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ORGANISATIONAL ROMANCE: THEORISING AND RESEARCHING AN UNDEREXPLORED PHENOMENON

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Despite organisational romance being heralded as an important managerial issue 30 years ago by Quinn (1977) there remains a lack of academic research exploring non-platonic workplace relationships. In light of this discrepancy, this chapter seeks to move organisational romance away from the managerialist rhetoric which adopts a rationalist, prescriptive approach, and towards the sexuality and organisation literature. Workplace romance can be thus viewed as an integral workplace dynamic, imbued with issues of power and politics at both a macro and local level. To explore how this may be played out in practice, data from 48 interviews were subjected to a number of narrative analysis techniques to demonstrate how organisational romance is discussed, negotiated, and played out in a workplace.

Keywords: Organisational romance; work; romance; sexuality; rules.

1. Introduction

As early as 1974, Donald Roy (1974, p. 44) noted that "sex is a commonly overlooked aspect of informal social organisation". Moreover, his chapter, published in a book entitled *Deviant Behaviour*, gives us an insight into how

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sexual relations at work were assumed to be an unwarranted and illegitimate aspect of the bureaucratic organisation. Yet, 4 decades of academic writing appears to have done little to challenge this conception. While the media feed on a public desire for work-sex scandals, such as President Clinton's extra-curricular activities with his subordinates (see Powell, 2000), the managerial literature has remained sceptical about the legitimacy of conducting affairs at work. However, there remains a lack of empirically informed research about the incidence, perceptions, and consequences of workplace romance, with many reports being informed through colloquial accounts or stereotypical reproductions of gender roles. To provide a means of enlightening current debates on this organisational phenomenon, this chapter sets out to critical overview the existing literature and situate workplace romances within the theoretical commitments posited within a "sexuality of organisation" perspective, before empirically investigating managers and employers perceptions and experiences of organisational romance.

2. Research Traditions in Organisational Romance

Within the body of mainly North-American scholarly literature, workplace romances are defined as mutually desired relationships between two people at work, in which some element of sexuality or physical intimacy exists (Powell and Foley, 1998). Romances at work have long been occurring, understood mainly through psychological theories of likeability, which states we are attracted to those similar to us or who work in the same corporate culture or occupation (Maniero, 1986; Smith *et al.*, 1993). The rise in number of such relationships has also been credited to a range of social and cultural changes in both work and private spheres. Developed countries have all undergone sociodemographic changes, such as later ages for marriage, higher divorce rates, and a higher proportion of unmarried people, all of which creates a greater potential courtship pool at work (Hearn and Parkin, 1987). Trends in working have also seen individuals work longer hours and ascribe to cultural norms which facilitate socialising outside the workplace (Pierce *et al.*, 1996).

One central research theme has been exploring perceptions of those who are around the couple, rather than those participating in the romance themselves, implying that the relationship will have an inevitable affect on the immediate work group. Using survey methods, studies have demonstrated that non-hierarchical relationships, reported to be the most common form of relationship (Alfred Marks Bureau, 1991; Girvin, 1995) are seen as acceptable with little need for managerial intervention (Training and Development Journal, 1994; Fisher, 1994). Warfield (1987) even suggests that there may be positive outcomes, such as enhancing work environments. Hierarchical work relationships are viewed as more detrimental, raising issues of career rewards, such as promotion or job assignments being given unfairly (Greenberg, 1987) and skewing the bureaucratic chain of authority and command.

However, regardless of an inter or intra-hierarchical relationship, research has provided a caveat that the romance should not interfere with the day-to-day running of the business. With the current literature following a Weberian logic of bureaucracy where organisations are viewed as operating "without regard for persons" (Weber, 1948, p. 975), the highly emotive characteristic that defines romance is ultimately at a disjuncture with ideologies of how the workplace operates. It is thus unsurprising that the literature is heavily slanted towards managerialist rhetoric and serves to accentuate the negative consequences of romance at work, such as the possibility of legal action should attraction become one-sided once the romance is terminated (Pierce and Aguinis, 1997; Pierce *et al.*, 2000). Indeed, scare-figures have been used as a reason to sanction romance altogether: one survey for the Society for Human Resource Management (1998) predicted (but did not prove) that 24% of romances would end in sexual harassment claims (Wilson *et al.*, 2003).

