform their superiors of a romantic relationship at work. Penalties for starting a workplace romance may be severe, even requiring one of the partners to resign (see, e.g., Stoller, 2005).

According to Williams, Giuffre, and Dellinger (1999), interest in sexuality in the workplace comes primarily from non-academic business researchers and consultants, who study its effect on employees' productivity and create policy guidelines to control and monitor workplace romances. A recurrent issue in this is whether organizations have the right and/or responsibility to intervene in employees' private workplace romances. In contrast, scholars are more interested in studying workplace romances in terms of how they affect the work behavior of individuals, groups, and organizations, and how these relationships differ from others in

organizations such as friendships (Powell & Foley, 1998). The purpose of this study was to obtain a better understanding of the workplace romances through the point of view of women and men who have had them.

2. Defining Workplace Romance

Pierce and Aguinis (2009) define a workplace romance as a primarily sexual relationship between two members of the same organization. Other researchers define such relationships as two employees who acknowledge their mutual attraction, have dated, and/or have had sex with one another (e.g., Matthewman, Biggs, & Fultz, 2012). In both views, mutual attraction is the basis of the workplace romance; Pierce and Aguinis do not define one-sided attraction or sexual harassment.

Wilson (2015) describes two types of workplace romance: hierarchical (between two people at different levels in the organization) and lateral (between two people at equal levels), and claims that hierarchical romances are both more common and more problematic than lateral romances.

3. Motives for, and Consequences, of Workplace Romances

People may enter a workplace romance for reasons other than sexual attraction, such as love, ego, job, or power (Paul & Townsend, 1998). An individual seeking love wishes to find a long-term companion (see also Mainiero, 1986; Wilson, 2013). One motivated by ego seeks adventure, excitement, and/or confirmation of self-importance. A job-motivated individual seeks career advancement, employment security, financial rewards, a reduced workload, and/or more vacation time. Those motivated by a lust for power may think a workplace romance will increase their work legitimacy and/or authority. Dillard and Broetzmann (1989) focused on the linkages between workplace romance motivations and work-related behaviors and found that people motivated to enter workplace romances for love were perceived by others to take a positive and enthusiastic attitude toward work (see also Dillard, Hale, & Segrin, 1994); job-motivated people had higher absenteeism. In general, job-related behavioral changes were small.

4. The Context of Workplace Romances

Some research on workplace romances focuses both on the people in the affair and their colleagues who observe them. Dillard and Witteman (1985) found almost a third (29%) of respondents (N = 293) had had a romance in the workplace, and 71% had either had a workplace romance themselves or had observed one. Since people are more likely to be sexually attracted to people who share similar attitudes and interests, the workplace is a suitable setting to start a love relation (Smith, Becker, Byrne, & Przybyla, 1993). "Working closely with others appears to foster interpersonal attraction" (Maniero, 1986, p. 752), and when employees work overtime and attend out-of-town conferences together, they are naturally more inclined to socialize with each other (Pierce, Byrne, & Aguinis, 1996).

Gutek, Cohen, and Konrad (1990) found that non-work-related sexualized behavior such as sexual jokes, comments, and innuendo had no significant effect on employees' self-reports of romances at work, but did influence their tendency to others' romances. In a study based on data collected from 197 employees, Salvaggio, Streich, Hopper, and Pierce (2011) also found the tendency to observe others having a romance was related to perceived workplace sexualization, but also to task interdependence. Employees in this study, however, were most likely to report initiating a workplace romance when workplace sexualization and male-female social contact were high, although there was no relationship between task interdependence and the tendency to initiate a workplace romance. Age and gender did not influence the propensity to engage in a workplace romance or to observe it in others. Powell (2001) concluded that the power inequality between people in a hierarchical relationship creates problems that result in work disruption, dependency, and organizational injustice.

5. Gender and Workplace Romances

In earlier studies the male perspective on workplace romances was dominant, but some more recent studies have taken the female perspective, or at least included both women and men. To understand almost anything that goes on at a workplace, gender inequality must be addressed. This inequality is no longer often expressed in words, but rather by acts or facts (Holmberg, 2001) such as the fact that men are likely to have higher salaries than women and to hold higher ranks, giving them more economic and organizational power. (Catalyst, 2007; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015). In Sweden in 2012 men who were business economists, in marketing, or human resources officers had an average monthly salary of 45 400 Swedish crowns and women in the same professions earned almost 9 000 Swedish crowns less per month (Statistics Sweden, 2012).

