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Spillover Effects: Communication Involved with Dissolved Workplace Romances

Sean M. Horan, Renee L. Cowan, & Emmalene G. Carberry

This study adds to the understanding of relationships and communication in organizations by studying how and why workplace romances fail – a unique situation given that former romantic partners likely still work together. Using interview data, findings revealed why workplace romances failed (distance, incompatibility, loss of interest, and/or partner mistake), how romantic partners used communication to terminate their relationship (direct versus indirect communication), and how former workplace romance participants communicated at work following their breakup (e.g., distancing/leaving organization, awkward/tense interactions, and/or antagonistic environment). Results are discussed with respect to Work-Life Border Theory (Clark, 2000), fatal attraction (Felmlee, 1998), as well as implications for individuals and organizations.

Keywords: Breaking-Up; Relational (De)Escalation; Termination; Work-Life Border Theory; Workplace Relationships

Close relationships at work have been a topic of study for some time. Whether studying peers (e.g., Kram & Isabella, 1985), workplace friendships (e.g., Sias & Cahill, 1998), or workplace romances (e.g., Horan & Chory, 2009), researchers have been interested in relationships at work that vary in closeness. Less understood, though, is what happens when these close relationships deteriorate. Therefore, we

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aimed to better understand one such deteriorated relationship, specifically focused upon terminated workplace romance (WR).

WR dissolution occurs when two people terminate their romantic relationship, yet still work together. One study explored the after-effects of these relationships. Verhoef and Terblanche (2015) conducted interviews with 11 employees in South Africa who were part of a WR that had terminated. Most participants were female, and all romances occurred between peers. Themes revealed that the termination of a WR had implications for *psycho-social functioning*, *social functioning*, *retaliatory violence*, *productivity*, and highlighted the *necessity and best strategies for an EAP*. Their findings highlight that failed WRs influence intrapersonal, social, and employee functioning—underscoring the importance of studying WR termination.

Verhoef and Terblanche's (2015) research documents how failed WRs influence the members of the WR as well as other employees. What remains less clear are the precursors to these outcomes, namely how and why couples terminated their relationship. Consequently, we sought to understand why WRs terminate, how this termination is communicated, and how this might impact the organization. We extend Verhoef and Terblanche (2015) by studying US employees, across organizations, and describing *how* and *why* couples terminated WRs. A review of WR and (dis)solution research follows.

Workplace Romance

A workplace romance is “a nonplatonic relationship between two members of an organization in which sexual attraction is present, affection is communicated, and both members recognize the relationship to be something more than just professional and platonic” (Horan & Chory, 2011, p. 565). Quinn (1977) asked participants about observed WRs and found three potential motives: love, ego, and job. Employees (e.g., current/former WR participants and/or those who observed a WR) who perceived a WR existed for job motives reported this influenced organizational outcomes (Dillard & Broetzmann, 1989; Dillard, Hale, & Segrin, 1994). Moreover, Malachowski, Chory, and Claus (2012) utilized hypothetical scenarios depicting peers in WRs, finding that peers viewed status differential WRs to be driven more by job and less by love motives.

Using interviews with WR participants and observers, researchers updated Quinn's (1977) typology (Cowan & Horan, 2014b). They found that WRs were driven by perceptions of similarity/homophily between organizational members, time, ease of opportunity, and/or desire for a hookup. Consistent with Dillard et al.'s (1994) speculation that WRs are “motivationally complex”, Cowan and Horan's data revealed that employees may enter a WR for more than one motive/reason (p. 230).

Moving beyond a motives approach, Horan and Chory (2013) presented an empirically-driven speculation as to why WRs may occur. They drew on research documenting that adults spend less time engaged in leisure activities (Gauthier &

Furstenberg, 2005), while also working more. This creates circumstances where adults spend more time at work, and less time engaged in leisure and social activities and such a pattern makes it difficult to meet potential romantic partners. Combining that reasoning with fundamental predictors of attraction indicates that the office is a place for potential romantic encounters. The collective argument presents an additional explanation for *why* WRs occur (Horan & Chory, 2013).