What is not challenged within current literature is that the "disruption" caused is highly subjective and often cannot be directly attributable to the romance itself. Indeed, it may lead to the romance being used as an excuse for derision of the colleagues, rather than a legitimate complaint. Other issues of political manoeuvring and power have also been negated within current studies, although there are clear signs of disparities between perceived gender roles. Some research has tentatively suggested that women are more at risk of negative evaluations following a romance (Quinn, 1977; Maniero, 1993), underlined in surveys where the stereotype of a women "sleeping her way to the top" or participating in the relationship for motives other than romance is clearly signalled (Powell, 2000; Anderson and Hunsaker, 1985). This is neither challenged or reproached by the articles, with many attributing the rise in workplace romance to an increase of women in the labour force which is seen to upset "traditional organisational behaviour modes" (Warfield, 1987, p. 22) and cause numerous "problems" for personnel departments (Ford and Mclaughlin, 1987). In doing so, many articles are in danger of blaming women for workplace romance, rather than exploring how inequities occur.

As suggested, this body of literature has yet to explore the full complexity of workplace romance, both in terms of the gendered power relations, and providing a well-rounded, critical assessment of its impact. With many of the studies published within popularist of manager-focused journals, organisational romance is rationalised as something that can be understood, managed, and effectively "solved" through traditional techniques or 5-point plans (see Schaefer and Tudor, 2001). The danger of not challenging organisational romance is presented in a heavily biased manner by often focusing on the potentially apocalyptic and "destructive" consequences (Warfield, 1987, p. 22), not only for employee relations, but for the very basis of the organisational structures (Collins, 1983). The scope and definition of organisational romance also remains underdeveloped through the limited methodological approaches, where surveys or vignettes concentrate on third-party perceptions of heterosexual relationships, failing to question the experiences of those involved in a relationship themselves (e.g., Harrison and Lee, 1985; Karl and Sutton, 2000). Indeed, it appears that to develop a better understanding of this phenomenon, there is a need to problematise how we identify and theoretically conceptualise workplace romance.

3. "Sexualising" Organisational Romance

In response to a managerial rationalistic bias within studies of human activities in the workplace, organisational behaviour has witnessed a transition towards more postmodernist and critical-influenced approaches to the theory of work which seek to disrupt the norms and assumptions that are accepted as constituting organisational life (Alvesson, 2002). Instead of placing value on what can be seen, proven, and factualised, critical theory has sought to develop a way of breaking down the taken-for-granted and instead focuses upon the processes through which organisational artefact and identities are socially constructed in relation to power and politics.

Within this terrain, sexuality has been called the "most taboo topics within contemporary organisation theory" (Hancock and Tyler, 2001, p. 150), inevitably silenced to the detriment of its study as a workplace phenomenon (Brewis and Linstead, 2000). Yet sexuality in organisations continued to exist and can be seen as mutually constructed by each other (Hearn and Parkin, 1987). Gendered identities have been strongly associated with ways of managing, where the masculine is aligned with assertive, aggressive traits, leaving females to be marginalised by deviating from a male norm, in accentuated gender positions characterised by being overemotional and the need to support, rather than lead (Trethewey, 1999). Likewise, sexuality may be interpreted as embodied, literally "written upon" the gestures, clothes, and appearance of women and men at work. Although these may come to stand for an aesthetic form of economy where specific cultural values of the organisation are inscribed on or through the body (Tyler and Abbot, 1998; Entwistle, 2002), it is inevitable that sexuality plays a role in the way we make meaning or send out messages about what the organisation stands for and, in turn how we come to understand our own and others' employee identity.