Horan and Chory (2011) found in a survey study presenting four fictitious scenarios that respondents viewed the trustworthiness and goodwill of men in a workplace romance more positively than that of women, and they viewed women who dated superiors as less caring and trustworthy than women who dated equals. Yet their

perceptions of men's did not change based on the work status of their partners. These findings are consistent with earlier research in the area of gender differences in the workplace (e.g., Albrecht, Björklund, & Vroman, 2003; Carli, 1989; Cashdan, 1998; Eagly, Makhijani, & Klonsky, 1992; Malachowski, Chory, & Claus, 2012).

Studies of formal power in organizations (e.g., Bourgeois & Perkins, 2003) show that sexual behavior initiated by those with more power may be seen as more threatening and coercive than that initiated by those with equal or less power. Berdahl and Aquino (2009) explain men's usually more positive view of sexual behavior at work by the fact that men tend to have more power in the organization. Some assert that a sexual relationship may be used as a weapon in a hierarchical power game between the sexes, but that women rarely advance their careers by such unequal relationships (Dannert, Seton, & Berthilson, 2001). In the early research (e.g., Quinn, 1977), the male perspective on such relationships dominated because men typically had the higher-level workplace positions. In recent years, as more women assume managerial roles, this perception may have changed. However, few studies take the female perspective on unequal status in workplace romances.

6. Organization Policy and Workplace Romances

Wilson (2015) states that one of the most important questions on this topic is: "Should workplace romance be banned because it can potentially hurt the organization and the couple?" (p. 2). Organizations usually have a formally desexualized context in which management has historically discouraged sexual relationships at work (Fleming, 2007). Burrell (1984) describes the organization as a complex mix of management control and employee resistance: "Sexual relations at work may be expressive of a demand not to be controlled" (p. 102).

In the literature on romantic work relationships managers are advised to deal with such relationships either as private matters (entirely unrelated to the organization) or as organizational matters (significantly related to the organization). In either case, the general advice is for organizations to adopt an "anti-fraternization" policy (Wilson, 2015). However, few organizations have a written, formal policy that offers guidance and rules for managers to handle workplace romances (Parks, 2006). In Parks' study among human resources professionals in the United States, fewer than 20% reported that their companies had a written policy, and only 10% that their companies had a verbal policy. People in organizations often have implicit "unwritten understandings" about what they can and cannot do, but these "understandings" often lead to complicated situations (Gautier, 2007). Given this ambiguity, people are inclined to construct psychological contracts that they think are acceptable to their colleagues and superiors (Parks, Kidder, & Gallagher, 1998).

Parks (2006) found that 31% of employees (versus 9% of human resources professionals) thought their companies' policies were primarily designed to prohibit workplace sexual relationships. Other policies focus on hierarchical relationships in which power differences exist. Many policies focus on avoiding workplace gossip and rumors (Cowan & Horan, 2014; Paul & Townsend, 1998; Pierce & Aguinis, 2009) and discourage fraternization among employees (Shaefer & Tudor, 2001). Despite such policies, some organizations avoid interfering in workplace romances out of concern about possibly violating human rights (Wilson, 2015).

Some organizations require couples to sign a "love contract" stating that the relationship is consensual and if it fails no legal action will be brought against the employer or the partner (Wilson, 2015). Such love contracts essentially allow the organization to discourage or even prohibit workplace romances (Biggs, Matthewman, & Fultz, 2012), but an unintended effect is that the requirement may cause couples to hide their relationships (Schaefer & Tudor, 2001).

Pierce and Aguinis (2009) recommend that organizations include workplace romance as an integral part of an ethical code of conduct reflecting their own corporate value; there is no boilerplate policy for workplace romance that all organizations can adopt and implement.

7. Summary and Aim

The workplace is increasingly recognized as a sexual environment that merits more investigation (Morgan & Davidson, 2008). Most empirical studies on workplace romance (e.g., Anderson & Fisher, 1991; Brown & Allgeier, 1996; Horan & Chory, 2011; Mainiero, 1986; Powell, 2001; Quinn, 1977) have relied mainly on data from co-workers' observations and self-report surveys (Wilson, 2015), which can provide useful knowledge on organization morale and equitable employee treatment (Cowan & Horan, 2014; Liberman & Okimoto, 2008; Pierce & Aguinis, 2009). However, it is also important to conduct interviews and discussions with people who have experienced workplace romance to supplement the largely third-person perspective of previous research with first-person perceptions.