Once in a relationship, organizational members may communicate differently with peers dating at work. A series of studies support this claim, utilizing employees' self-reported perceptions regarding a hypothetical peer in a WR. Findings indicate that when heterosexual peers were dating superiors, they were trusted less (Horan & Chory, 2009), subject to more information manipulation (Horan & Chory, 2009; Malachowski et al., 2012), and viewed as less credible (e.g., caring and trustworthy; Horan & Chory, 2011) compared to peers dating peers. This might be due to the perception that peers dating superiors were perceived as having have unfair advantages (Malachowski et al.). In same sex WRs, peers dating superiors were trusted less, deceived more, and viewed as less credible than peers dating peers (Horan & Chory, 2013). Collectively, this pattern of findings indicates that organizational members communicate differently with peers dating at work, suggesting there are organizational communication implications for the dissolution of a WR.

Relationship Termination

Despite the above discussion aimed at understanding *why* WRs may form, for many of these WRs, a breakup may be inevitable. If one believes that they will marry, or simply spend their life in a form of a committed relationship with one person, then all relationships other than the marriage/commitment will dissolve. In other words, marriage, or form of lifelong commitment, represents the one relationship that did *not* terminate. Accordingly, "most romantic relationships will dissolve" (Lannutti & Cameron, 2002, p. 153), and there are organizational and interpersonal implications for dissolution (Verhoef & Terblanche, 2015)—underscoring the importance of and need for studying failed WRs.

Generally, communication researchers have used typologies to describe the process of relational separation (e.g., Knapp, 1978). Though typologies describe the separation process, scholars have recognized that breaking-up is not always the end of the relationship (Dailey, Pfister, Jin, Beck, & Clark, 2009). Some specific explanations for termination include a couple not making it past their first fight (e.g., Seigert & Stamp, 1994), needs not being met (Connolly & McIsaac, 2009), conflict communication (Gottman, 1993; Gottman & Levenson, 1992), and fatal attraction (e.g., Felmlee, 1998; see also Rodrigues, Hall, & Fincham, 2006). Moreover, communication has been identified as a prominent reason for attending therapy (Doss, Simpson, & Christensen, 2004) and termination (Meredith & Holman, 2002).

Relational dissolution can also be understood via the Investment Model (Rusbult, 1983). This model argues that a couple remains together based on perceptions of

satisfaction, investment size, quality of alternatives, and commitment. In other words, a person is committed when he/she/they is satisfied, perceives poor quality alternatives, and a large investment size. Conversely, a couple may dissolve based on the previously described factors.

Moving away from the general study of romantic relationship termination, there are three primary reasons why it is important to study WR-specific termination. First, the organizational culture, combined with formal rules governing policies and interaction, exert influence over the relationship's management and communication. Given that WRs exist within employment settings, WRs face gossip from other organizational members, unique disclosure constraints and processes (see Cowan & Horan, 2014a), issues with potential harassment (e.g., Pierce, Aguinis, & Adams, 2000), and possible company policy violation. The need to talk to HR, trying to court a colleague, and romantic partner communication on company owned technology are all additional, and unique challenges that WRs encounter.

Second, WRs encompass *category-spanning ties* of relational partner and organizational system member (Lizardo & Perky, 2014, p. 48). Theoretically, such relationships are proposed to "have a higher dissolution hazard," implicating the need to better understand WR-specific termination (p. 49). Particularly, understanding why WRs dissolve may offer an understanding of why such relationships are argued to have this "higher dissolution hazard."

Third, the existence of WRs is the embodiment of work-life blending (Horan & Chory, 2011), as both members of the romantic relationship are physically in the work and life domains (e.g., Clark, 2000). Moreover, communication about work likely occurs in life, and communication about life likely occurs at work (Horan & Chory). This embodies the "mental space flexibility" employees desire (Cowan & Hoffman, 2007, p. 41). Consequently, WRs are a unique romantic relationship because of the time spent together, the spillover, shared work experiences, and influence that the organization exerts over the relationship. Given the unique nature of WRs, termination of a WR has additional complications not seen in non-WRs.