If sexuality is embedded within organisational life, it is inevitable that explicit activities relating to sexual relations may be considered as ripe for critical analysis. Not only may organisational romance shape organisational artefacts, it also affect the identities of those who are situated within the field. However, freeing organisational phenomena from the oppression of rationalism, sex at work can not only be seen as disrupting the myth of objectivity, but perceived as something which is enjoyable and can serve to subvert the "seriousness" ascribed to organisational life (Hancock and Tyler, 2001). In entering into a relationship neither sanctioned nor formally recognised by the organisation, individuals may be viewed as creating an organisational identity which is not dictated to, or conferred by, larger bodies of power. Indeed, in entering into a relationship neither for organisational means or wider social pressures of reproduction, employees may be understood as engaging in what Giddens (1992, p. 147) calls "plastic sexuality... sex detached from its age-old subservience to differential power".

However, as yet, there is little evidence of how employees themselves construct workplace romance as an organisational phenomena or how it impinges on their own workplace identity. To further develop these ideas, the chapter now turns to the empirically driven analysis.

4. Introduction to Research Study and Methodology

To address the above research issues, the bar industry was chosen as a prospective research site. The UK pub industry employees over half a million people in over 60,000 public houses (Keynote, 2005). The research commenced after approaching and negotiating access with a large chain of pubs employing around 80,000 staff. The branding of the bar targeted the 18–35 youth market, and was mirrored in the demographics of their workforce, with around 65% of weekly salaried workers being under the age of 35. The chains shared a number of problems endemic to the industry, such as high turnover of staff, which had lead to a number of practices and incentives designed to create a strong cohesive culture within each house. For example, working evening or unsociable shifts meant that staff would socialise together after a late shift, drinking after work. Management would also organise inter-bar competitions or incentives to meet targets, which would be rewarded by money to spend on works nights out. All these incentives and aspects of working appeared conducive to fostering workplace romances.

Taped interviews were conducted with 48 employees and managers, following codes of confidentiality and ethical guidelines. Using a 5-point scale, participants were asked the extent to which they disagreed or agreed with a number of statements and why, their reasoning providing a basis for discussion. Participants were then asked a number of open-ended questions about whether they had experienced or witnessed organisational romance, their views on workplace relationships, and its role in organisational life. Rather than probing for a definitive answer, the interviews were understood as "guided conversations" (McNeill, 1990) where both the participants and the researcher had the opportunity to develop certain themes that did not explicitly come up in the questions. On transcribing the interviews, data were anonymised by assigning a number and the letters A–D to managers, and W to workers.

The interviews were subsequently analysed using a number of qualitative coding techniques, with particular interest in narrative analysis techniques in order to explore the personal stories and experiences of the participants. Due to the relative infancy of the research area, in the very early stages of analysis the authors favoured a grounded form of analysis where themes and codes were solely derived from the data, rather than preliminarily drawn up from other studies. Then the authors began to identify themes, which were further informed by both the research questions and our literature review. Transcripts were read several times by both authors independently, in order to allow themes to emerge, and were then compared against the other researcher's analysis and arranged into a number of larger conceptual categories. Once this stage was complete, we turned to techniques developed from narrative analysis, serving to explore the process of retelling an event as both a strategic and interpretative event in itself (Boje, 2001). This enabled us to move from the core beliefs being presented or upheld, to understanding the processes which were employed to support these ideals. Stories of organisational romance were thus seen in two ways. First, the experiences were understood as ways of supporting the legitimacy of beliefs espoused by participant throughout the interviews. Second, they were employed as a way of justifying conflicting or paradoxical opinions produced by the participant. As a means of achieving legitimacy, a number of techniques were also employed within the participants stories. These were identified as "effects of ideology" (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000, p. 84) which included: naturalisation of social order; universalisation of common interest and silencing of conflicting interest; domination of instrumental reasoning and; hegemonic processes. These stages of analysis allowed a set of key conceptual ideas to be developed relating to the constitution of organisational romance and its situated meaning in the workplace, and possible consequences. As a result of analysis, the findings are separated into three sections, subsequently dealing with the normalisation of organisational romance; the rules of engagement, and the gendered outcomes of organisational romance.