The main purpose of this study was to obtain a better understanding of the phenomenon of "workplace romance" by taking the first-person point of view. Because much of the research in this field has been set in the United States and, as far as we know, none in Sweden, we found it interesting to conduct this in a Swedish context.

8. Method

8.1 Focus Groups

Focus groups allow researchers to collect a large volume of data relatively quickly and cheaply (Wilkinson, 2006) and are well suited to exploring sensitive topics:

The laughing, joking, arguing, persuading, negotiating and telling of stories that typify focus group discussions make them an ideal method for gaining insight into the sexual language commonly used by participants and the ways in which this language operates (Frith, 2000, p. 291).

The interaction between participants in focus groups is interesting in itself (Flick, 2002; Morgan, 1996) and can function to stimulate memories and debates that are less likely to occur in an interview situation (Millward, 2006).

8.2 Participants

Data were collected in Sweden from two focus groups, one with five women (ages 34 to 41) and one with five men (ages 37 to 67). All participants had had a workplace romance. The participants were white-collar professionals working in industry, or in the case of one, education.

Snowball sampling was used to recruit the focus group participants. In snowball sampling the researcher tells qualified potential participants about the study and asks them to invite people similar to themselves to take part (Atkinson & Flint, 2001). The purpose of the study was explained to potential participants and their anonymity guaranteed.

8.3 The Focus Group Guide

We designed a question guide that permitted flexibility for responses in the focus group as recommended by Wilkinson (2006). Our intention was to give participants the freedom to explore novel areas (Smith & Osborn, 2006) yet maintain a structure permit replication of the results (de Vaus, 2006). A semi-structured guide allows the scripted questions to be adapted to the responses and new subjects to be explored (Smith & Osborn, 2006).

The first question was open-ended and asked participants to talk freely about their experience of workplace romance. Supplementary questions included "What were your perceptions at the beginning of your romance?" "What was your attitude about going to work while you were in this relationship?" and "What is your opinion of marital/partner infidelity?" Besides these scripted questions, various probing questions were asked when clarification was needed.

8.4 Procedure

The two focus groups, each of which lasted approximately 90 minutes, were conducted at the Department of Psychology, the University of Gothenburg. The authors, a woman and a man, each moderated the group matching their gender. Participants did not receive the questions in advance. The focus group discussions were recorded and transcribed using standard orthographic transcription that preserves the words spoken and sometimes as they should be spoken (Drew, 2006). The main reason for separating the women and the men into two different groups was to encourage open and equal discussion among all participants. Numerous studies show gender differences in how men and women exert social influence; in mixed-gender groups, men tend to exert more influence than women (e.g., Carli, 1989; Propp, 1995; Schneider & Cook, 1995; Wagner, Ford R., & Ford T., 1986). According to Pavitt (2014) sex has historically operated this way, with men more talkative and influential than women in mixed groups; whether these tendencies have diminished over time is unknown.

8.5 Analysis

The focus groups' transcripts were analyzed using a hermeneutical process with a selective frame of reference, and the data were interpreted to represent the participants' subjective experience of workplace romance. Because our intention was to search for patterns in the transcripts, we used the thematic analysis described by Braun and Clarke (2006) and we analyzed the transcripts in a data-driven way with an inductive approach. Initially, both authors read and reread the transcripts to obtain a sense of the whole and to become familiar with the data. Subsequently, almost all data was coded in order to find the most suitable code for each extract. The codes were then listed, ideas were discussed by both authors, and the codes were structured and restructured to identify themes in the narratives. When differences arose, these were discussed until agreement was reached about the

most suitable interpretation. We then categorized the themes and subthemes to analyze the relationships among them (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Smith & Osborn, 2006). This step is a reductive abstraction process that aims to identify an integrated and meaningful conceptual pattern overlaying the empirical material (Gläser & Laudel, 2013; Hellström, 2001). The analysis resulted in two main themes and subthemes were created to give structure to. Finally, the coded data extracts were reread to ensure that the themes and subthemes covered the research question and the extracts were reviewed to find examples that best captured the participants' experiences.

9. Results

The analysis resulted in the themes and subthemes shown in Table 1. These are illustrated with quotations from the participants to show how the themes are grounded in the data. To give some context, it is noted whether the quotation is by a female or a male.