Our first research question sought to understand why WRs fail. Research examining workplace friendship disengagement (Sias, Heath, Perry, Silva, & Fix, 2004) and traditional romantic relationship termination (e.g., Levine & Fitzpatrick, 2005; Sahlstein & Dunn, 2008) informs this question. Regarding workplace friendships, Sias et al. (2004) identified five narratives detailing why an employee would desire less closeness with a workplace friend: "problem personality, distracting life events, conflicting expectations, betrayal, and promotion" (p. 333–34). Their findings provide a rich understanding of why platonic relationships at work terminate; less understood is why WRs terminate.

Focusing on traditional romantic relationship dissolution, Levine and Fitzpatrick (2005) found the most common reason for breakups in their sample was that the "relationship does not reach full potential because one or both partners does not make use of all available resources" (p. 28). Potentially, the blended domains of work and life (Clark, 2000) complicate the relationship's ability to "make use of all

available resources.” Other common reasons included distance, learning about something negative, and a perceived “loss of personal freedom” (p. 28; see also Duck, 1982). The “loss of personal freedom” implicates a potential tension between autonomy-connection, an active tension in terminating relationships (Sahlstein & Dunn, 2008). Although the previous research helps us understand some processes associated with termination of traditional romantic relationships (Levine & Fitzpatrick, 2005; Sahlstein & Dunn, 2008) and workplace friendships (Sias et al., 2004; Sias & Perry, 2004), considerably less is known about *why* WRs fail. Our first research question aimed to inform this area, formally:

RQ1: Why do individuals terminate their workplace relationships?

The termination of a romantic relationship is, inherently, a communicative act, explaining why our second research question aimed at understanding *how* breakups of WRs are communicated. General investigations of relational termination inform our study. For instance, Wilmott, Carbaugh, and Baxter (1985) found that breakup messages vary in their (non)verbal directness. Later, Levine and Fitzpatrick (2005) found that, to facilitate a breakup, individuals most often directly communicated with their partner their desire for termination, often citing the reason for termination. Moving into the organization, but focusing on platonic friendship disengagement, Sias et al. (2004) offered an explanation of how workplace friendships disengage. Their results indicated that individuals primarily relied on *indirect* methods of disengagement. Specifically, “These strategies included avoidance of nonwork topics in conversation, nonverbal distancing, cost-rendering, and avoidance of socializing outside the workplace” (p. 335). This work on non-romantic workplace relationships (Sias et al., 2004; Sias & Perry, 2004) indicates that employees utilize various strategies to de-escalate relationships. Consistent with that research, and combined with the unique constraints imposed by a WR, we expect a variety of WR termination methods and messages to occur. Thus, our second research question asks:

RQ2: How is workplace relationship dissolution communicated?

The introduction, maintenance, and termination of WR influences both the WR participants and other members of an organization. For those who terminated their relationship, communication between the partners likely occurs following termination (e.g., Dailey, Hampel, & Roberts, 2010; Lannutti & Cameron, 2002) – potentially occurring at work. Some of this communication is unwanted (Langhinrichsen-Rohling, Palarea, Cohen, & Rohling, 2000), presenting a particularly complicated situation when this occurs at work. Relationship researchers have described the impact that relational termination can have on both the members of the relationship and the network in which the relationship was imbedded. Duck (1982) explains that the last stage of dissolution “represents a working out of the social and public consequences of executing and publicizing the decision” to terminate (p. 24). Inherent in this process are issues associated with grave-dressing, or what to convey to others about the breakup. A key issue associated with dissolution, Duck (1982) argued, was “the means by which the network adjusts to the loss of a previously acknowledged

constituted pairing” (p. 26)—once again underscoring the important implications of a breakup for the larger organizational system. Essentially, the breakup likely causes a ripple effect, with members across the organization feeling the implications of the failed WR. Some of these implications may be stress (Boren & Veksler, 2015), avoidance/secrets (e.g., Afifi, Caughlin, & Afifi, 2007), gossip (e.g., Blithe, 2014; Hafen, 2004), or increased and reduced uncertainty (e.g., Knobloch & Satterlee, 2009; Kramer, 2009). Though the aforementioned implications are empirically driven speculations, little remains known about the consequences of failed WRs for former romantic partners at work. Thus, our third research question explored this issue:

RQ3: Following workplace relationship dissolution, how do individuals describe their work experience?