5. Normalising Organisational Romance

Whether participants agreed or disagreed with workplace romance, there was a consensus that it was a common occurrence. One of the key resources deployed by participants in justifying this was the specific work context. A young workforce, mostly single, were working together during evenings and weekends, and set aside times for socialising. Drawing on Gidden's (1992) notion of "plastic sexuality", the work environment was seen as creating playful landscapes. For example, one employee compared it to being at school: "Play-ground romances, oh, I'm going to kiss them, oh I'm going to take them home. No one takes it too seriously" (A4). Estimates of how often romance involvement varied from half the staff (C2, C4) to the majority or nearly all the staff (WB008, B3) and sought to emphasise the commonality of romance, serving to normalise the incidence of workplace romance.

Flirting was not confined to inter-staff relationships, but was strongly connected with the landscape of work: the pub. "People come to the pub to meet people or try and pull, so the bar staff are all included in that experience" (WC005). Rather than accentuate the divide between those working and not-working in the same space, participants concentrated on their role as creating an atmosphere or setting conducive to romance. Not only was this an enjoyable atmosphere to be in but was also "part of the sales technique at the end of the day" (WB009). This allusion to emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983, 1996), where work processes required individuals to express or provide an emotionally appealing appearance, was particularly common when justifying the occurrence of inter-staff romance. This requirement of the job not only created a space where flirting, humor, and sexual banter were acceptable features of the work landscape, but where emotional support between staff was needed in order to cope with the demands of dealing with drunkenness, fights, and unwanted sexual advances from customers.

Yet, workplace romance were also discussed as normal within any workplace environment, justified by participants drawing on a discourse upholding the social biologisation of human interaction. By forefronting attraction as an instinctual dynamic, interviewees were able to justify organisational romance as not simply common, but unavoidable. Due to "human instinct" (A2), "people are going to be attracted to each other no matter what" (WC004).

The effect this had on the participants' own work identity was noticeable through an absence of separation between their work and home personas. First, there was a "spatial overlapping" of work and social spheres, where the environment in which they were employed was also a space which they would occupy outside work. The labour processes also required emotions to be explicitly performed, or managed, and was not seen as incompatible with being professional or carrying out your work; indeed, it constituted part of being a good barperson. As well as drawing on these modes of justification, romance was also regarded as a "natural" aspect of any type of interaction, within the workplace or otherwise.

6. The "Rules of Engagement"

Unlike in other studies, the definition of organisational romance was by no means assumed or fixed, although was always seen as involving reciprocal relations, which distanced any "romantic" activities from harassment of unrequited advances. However, some participants, found the term "romance" misleading. Flirting, kissing, one-night stands, flings, and longer relationships were all seen under the rubric of "workplace" romance, although the participants were keen to emphasise that traditional conceptions of romance as associated with love or intimacy was not entirely suited to describe the one-off drunken encounters after a staff night out.

Despite this discrepancy, it appeared that there was a collective notion of what was acceptable and unacceptable in a nonplatonic workplace relationship. In this aspect, participants were more likely to recall stories of how *not* to conduct a romance. Again, this was based on the ideal of organisational romance as something which was light-hearted and enjoyable, providing entertainment for the whole team. While some stories recalled couples trying to keep their relationship a secret, this was seen as impossible, with many other employees guessing that the couples were involved long before it was revealed. In some sense, the relationship was often discussed as "belonging" to the whole team, and not simply involving the two people who were romantically attached. To legitimise this, participants discussed how the work group were all affected, whether through swapping shifts so the couple worked and had time off together, or allowing them to go on their breaks at the same time (WD002; WB004).