Table 1. Themes and sub-themes

Being on a scary and thrilling journey	I will not allow myself
	We hoped no one knew
	Fun going to work
	You know what you're getting
	The fire is out
Other passengers on the journey	Rules or not
	Others are worse
	Infidelity or not

9.1 Being on a Scary and Thrilling Journey

This theme mainly concerns participants' feelings and thoughts about the selves and sometimes their romantic partner. Sometimes discussion focused on the negative consequences of romances at work, which raised the necessity of keeping an ongoing love affair hidden. Different motives were used to explain the wish to keep the relationship a secret, and the secret itself seemed somehow thrilling, making the love affair even more rewarding. It thus became fun to go to work in this rewarding bubble of love and secrecy. After the initial passion faded, if the relationship continued, men especially stressed their need for some separation from their partner rather than being together both at home and at work. At the start of the discussion, the focus was mainly on the emotion and the thrill of the forbidden; however, the discussions often turned to more rational topics such as the workplace's natural suitability as place for mating.

9.1.1 I will not Allow Myself

Although all participants had had an intimate relationship at work, they stressed the dangerous aspects of such relationships. One participant said he had been attracted to a co-worker. However, he ignored this feeling because he was living with another woman. Another participant said it was impossible to have a workplace romance because of the inevitable problems such as hurting someone else.

> I guess I never thought I should meet someone at work. It can never be good. It can only be negative. You do not know if it will be just a romance that quickly blows over, with someone feeling bad. Then you won't want to be seen every day. It's really hard. (Woman)

A male participant reflected that he had always had had a negative view of workplace romances, but that his view changed when he fall in love. "I thought that I would never have a love-affair at work. It was unthinkable because it only creates problems. That was my reasoning until I fall in love". (Man)

9.1.2 We Hoped No One Knew

A reoccurring theme was the need to hide something obvious. One reason behind the wish to hide was ambivalent feelings; on the one hand it was sensitive and complicated, on the other, it was exciting. Others saw no logical reason to hide the romance other than the situation of partner infidelity. Some stressed that the power inequality between opposite-sex partners could be a vital reason for secrecy and the general view was that the woman was in a dependent relationship. In common though, was the wish that at work were possible to hide. One man worried about his partner not knowing what was said about her.

> I realized we should not reveal our relationship at work although people knew we were together. However, I thought we still should not be seen together. Because she was lower in the hierarchy, my colleagues evaluated her. That situation could be advantageous or disadvantageous for her, depending on what these colleagues thought of me. (Man)

One participant explained his feelings when he began a workplace romance while living with another partner. Secrecy in this situation was not thrilling; rather, was necessary to avoid others' criticism.

> I was living with someone at the time, and so was she. We worked together for three years before there was "sweet music". Then we began talking. Finally, we ended those other relationships, and began our relationship. We kept quiet at work, of course. (Man)

Some participants who wished to maintain secrecy described confrontations with co-workers that may have contributed to the end of the secret phase. In the following quote a woman describes trying to hide an on-going love-affair, but soon realizing that other knew and that their co-workers talked about them.

> We were quite careful and actually said nothing to anyone. But people discovered things because they saw us at the car park. Two people always arrived at the same time or left work together. People began talking although no one said anything to us. (Woman)

Apart from the more rational reasons to keep the love affair as a secret, it was common to talk about how thrilling it was to be in love and having nobody know. "It was so fantastic. You cannot explain that time. I have been in love many times in my life, but this was an incredibly different love because it was so exciting and secret". (Woman)

Both women and men said their workplace romance was quite different from their previous romantic relationships. One difference, related to secrecy, was in learning how to behave so that the relationship was not revealed. "It was exciting. I thought at the beginning—how can we make it seem like we're not together?" (Man)

9.1.3 Fun Going to Work

Many participants expressed their pleasure in going to work when they were in a workplace romance. One participant said the relationship energized him to work even harder and another said this euphoria motivated her to work more. A woman described spending time in the morning trying to be attractive to her new partner: "Suddenly, it was great to go to work. I took more time with my appearance. It was fun to paint my nails. I chose my clothes with extra care." (Woman) The men also described their renewed pleasure in going to work: "I also think it was more fun to go to work. It was a boost, quite clearly." (Man)

9.1.4 You Know What You're Getting

The participants discussed the advantages of meeting someone at work. Women and men talked about the safety of finding a partner in the workplace, and explained that one was more likely to get a truer picture of a possible partner at work than during a casual encounter with someone in online dating or at a pub. The participants thought it was quite natural that relationships would develop at work given all the time people spend together there. "We work about eight hours a day, five days a week. The likelihood is higher that you will meet someone at work than elsewhere." (Male). One participant explained that it was an advantage to meet someone involved with work similar to hers: "If we are in the same industry, we know what we're talking about because we have a common background. Both of us know who the other is." (Female)

The participants compared meeting someone at work favorably with other ways of meeting people. They emphasized that the work environment allows you to get to know an individual before committing to a relationship.