Method

We chose to conduct interviews obtaining qualitative data for two reasons. First, less is understood about the relational termination process of WRs and, therefore, we aimed to obtain a description of how and why couples terminated relationships. Consequently, there is an alignment between the study’s goal and the use of interviews, satisfying the “meaningful coherence” that Tracy (2010) described (p. 840). Second, Fritz (2014) described the importance of and use of qualitative methods in studying workplace relationships. She specifically cited “work relationships contributing to stress and social support” and encouraged qualitative research of these relationships (p. 463). Workplace romances clearly constitute such an area, as dissolution could spark stress in the workplace and necessitate support from coworkers. Thus, our study helps answer Fritz’s calls and, consistent with her recommendations, utilized qualitative research methods to better understand workplace relationships.

Sample and Data Collection

Voluntary participation was solicited via convenience and snowball sampling methods (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011) from personal and professional networks; students meeting eligibility requirements could also participate. To participate, adults had to have been in, or were currently a part of, a WR. Sixteen relevant interviews are reported.¹ Interviews took between 30 and 75 minutes. Interviews were transcribed, resulting in 308 pages of transcription (single spaced). Participants were not compensated, and IRB approval was secured.

Interviews were conducted outside of organizations, and in some instances, included telephone interviews. Participants were provided a definition of WR and then asked to tell stories about WRs. With this in mind, they were both narrative and respondent (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). The second author took notes during interviews and asked follow-up questions to gather additional information.

Data Analysis

Interviews were analyzed using Strauss and Corbin's (1990) grounded theory approach. Authors engaged in several readings of the transcriptions to better understand the data. With the constant comparative method in mind, a two-step coding process was undertaken using criteria outlined by Strauss and Corbin. First, the third author began open coding. Example open codes included: RQ1: age difference, losing interest, too much too fast, distance, less face time, left the job, cheated, moved away, withdrawing, different focus; RQ2: text, direct, called, just stopped talking, ceasing communication, disengaged, removed from social media, made excuses; RQ3: awkwardness, distance, avoiding, mindful of feelings, less distracted, argument, choosing sides, anxiety, tension, mood change, boundary setting, transferring, leaving the job, and avoiding.

Following open coding, and discussion of codes among all authors, analysis was refined via axial coding. The analysis of larger codes resulted in general themes. That is, this coding process revealed several themes that explained why WRs failed (distance, incompatibility, loss of interest, partner mistake), how they occur (cutting off communication or lowering effort; direct strategies), and the organizational implications of failed WRs (negative, positive, and/or neutral outcomes). To add credibility to our findings we engaged in a member checks with 2 participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), and they communicated our findings described their experiences with failed WRs.

Findings and Interpretation

Our analysis revealed valuable information about why individuals terminated their WRs, the communicative strategies they used in doing so, and the consequences for organizational members following WR termination. Overall, patterns of the importance of closeness during the relationship and avoidance of communication after its failure were seen throughout the participants' responses. Findings are subsequently described using pseudonyms.

RQ1: Why Workplace Romances Dissolve

In response to the first research question, participants in this study were able to explain clear reasoning for why their WRs came to an end. These reasons can be broken down into (a) distance, (b) incompatibility, (c) loss of interest, and (d) partner mistake.

Distance

Participants expressed facing difficulty in their WRs when either physical or emotional distance with partners increased. For the most part, this distance came with one of the partners leaving the workplace while the other remained. Although some participants attempted to maintain their relationships after moving, most expressed that this did not ultimately work for them. For example, Shelby explained that when

she and her partner tried to stay in a long distance relationship, “it worked for a little while, but it was just different compared to me being able to come see him every day at work and spend hours of time with him and then having to transition to him being miles away and the only way of me being able to talk to him was through the phone.” Gabriella agreed that finding time for each other becomes hard when individuals are not always with each other, describing different schedules as resulting in “too much stress trying to find the time.” This notion that WRs are more convenient than traditional relationships was echoed in responses such as that of Sarah who explained that she terminated her WR because she was moving away and wanted to open the door to new opportunities, saying she “wouldn’t want that [relationship] lingering,” implying it would no longer be worth pursuing if she were not local.