Staff leaving was a cause of concern for managers, either due to inter-hierarchical relationships: "She found it hard being ordered about by someone she was sleeping with and being treated the same as the rest of the bar staff" (D3), or dissolved relationships. What was interesting in the latter case was a lack of a "victim" figure: whether relationships had finished under acrimonious or amicable terms, both parties were expected to continue working productively. One employee (WB009) stated that they were caught between sympathising and having to "pretend you don't know anything and keep quiet", while others recall "morning-after awkwardness" (A4), and "tension and bitchiness" (B3). However, the negative effects from both good and bad relationships should be kept to a minimum and not affect the rest of the team. As such, sex was placed in contradictory positions as being both an integral and normal aspect of work, and yet not allowed to have a negative impact in any way.

Similarly, there appeared to be some shared consensus over management approaches to consensual romantic relationships at work. The company had no formal policy on how to deal with romance (as far as the manager and employees were aware of), and the possible introduction of such guidelines was met with cynicism, or claims that it was immoral to sanction such rules, stating it would just be "another of their rules we ignored" (A8). As a result, managers dealt with each instance on a case by case basis.

Of interest is the how participants discussed the line between when to intervene and when to sanction or ignore a relationship. The first-hand experiences of participants suggested that the majority of affairs were allowed to continue, with workers being allowed a degree of autonomy about how they chose to conduct work relations. However, this did not serve to counteract the importance of economic discourses and both managers and employees stated intervention should occur if the romance affected productivity in any way. Employing an economic marker contrasted strongly with the tone of previous discussions about romance, which were characterised by light-hearted, playful rhetoric. However, it remains unclear as to how any economic downturns of issue of productivity were attributed directly to a workplace romance, and managers avoided specific quantified examples.

Instead, managers discussed their own experiences of intervening as "sensing" or "feeling" that something was going wrong. As such, the decision to intervene remained a subjective judgment made by the managers.

Interestingly, this economic rationale was used to justify a number of practices that appeared on the surface as constituting unequal or discriminatory practice. One gay employee (WD003) found her girlfriend banned from coming into the put as she "looked like a lesbian... and that was the wrong kind of clientele". This action was justified as "bad for business" by drawing on the brand target, rather than homophobia. Similarly, negative tales of romance causing a detrimental affect were aligned with individuals who were lazy (WB006), not doing their work (WA005), or stole from the till (A3). Such cases of affected productivity were absent from stories emphasising the positive aspects of organisational romance, and appeared than the "bad effects" of workplace romance only arose from "bad employees".

7. Gendered Outcomes of Organisational Romance

As discussed above, of noted importance to the construction of organisational romance was the lack of a "victim" figure. No matter whether the dissolution of a relationship was mutual, or had involved a third party, those concerned were expected to not let it affect their workplace relations or efficiency. However, this did not mean that "everyone was a winner". Both the beliefs participants expressed about workplace romance, and through the assumptions and positioning of subject-actors within their stories, women were continually marginalised and presented as "losing" when it came to romantic relationships at work. While the pattern appeared that the more junior member of staff was most likely to leave if a relationship dissolved, one female manager (A7) stated it would always be the woman "as she is more likely to be criticised by the rest of the team". Similarly, the tales of managing the termination of a romance often focused on the women, or "girls", not being able to cope, and breaking down in the workplace. When discussing this moment of relationship breakdown, stories also relied heavily of gendered stereotypes of behaviours where the over-emotional party was invariably female, compared to the "coping" male: "They're (men are) not fussy, because they can get on with life without women anyway whereas women are called a slag (slang insult for women with loose morals) and are seen to not be able to separate their private life with anything else in their life" (WA006). From this it is clear that while emotions are normalised as workplace activity *being* emotional in itself was rejected as an acceptable working identity.

Women assumed a second position with narratives of organisational romance. The women were often presented as participating in the romance for pragmatic reasons. One manager (C4) discussed a "conniving" member of staff who received favourable shifts and treatment after an affair with one of the managers, while employees (such as WC002) discussed another employee "trying to get in or further up the company". Even though inter-hierarchical relationships where the male was the subordinate were also recalled by participants, these were not discussed regarding any degree of instrumentality.