> It is a great advantage to meet someone at work. The relationship develops naturally, although in my case, it was at an after-work event before we clicked. It felt much more natural in that context. So work is a very good setting for a romance. (Male)

9.1.5 The Fire Is Out

The participants discussed the development of workplace romances when the initial thrill and excitement diminished. One participant reflected on the period after the first passion when work became the same as it was. Some participants also described the difficulty when the romance ended, and one talked about the time after as an awkward situation. "As long as the romance continues and you work together there is no problem. But when the relationship ends, and you still work at the same place, then there is awkwardness." (Male)

When the initial passion faded, the men in particular expressed a wish to have some separation in their lives, rather than being together both at home and at work. It seems that a shared life creates a need for separate workplaces. They recognized that couples need time apart; they cannot be together 24 hours a day.

> I think you need to be yourself and on your own at work. For me, this is a fairly strong need and I think that she agrees. The world becomes very small. Even if I love her very much, I want to have a private life, a professional life, so to speak. (Male)

9.2 Other Passengers on This Journey

Even if their surroundings were present in the first theme *Being on a scary but thrilling journey*, this theme focuses mainly on thoughts about others at the workplace and about their co-workers' attitudes toward the couple. Here the participants discussed what they wished from their colleagues and bosses, and compared their moral views about workplace romance. For example, the view was expressed that starting a serious relationship was better than "fucking around". Another sort of moral statement stressed that it was better that both be single before starting a love affair at work. Love found at work also became loaded with feelings of guilt for someone already living in an intimate relationship. Here, the discussions did not focus on the thrilling start or the long-term success of the romance, but on what happens when the romance ends. Some worried that their career could be slowed if others knew about the affair, and the discussion also turn to whether workplace rules were needed. Some in the women's group expressed their need for their boss's approval and esteem.

9.2.1 Rules or Not

The participants agreed that workplace romances that had "happy endings" were unproblematic. The happy ending might be marriage, living together, or even a relationship terminated with integrity and decency. However, several participants stated that couples should consider that the consequences of the relationship could be problematic and be prepared to deal with these consequences, and that rules could be helpful. Some said they would find it strange and intrusive if a superior in the organization interfered in a couple's relationship. However, the participants offered a number of qualifications about organization rules and policies in the nature of "it depends". They also discussed a few situations where they thought rules might be appropriate. In general, however, the participants thought workplace romances should be unregulated, and couples should be trusted to rely on their common sense. They felt rules and policies from the organization could be likely to create negative responses and ill feelings. Almost all participants said that they did not know of any rules at their workplaces, written or verbal. One exception recalled only some oral rules her boss mentioned. "I have not seen any rules, but my boss has told me about them. I do not think that they are written." (Woman)

Some participants pointed out that it was quite common to find a partner in the workplace; therefore, rules were inappropriate and unnecessary. "No, we have no such policy. I think it is normal to meet someone in the workplace today. A policy for such a thing would be crazy." (Man) Another participant thought such rules might create more problems than solutions. "With rules, you would probably react to them negatively." (Man)

Some participants stated that because men are usually favored in organizations, some rules and policies are needed. A situation in which rules or policies of some kind were seen as appropriate was when a clear power imbalance existed between the partners. The possibilities for abuse of power and favoritism, as well as rumors and gossip, became evident. "My partner is a member of the management team. If I want to advance in my career, I don't have the same possibilities as my partner." (Female)

In the discussions about rules, the need to inform the boss about the love affair was mentioned. However, it was only the women who talked about how important it was to get the new relationship approved by their immediate superior. One woman said that management's permission and approval had been beneficial for her.