Incompatibility

The idea that partners had incompatible needs and/or dating styles was also discussed as a reason for WR dissolution. Some participants cited instances of their partners coming on too strong and scaring them off, such as Emily who did not like her partner’s social media habits, stating “you can’t be so dramatic on your status. You know I’m like it’s only been a week, calm down. We’ll be okay.” Similarly, Andrea was put off by her partner when “he said I think I’m falling in love with you. I was like done. I’m done. It kind of like freaked me out and I was like ‘ew, stay away.’” Others had the opposite experience. Emily also cited age differences as an incompatibility issue, as she was 19 at the time, while her partner was 23. Tammy, on the other hand, was older than her partner and thought he was too young for her, especially since she was in college and he was “still in high school.” These age differences were often also accompanied by different foci and incompatible goals that participants said were factors in WR terminations.

Loss of Interest

Other participants stated either they or their partners simply lost interest and became disengaged. For example, Kevin stated that he/she “just kind of let things happen and I wasn’t persistent as maybe I should have been at the time.” Lynn talking about her partner said, “I think he saw that I was getting a little, I wouldn’t say annoyed, but he thought that it was a mutual, like things were falling off. I guess he just you know was like okay this is not going anywhere so let’s just cut it short.” This loss of interest may also speak to the ease and convenience of seeing each other frequently in the workplace, and how that can either become old fast or become difficult to maintain outside of the workplace.

Partner Mistake

A few participants identified an irreparable mistake their partners made as the instigating factor for WR terminations. For example, Shelby thought that “everything

was great, and then [she] found out [her partner cheated] and of course [she] ended the relationship and that was that.” Other participants cited mistakes such as partners making a lifestyle change and lying about it, as was the situation with Maria who broke up with her boyfriend because she loved him too much to watch him go down a problematic path. In these cases, it was quite common that not only the relationship ended, but one partner left the workplace soon after. For example, when Natalie found out her partner had cheated on her with her roommate, she chose to immediately terminate her living situation, her relationship, and her employment all at once.

RQ2: How the Dissolution Is Communicated

Although reasons for WR terminations were varied, the termination strategies employed were much more standard. That is participants and their partners either chose to engage in indirect strategies, such as (a) cutting off communication or (b) lowering effort; or direct strategies, which occurred either (a) face-to-face or (b) via mediated communication.

Indirect Strategies

Perhaps not surprisingly, many participants described engaging in indirect communication strategies to communicate relational dissolution. Many of them did this by *cutting off communication*, a strategy that, as Shelby put it, involved cutting “communication completely, like cold turkey.” She said of her communication with her ex-partner, “I wouldn’t reach out to him. When I would see him at work I would completely ignore him.” Others were on the receiving end of this strategy, such as Lynn who tried to reach out to her ex-partner, “and he just kept kind of like pushing it off and off and to this day we never talked about it in person.” Technology seemed to be used widely by participants and their partners when employing this strategy (This article focused specifically upon the dissolution antecedents and communication—see Cowan and Horan (2017) for a full discussion of this sample’s use of technology’s role in WR initiation, maintenance, and termination). For example, after Natalie left her job and moved out of her apartment, her ex-partner kept trying to contact her, and she said “I had to block him. I had to block him from all my, from Instagram ... I had to block him from my phone.” Others referenced similar experiences with their exes defriending them on Facebook. Some participants eliminated the need for potential further communication by leaving their jobs completely as a way of communicating to a partner that the relationship was over. For example, Mike said of his girlfriend, “she kind of just left and that eliminated any other like workplace talk.”

Those who did not cut off communication completely chose to let the relationship dissolve on its own by *lowering their effort*. In this indirect strategy, participants lowered their relational inputs gradually until there was a mutual understanding that the relationship had run its course. For example, Gabriella stated “It’s like we just

started slowly trying not to stress so much to put in the effort ... I think eventually it was just little by little ... I was slowly just like not trying as hard."

