

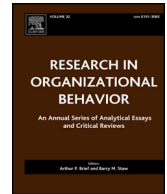


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## Social sexual behavior at work

Karl Aquino<sup>a,\*</sup>, Leah Sheppard<sup>a</sup>, Marla Baskerville Watkins<sup>b</sup>,  
Jane O'Reilly<sup>c</sup>, Alexis Smith<sup>d</sup>

<sup>a</sup> University of British Columbia, Canada

<sup>b</sup> Northeastern University, United States

<sup>c</sup> University of Ottawa, Canada

<sup>d</sup> Oklahoma State University, United States

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### ABSTRACT

Organizational leaders and scholars have long regarded social sexual behavior in the workplace as deviant, harassing in nature, and something that organizations must eliminate to ensure maximal performance. Regardless of this perspective, however, social sexual behavior is an inescapable feature of human interaction that cannot be completely controlled in organizations. Moreover, there are many aspects of social sexual behavior that have not been considered or granted enough research attention to entirely warrant the broad assumption that social sexual behavior is always problematic to organizations and individuals. In the current paper, we highlight these under-researched or ignored facets of social sexual behavior. First, we consider the potential buffering effects that consensual social sexual behavior at work can offer to those involved, in terms of protecting them from the negative impact of workplace stressors. Next, we discuss the ways in which social sexual behavior is used as a tool of social influence at work. Finally, we consider the role of social sexual behavior at work as a precursor to the development of romantic relationships among employees. Throughout this discussion, we highlight both the potential benefits and drawbacks of engaging in social sexual behavior at work rather than adopting the perspective that all social sexual behavior at work is harmful. We encourage future research to consider all angles when investigating social sexual behavior at work, so as not to be completely detached from the reality that social sexual behavior *can be* consensual and sometimes enjoyed.

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\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [karl.aquino@sauder.ubc.ca](mailto:karl.aquino@sauder.ubc.ca) (K. Aquino).

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“Maureen,” he said, moving up close and taking hold of the back of her chair, “if you’re not too busy here I wonder if you’d help me find some stuff in the central file. You see this?” He laid the brochure on her desk as if it were an intimate revelation, and she leaned forward from the hips to examine it, so that her breasts swung close to his pointing hand.

“Mm?”

“The thing is, it’s got to be revised. That means I’ve got to dig up all the material that went into it, right from scratch. Now, if you’ll look in the inactive file under SP-1109 you’ll find copies of all the stuff we sent to the agency; then if you check each of those papers you’ll find another code number referring you to other files; that way we can trace the thing back to original sources. Come on, I’ll help you get started.”

“All right.”

As he moved up the aisle behind her hips, he felt the promise of triumph in his expanding chest, and soon they were alone together in the labyrinth of the central file, enveloped in her perfume as they fingered nervously through a drawer of folders.

“Eleven-oh-what, did you say?”

“Eleven-oh-nine. Should be right there somewhere.”

Richard Yates, from *Revolutionary Road*

The scene described above is fictitious, but as many who have worked in organizations where men and women spend long hours side by side can attest, it is not uncommon. The reality that men and women think about one another as potential partners, flirt, tell salacious jokes, and sometimes even end up having sex is the basis for television shows, movies, books, and everyday office gossip. In her book *Sex and the Office*, Berebitsky (2012) traces the history of the sexual culture in white collar

workplaces from the Victorian era to the present day and shows that sexual behavior is not a new development but has been a part of the organizational landscape since women began entering the workforce in large numbers. Notably, Berebitsky (2012) concludes her study by acknowledging, as other scholars have before her (e.g., Lobel, 1993; Schultz, 2003; Williams, Guiffre, & Delligner, 1999), that the tensions generated by these behaviors are likely to remain far into the foreseeable future despite the sometimes draconian efforts made by organizational authorities to rid the workplace of any hint of sexuality. The reason for the persistence of sexual behavior at work is simple: men and women do not suddenly extinguish their identity and desires as sexual beings when they move from bedroom to boardroom.

Sex is a fundamental part of the human experience that is expressed in countless ways of varying depth and complexity. Yet when we survey the organizational behavior literature on sexual behavior at work, we find that the majority of research on this topic has largely emphasized its harmful and divisive side in the form of sexual harassment. Perhaps this emphasis is not surprising because, as thinkers such as Weber, Foucault, and Freud have explained, sex has long been viewed by many people as a problem for organizations. To Weber (1930, 1947), an organizational theorist, sexual behavior violates the bureaucratic ideal whereby employees are expected to act in accordance with the depersonalized requirements of their occupational roles. In the Weberian model of bureaucracy, sexual behavior in the workplace is “irrational” and should be relegated to the private realm of personal interaction because the comingling of personal with occupational role relationships can lead to conflicts of interest that undermine bureaucratic efficiency. An example would be when decisions about advancement

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