The termination or commencement of a workplace relationship also appeared to have more immediate consequences on the women's working identity. One worker (WB004) stated that women were portrayed as "less fun once she is in a relationship" while others were well aware of the danger of being seen as a slag (WA006), slut (WA007), or tart (WD001) if they participated in two or more romances over a short period of time (WD001). On the other hand, such negative comments were absent when discussing the perceptions of men engaging in workplace relationships. Instead, they were the "lads", "studs", "heroes", or "the man". Although the double standard was well recognised by both the male and female participants, there was little evidence that they were actively challenged or refuted. While it was often conceded that the comments made were good-natured, attempts to answer back or challenge the remarks were not advisable: "people will think you can't take a joke" (WD001).

In this sense, women were bound to either comply with the double standards, as found in other discussions of romantic relationships (Giddens, 1994), or face accusations of threatening the "fun environment". With the norm of workplace romance defined and determined through a notion of "fun", anyone not complying with such rules will suffer the consequences. In doing so, the rules of organisational romance remained implicitly gendered where women are dichotomised through a Madonna–Whore complex. This means that women must either be classified as unable to control her emotions and manage "romantic love" and "working" as simultaneous activities, or defined through their perceived use of sexual manipulation and predatory behaviour to their own advantage. With both male and female participants relying on these norms to construct their views about workplace romance, it may be argued that the dominance of the "male in the head" (Holland *et al.*, 1994) acts as a regulating medium to assume a logic of patriarchy. In doing so, the rational emotional objective of the male is set as the norm, leaving feminised behaviour to be marginalised as "unsuitable".

8. Conclusion

In light of the lack of empirical-based evidence surrounding the real-life experiences of organisational romance by those who participate or witness them, this study set out to explore how inter-workplace relationship were defined, characterised, and understood by those who have to manage and encounter them in their daily working lives. While some discussion may be attributed to the particular context and labour processes within the public house industry, the rise in contingent workforces and the service-based job market suggests that the processes of justifying a "fun" working atmosphere may result in similar sentiments across a number of occupations.

Moreover, the processes of rationalisation and justification used by the participants draw on wider discourses about behavioural norms or treatment in relation to both the workplace, and social ideals. Romance is seen as an inevitable outcome of a close-knit workgroup, presented through the "voice of nature" (Barthes, 1977; Potter, 1996), where behaviour is viewed as beyond the individuals control; it is a "natural" part of human interactions. Yet, despite this, the rules of conduct are drawn up through the reliance on neo-economic measures, such as productivity, even through these are subjectively implemented in practice. Similarly, individuals are required to maintain their productivity and professionalism, both during and after the romance. Indeed, it appears that while romance is at first classified as a workplace phenomenon that should escape formal rules of regulations, participants constantly returned to the importance of conducting the relationship in ways that are typically associated with traditional bureaucratic modes of behaviour. In doing so, not only can the "façade of fun" be refuted, but this perspective served to shape the rules of organisational romance in distinctly gendered ways.

This research is by no means without its limitations. The research context may have created some bias in terms of the frequency or openness of employees in talking about romance, or the managers' apparent liberal attitudes to inter-staff relations. Similarly, the discussion of gay relationships suggests that there are distinct hetero-biases in what is deemed acceptable and unacceptable which need further study. However, it does raise a number of questions over how we discuss organisational romance, both as academic researchers, and as members of organisations. If, as this research suggests, romances are to occur whether sanctioned or not, it is clearly a workplace dimension that needs to be at least discussed as a management issue. Yet, by discussing an activity which sits outside hierarchy, job descriptions and workplace processes, it is difficult to see how a managerial rule could be applied without infringing on the civil liberties of their workforce. Nonetheless, as shown in this chapter, both employees and managers are well aware of the ability to create a consensus to prevent any disruption and maximise the positive outcomes of organisational romance, and are engaged in this negotiation at a local level, often without guidance from institutional or organisational bodies. Whether this can be achieved without the risk of reproducing inequalities is of course, another matter.

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