Direct Strategies

The few who took a more direct approach to termination did so by using face-to-face or mediated communication. Maria was one who directly told her boyfriend "I'm not okay with this," when his behavior changed, "and he wouldn't stop doing what he was doing," so she said "I can't be with you if you're going to be doing this. I can't be with you ... You're more than welcome to do this, but I'm not going to be any part of it." Others had similar conversations via text messaging and phone calls. Ashley texted someone she had been seeing casually at work to tell him "I'm seeing somebody else and it's not fair to you. And I want something more with this person ... I can't do this, I can't date both of you at the same time." Sometimes technology was necessary for this type of strategy, as was the case with Tammy, who ended her attempt at a long-distance relationship by calling her boyfriend: "I pretty much just told him how I was feeling about the distance and how I was feeling like our relationship was kind of fading."

RQ3: Organizational Outcomes

Participants cited negative and neutral organizational and interpersonal outcomes following WR dissolution. Primarily, outcomes were negative, including (a) awkward/tense workplaces, (b) an antagonistic environment, and (c) distancing or leaving the job. Those who reported neutral outcomes either stated that their breakup (a) had no effect on their workplace or (b) led to a respectful maintenance of boundaries in the workplace. Still, one participant cited positive workplace outcomes following her failed WR.

Negative Organizational Outcomes

The workplace outcomes discussed by participants were overwhelmingly negative. At times failed WRs created an *awkward or tense workplace*. Participants used these exact adjectives many times, describing their workplace after a WR termination as "really awkward," (Ashley), "a very tense place," (Lynn), "extremely weird," (Shelby) and "uncomfortable" (Eric). While this type of negative emotion may be expected in these situations, some workplace situations rose to heightened levels of negativity that caused an *antagonistic environment* for participants. John described a situation where his former partner began yelling at him at work, while Andrea talked about how her former partner "got furious" with her at work after their WR termination. Other situations involved coworkers siding with one of the partners, such as when Natalie used to go home crying because none of her coworkers would look at her anymore. Similarly, Michael recalled "one instance of discipline being handed out formally by a manager to someone who said something to [him] ... which was related to the relationship ending."

Participants reported *distancing themselves or leaving the job* as often as they reported an awkward or tense workplace environment. In these cases, however, the participants found ways to avoid the awkward environment by distancing themselves from their ex-partners or by leaving the workplace entirely. For example, Eric recalled that after WR termination, “it turned into where the girl never talked to me at all while we worked together.” John said that the tension that resulted from his breakup got “so bad” that he “had to quit.” The issue of whether to stay at a job or leave it after a WR dissolved was clearly something that partners attempted to communicatively navigate. When talking about a friend’s failed WR, Lynn reported that her friend “pretty much said [to her ex] ‘I’m not leaving. If you want to leave you can go, but I’m not going anywhere.’” The friend’s ex-partner “just got tired of it and decided he was going to be the bigger person and just walk away.”

Neutral Organizational Outcomes

Those who cited neutral outcomes generally discussed conversations where they established boundaries or exercised mindfulness in the workplace. For example, Lynn recalled messaging her former partner after their WR termination to say “Hey I know we’re both single and we pretty much can do whatever we want, but I would really appreciate it if you don’t start seeing anybody at work. Just because word of mouth will get to me. I’m there every day and I don’t want to have to be around that or hear it.” He agreed and asked the same of her. This type of boundary setting and emotion management is something that influences workplace interactions after WR terminations but not necessarily for better or worse. Others simply felt that their WR termination had *no effect* on their workplace, like Mike who said “it just kind of blew over and it wasn’t a big deal.”

It is worth noting that one participant, Tammy, stated that after she terminated the relationship and left the workplace, her former partner had positive workplace outcomes. More specifically, “because of me not being there I feel like I was kind of a little distraction for him, so he focused on work, and he actually ended up getting promoted.”

Discussion

Termination of any relationship is difficult, yet working together presents an additional complication of dissolution. Therefore, our inquiry described how and why WRs dissolved and subsequent (non)communication between partners. Findings are valuable as they depict failed WRs—describing a less understood relationship that is argued to be at increased risk for termination (Lizardo & Perky, 2014). Uniquely, findings described communication between former romantic partners in professional environments. What follows, then, is a review of findings and implications for organizational and relational communication.