> I mentioned the situation to my boss quite early because I did not want her to find out another way. I realized she had not noticed anything because she thought the situation was quite fun. It would have been very difficult if she had brought up the situation first. (Female)

9.2.2 Others Are Worse

The discussions revealed some judgmental observations on the behavior of other couples in workplace romances. Perhaps judging others' behavior as worse or less moral than their own provided some relief. Discussion about what constituted bad behavior was more common among the women, who thought casual sex at office parties or conferences was particularly bad or immoral. One woman described the same men who behaved "immorally" each year at office parties. "Some people do have such relationships. You do not know if their partners approve. However, you think this is very strange." (Woman)

The men also, although to a lesser extent, had negative opinions of "conference sex". "I have seen how some colleagues at conferences behave in ways they would not at home when, for example, the norms are not clear." (Man)

The participants also stressed the importance of handling a workplace romance in an appropriate way. They described some inappropriate actions as "unprofessional". "When she has an affair with him and sits on his lap at work—this is not professional behavior." (Male)

9.2.3 Infidelity or Not

Closely related to "others are worse" were discussions about what was counted as fidelity; almost all the participants felt that both partners should be single when engaging in a love affair at work. "I was single, and it was easier for me to get involved in a new relationship." (Man). Some participants, however, said they had another ongoing intimate relationship when the new relationship started. Discussion on this topic led to further discussions about infidelity in which the participants tried to define the parameters around infidelity. As one participant described the border between what was acceptable and what was not, she also expressed a wish to shelter her conscience. "As far as infidelity, we used text messaging only. For my own sake, I thought we should not do anything I would have a bad conscience about." (Woman).

Participants who were in another relationship when they entered a workplace romance agreed it was important to end the first relationship before beginning the new one. "Suddenly someone sat next to me and started talking to me. We clicked a bit and began dating. He left his girlfriend then." (Woman). For some it seemed important to say "we were about to separate". One man said that although he was single before the workplace romance began, his partner had recently begun to separate from her partner. "She was not married, but they were about to separate. It was harder for her than for me because I had been alone for over a year." (Male)

10. Discussion

The aim of this study was to obtain a better understanding of the phenomenon of "workplace romance" by taking the first-person point of view. The motives for a workplace romance described by Quinn (1977) were related to work (e.g., advancement) ego (e.g., excitement, sexual experience), and love (e.g., genuine love, longing for a partner). The findings here were in line with Quinn's study with one exception. None of the participants talked about their own work-related motives, although they recognized the existence of such motives in others.

The two things most talked about were secrecy and whether or not there is a need for rules. Therefore, these two subthemes will be discussed first. The participants generally stated that workplace romances had few negative consequences, yet they all described the need to keep the romances secret and sometimes described doubts about the legitimacy of the relationships. There were two main motives for secrecy. One was the fear of negative consequences, such as disapproval, office gossip, and jealousy on the part of superiors and/or colleagues. Most dominant, however, in the discussion of needing to hide the affair, was the thrill and excitement of having a secret. In the discussions about rules, the participants wavered between expressing negative views and describing situations where rules were needed. The participants seemed to) try to formulate "unwritten understandings" (Gautier, 2007) about what people think they can and cannot do in workplace romances. Perhaps it was when strategies for keeping the relationship secret failed, the need for rules became apparent. Interwoven with discussion of secrecy and rules was a need to discuss others who had behaved more "immorally" than themselves. To some degree, it seemed the participants were able to excuse their own behavior, if they believed others behaved. Perhaps the need for secrecy, the ambivalence about rules, and the wish to see others as worse could be seen as signs that there is a need to discuss romantic relationships, love-affairs, and sexuality in organizations and at workplaces.

Among the various kinds of secret relationships, forbidden sexual relationships are perhaps the most common (Richardson, 1988). The secrecy itself seems to create a bond of substantial strength that may be the basis for an individual's attraction to and preoccupation with a partner (Wegner, Lane, & Dimitri, 1994). According to Stoller (1986), when secrecy is built into sexual scripts, it is possible that sexual arousal increases when there is a risk that the secret may be revealed.