Understanding Workplace Romance Dissolution

Findings in response to our first two research questions are consistent with prior studies. For instance, obtained findings about why WRs fail are similar to reasons

why WRs form. That is, people terminated WRs due to *distance*, the opposite of two WR motives: *time* and *ease of opportunity* (Cowan & Horan, 2014b). The issues of distance, along with partner mistake (e.g., *sudden death*), are consistent with Levine and Fitzpatrick (2005). Likewise, some reasons identified share overlap with Sias et al.'s (2004) reasons why workplace friendships de-escalate. To facilitate breakups, participants reported communication that occurred (in)directly. Primarily, indirect methods were used, which is consistent with workplace friendship deterioration processes (Sias et al., 2004) and breakup scripts (Battaglia, Richard, Datteri, & Lord, 1998). Both our findings and Levine and Fitzpatrick's highlighted that participants used face-to-face and mediated communication to terminate relationships.

Reported findings describing reasons for termination, as well as methods of dissolution, should be compared to general romantic relationships that exist outside of organizations. As mentioned, findings do share some overlap with existing studies of general romantic partner and workplace friendship dissolution. This overlap suggests that some factors driving the termination of close relationships cut across contexts, operating similarly in WRs.

Still, that WRs exist within the context of an organization is a factor that makes findings valuable. Though the reasons for breakup share similarity, the organization could be responsible for any and all of these. For instance, a transfer could be the reason for *distance*, dislike of a partner's work ethic could be the reason for *incompatibility*, spending too much time together at home and work could explain *loss of interest*, and unprofessional/unethical behavior could be the *partner mistake*. These factors would diminish Investment Model factors (Rusbult, 1983), resulting in termination. As such, events unique to the organization that potentially otherwise would not be present if this relationship was not a WR might drive dissolution.

Findings describing the communication of dissolution further highlight the unique complexity of WR termination. Shelby, for example, described ignoring her former partner. This is likely common in WR termination, and would be difficult for other organizational members to ignore. Additionally, it highlights the unique complexity of dating at work. In a non-WR breakup, participants could easily avoid seeing and/or communicating with their former partner – a scenario less possible here. Others discussed removing and/or blocking former partners from social media. This complicates matters, as other organizational members may comment on their former partner's social media, potentially forcing an individual to disclose he/she/they removed someone from social media. Participants further described *lowering effort*, introducing questions regarding productivity and potentially antisocial organizational communication.

Following termination, non-WRs would likely greatly reduce the amount of time seeing and/or communicating with one another. Dissolved WRs share employment and, therefore, do not have that luxury. Findings of our third research question describe post-WR communication, which was largely negative. Two of Sias et al.'s (2004) findings regarding the aftermath of deteriorated workplace friendships help explain our findings: "emotional stress, turnover" (p. 337). Those findings implicate the *awkward/tense workplace* and *antagonistic work environment* described.

Reported negative outcomes not only extend research highlighting individual-level negative outcomes of breakups (e.g., Perilloux & Buss, 2008), negative breakup outcomes also influence organizational-level processes. That is, these negative outcomes suggest effects on communication and subsequent decision-making, productivity, and related organizational and relational outcomes. Importantly, results indicated that failed WRs, in some instances, led to organizational distancing and/or exit. Failed WRs then could lead to turnover that, ultimately, impacts both organizational productivity and budgets (e.g., hiring and training of a new employee). Combined, these findings have implications for organizational and relational communication researchers and practitioners.

Implications for Research and Theory

This study of dissolved WRs offers unique insight into existing research and theory. Perhaps WRs are susceptible to fatal attraction (Felmlee, 1998). This occurs when, what drew couples together, is the reason that they terminated. *Similarity* is a motive for WR formation (Cowan & Horan, 2014a) and, oppositely, *incompatibility* was cited as a reason why couples broke up. This is consistent with prior research, as differences have been cited as a reason for non-WR termination (Meredith & Holman, 2002). The initial formation due to similarity and subsequent termination due to incompatibility may be due to “rose colored glasses” (p. 9). That is, WRs are thought to be exciting (e.g., Quinn, 1977) and this excitement might function to cloud perceptual vision via the “rose colored glasses” Felmlee described. Alternatively, it could be that similarity was perceived, and did not exist in reality (see Tidwell, Eastwick, & Finkel, 2012). Future studies should explore this issue.