The participants who engaged in extra-marital/partner workplace romances stressed the need for secrecy and concern that such sensitive relationships could create problems. According to Mainiero (1986), conservative cultures are more likely to force people who are in workplace romances to maintain silent. However, none of the participants worked in an organization with a conservative culture that, according to Wilson (2015), is typical of some fields such as banking and finance. Instead, the organizations the participants worked in could be described as having a liberal attitude toward individual freedom and sexuality, which is generally characteristic of Swedish

society. Nevertheless, the participants in this study emphasized the necessity of keeping their relationships secret. The need for secrecy was also found by Widmer, Treas, and Newcomb (1998), suggesting that people in so-called illicit affairs at work may wish to avoid the critical opinions of their co-workers. Infidelity certainly has a negative and immoral connotation in many, if not most, societies (Rokach & Philibert-Lignières, 2015). The participants who were engaged in extra-marital/partner affairs were aware of this disapproval. However, most people discover, as did our participants, that a love affair at work is difficult to hide, and according to Quinn (1977) most such relationships eventually become open secrets despite the couples' wish for secrecy.

Most participants said that a workplace romance could have damaging career consequences, also found in earlier research (e.g., see Alder & Quist, 2014; Brown & Allgier, 1996; Dillard, 1987). For example, one woman said she was not promoted because her partner (who was not her boss) was on the management team. Thus, the participants concluded that a workplace romance with someone higher in the managerial hierarchy might pose a career barrier to the subordinate partner.

The women and men generally shared similar thoughts and feelings about workplace romances. However, there were two exceptions. The women, unlike the men, emphasized the importance of informing their superiors about the romance, while only the men stressed the need of having their own "workplace" and independence after the first exiting phase of the romance ended.

The women described a wish to be validated by their boss, and this could perhaps be understood as a reflection of the "good girl" syndrome. For most women, these good girl scripts are rooted in childhood. According to Cannon, Lauve-Moon and Buttell (2015), gender is a construction of society that is not based in biological female–male natures. Our identities, according to Risman (2004) are "constructed through early childhood development, explicit socialization, modeling, and adult experiences" (p. 436). Women may feel the need for validation from their bosses because society expects them to seek approval (see, Sandmark & Renstig, 2010). The idea of the good girl syndrome is confirmed also in other research. For example, Sandmark and Renstig (2010) found in a study among young women in full-time, white-collar jobs in Sweden, that women in workplace romances think they are expected to perform more, simply because they are women. This so-called good girl syndrome is attributed both to women's eagerness to please and to the pressure to perform perfectly (Fjelldal-Soelberg, 2014).

The men focused more than the women on the aftermath of a workplace romance when the initial passion was over. The men talked more about their need for personal space, including their "own" workplace. They expressed feelings uncomfortable being with another person 24 hours a day. Some researchers explain this discomfort as the result of men's greater need for independence or fear of intimacy (Lemaster et al., 2015; Robertson & Fitzgerald, 1992).

11. Limitations

There seems to be a volunteer bias in studies concerning sexual matters; those who are most likely to take part tend to be those who would be considered more sexually liberal and open than those not willing to participate (Plaud et al., 1999). The sensitivity of the topic of sex at work might be one reason some hesitated to participate. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that in the focus groups we met women and men who were both more willing and more open to discuss sex at work than non-participants. This limits our ability to discuss the validity of our results for other women and men at the workplace. In addition, it was easier for us to recruit women than men, which may indicate something about women having more courage or willingness than men to discuss emotional matters. This in turn may have affected our results.

It is also important to note that this study was conducted in a society that is characterized by a relatively liberal attitude toward human sexuality. In Sweden, education about sex in schools was mandated in 1955, the right to abortion was approved in 1975, and youth clinics related to sexual issues were established in 1970 (Lennerhed, 2010). Because of this open-minded attitude toward sexuality, this research was more easily conducted than it might have been in some other countries.

12. Suggestions for Future Research

Most of the research on workplace romance has been conducted in the United States with a focus largely on negative consequences and risks for gender discrimination (Boyd, 2010). Research in other countries and cultures is needed that addresses the motives, benefits, and problems associated with workplace romances from the first-person point of view. The findings here can offer empirical knowledge for constructing a survey study with an experimental design to further study workplace romances in larger samples. As Wilson (2015) claims, most research samples are unrepresentative in terms of gender. Greater inclusion of female participants would

increase our knowledge of how women perceive and react to organizational issues related to workplace romances. It would also be interesting to conduct focus groups to investigate the views and attitudes held by superiors and human resources staff about workplace romances. It also seems important to conduct studies about workplace romances among diverse work groups and in different organization settings.

Finally, it is our hope that this study can be useful in enabling an open and non-judgmental dialogue about romantic relationships, love affairs, and sexuality in different organizations and workplaces.

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