Work/Life Border Theory (Clark, 2000) argues that: “Border-crossers whose domain members have higher other domain awareness will have higher work/family balance than border-crossers whose domain members have low other-domain awareness” (p. 765). As individuals’ work partners, WRs are situations where individuals have partners with “high other domain awareness”. Therefore, the theory’s propositions might ring true in situations where WRs are successful and positively maintained. However, failed and/or highly contentious WRs likely result in lower levels of balance through higher levels of negative spillover and involvement from domain members in other domains. Regardless of the quality of the relationship, WRs make it difficult to obtain the “psychological separation between work and life” that employees desire (Schultz, Hoffman, Fredman, & Bainbridge, 2012, p. 48). This discussion collectively suggests additional consideration of the theory’s arguments.

Implications for Organizations

Communication occurs following termination and can function in a variety of ways. It could lead to couples getting back together (e.g., Dailey et al., 2009) or post-relationship sex (e.g., Koenig Kellas, Bean, Cunningham, & Chen, 2008). Still, it can

be unwanted (Langhinrichsen-Rohling et al., 2000) and dissolved WRs have implications for assessments of harassment (Pierce & Aguinis, 2001; Pierce, Aguinis, & Adams, 2000). The unwanted nature of communication about life in the work domain present a key concern: at what point does this communication become an issue of harassment when it occurs at work? This is particularly complicated when used on company technology (see Cowan & Horan, 2017 for a full discussion). As Mainero and Jones (2013) cautioned caution: “some romances may turn into sexual harassment if the romance is not properly concluded” (p. 190). These issues warrant future attention from both organizational and relational communication researchers to inform best practices for therapists, HR, and policy development.

Regardless of whether WRs thrive or fail, HR and management should consider ways to manage WRs. Though Cole (2009) advocated for policy development, 80% of her participants did not know whether their organization had WR policy. Similarly, about 60% of participants reported their company had no policy, and around 23% did not know (Horan & Chory, 2009, 2013). Our findings implicate that consideration about WR policy is necessary, and policy communication warrants improvement (see Pierce & Aguinis, 2009).

Limitations and Future Research

Results should be interpreted with the following limitations. Primarily, we interviewed only one WR participant. Missing are accounts from former partners which, as Sprecher (1994) highlighted, would be valuable. Future studies should focus specifically on a) accounts from both partners, b) how WR termination is disclosed (e.g., Cowan & Horan, 2014a), c) associated grave-dressing (Duck, 1982), and d) differences based on who initiated the breakup (e.g., Perilloux & Buss, 2008). In addition, the sample focused mostly on traditional cross-sex WRs. What remains to be studied concerns WRs involving infidelity, significant age differences, and significant power differentials (Cowan & Horan, 2017)—namely, relationships that may be considered *inappropriate* (Duck & VanderVoort, 2002). Third, less understood is the opposite of a terminated WR – that is, couples who successfully live and work together.

Duck and VanderVoort (2002) argued that it is important to distinguish between the (in)appropriateness of specific behaviors and (in)appropriateness of relationships; that is, are certain behaviors appropriate in some relationships compared to others? A WR is an appropriate relationship to use within their frame: behaviors that are acceptable in traditional romantic relationships may not be acceptable in WR. A non-WR might expect that romantic partners greet one another with a kiss; when two partners encounter one another at the office, it may be deemed unacceptable to kiss one another at work. Therefore, a normally appropriate behavior, partner affection, is unacceptable in this WR relationship. Future studies should examine employees’ perceptions of the (in)appropriateness of behaviors in WRs.

Note

1. Though we interviewed 23 (18 women) participants from a variety of organizations, we specifically focused on this sample's discussion of relational termination—resulting in 16 usable/relevant interviews. Portions of data obtained from this sample have been reported in a study specifically focused on ICT in WR initiation, maintenance, and dissolution (Cowan & Horan, 2017). Though 16 interviews were used, 18 total WRs were discussed. Specifically, we used 15 insider perspectives from individuals discussing their own failed WRs and 3 outsider perspectives of individuals discussing observed WR termination. No noticeable differences were observed between insider and outsider perspectives (see Duck & VanderVoort, 2002), likely explained by a) our limited number of outsider perspectives and/or b) the fact that all participants had been insiders by their participation in a WR.

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