

A Qualitative Study on Healthcare Workers' Emotional and Psychological Experiences During Workplace Scandals

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explores healthcare workers' emotional and psychological experiences related to workplace scandal within healthcare settings. Workplace scandal is a common yet sensitive issue, particularly in high-pressure environments where employees spend long hours together and share emotionally demanding responsibilities. Using a qualitative research design, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 healthcare professionals (5 male and 5 female) to examine motivations, partner selection patterns, and the impact of such relationships on work performance and behaviour. Thematic analysis identified six major themes, including workplace proximity, emotional affirmation, romantic attachment, hierarchical influences, work-related consequences, and gender disparities after exposure. Findings reveal that male participants were more influenced by ego and recognition, while female participants were more driven by emotional support and understanding. The study also highlights that women tend to experience greater social and emotional consequences following exposure. These findings contribute to understanding gendered dynamics of workplace romance in healthcare contexts.

Keywords: workplace scandal, healthcare workers, emotional experiences, gender differences, thematic analysis

INTRODUCTION

Workplace relationships and romantic involvement between employees are increasingly recognised as significant social and organisational phenomena, particularly in high-pressure professions such as healthcare (Ali et al., 2024; Büyükyılmaz & Shehadeh, 2023; Society for Human Resource Management; Khan et al., 2017). In healthcare settings, where professionals often work long hours, face emotional demands, and depend on teamwork, interpersonal bonds can naturally evolve into emotional or romantic attachments (Aunger et al., 2023; Tsai et al., 2025). These dynamics can enhance morale, empathy, and engagement, but they also blur professional boundaries and may lead to ethical dilemmas, stress, or workplace scandals (Ali et al., 2024; Pierce & Aguinis, 2003; BMC Psychiatry). As emotional connections intertwine with professional responsibilities, understanding the psychological impact of such relationships becomes essential for promoting employee wellbeing and maintaining organisational integrity.

Despite being a common occurrence, workplace scandals and affairs are often associated with emotional distress, moral conflict, and social repercussions, especially among healthcare professionals (Zare-Kaseb et al., 2025; Snapparazzi, 2024; World Health Organization). Healthcare workers experience significant emotional labour, balancing empathy and professionalism while coping with high workloads and ethical dilemmas (Hochschild, 1983; Jameton, 1984; Maben et al., 2023). When emotional or romantic entanglements occur in such

environments, they can heighten psychological tension and moral distress (Zare-Kaseb et al., 2025; Auger et al., 2023). Furthermore, gendered perceptions in workplace relationships often lead to unequal social and professional consequences, with women facing harsher stigma and men recovering reputationally faster (Rao & Banerjee, 2022; Pierce et al., 1996). These disparities demonstrate how workplace scandals are deeply influenced by social norms, organisational hierarchy, and emotional coping mechanisms.

This study aims to qualitatively explore healthcare workers' emotional and psychological experiences during workplace scandals, focusing on the interplay between job-related factors, ego, and emotional needs. It investigates how these motives influence workplace relationships, hierarchical partner selection, and post-exposure consequences across genders (Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2020; Qu & Dumay, 2019). By examining lived experiences, this study seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of how emotional labour, moral distress, and workplace culture intersect to shape healthcare workers' wellbeing (BMC Psychiatry authors, 2022; Maben et al., 2023; Tsai et al., 2025; Ali et al., 2024). The findings are expected to contribute to organisational policy formulation, employee mental-health support systems, and gender-sensitive interventions aimed at fostering ethical, empathetic, and psychologically safe healthcare environments.

Research Objective

1. Explore how job-related factors, ego, and emotional needs influence workplace affairs among employees.
2. Examine with whom employees commonly engage in workplace affairs at different hierarchical levels.
3. Investigate how workplace affairs affect work performance, attitude, and behaviour.
4. Identify differences between male and female employees in motives, partner choice, and work-related consequences of workplace affairs.
5. Examine which gender is more affected professionally and socially after a workplace affair is exposed and what factors contribute to these differences.

Research Question

- a. How do motives such as job-related factors, ego, and love influence the likelihood of male and female employees engaging in workplace affairs?
- b. With whom do male and female employees most commonly engage in workplace affairs — with a superior, subordinate, or colleague of equal rank?
- c. How does involvement in a workplace affair affect the work performance, attitude, and behaviour of both male and female employees?
- d. Are there notable differences between male and female employees in terms of their motives, choice of partner (hierarchical level), and work-related consequences following an affair?
- e. Which gender tends to be more affected professionally and socially after the exposure of a workplace affair, and what factors contribute to this difference?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Workplace affairs usually happen because employees spend a lot of time together and build emotional closeness. Working closely on projects, sharing stress, and daily interaction can create romantic feelings (Iqbal et al., 2022). Men are often influenced by ego, attraction, and excitement, while women are more motivated by emotional support and companionship (Ali et al., 2024; Chory et al., 2023). Organisational culture also plays an important role. In hierarchical settings, relationships between superiors and subordinates may involve power differences and create ethical concerns (Ali et al., 2024; King & Smith, 2022). This shows that both personal motives and workplace environment influence how workplace affairs begin.

Hierarchical relationships often receive more attention than relationships between colleagues of equal rank. Affairs between a superior and a subordinate may create issues such as favouritism, bias, and reputational risk (Nadia & Akbar, 2026). Research shows that women are more likely to be judged negatively, especially when involved with a superior, while men face less criticism (Abdalla & Agustina, 2025). These gender differences

reflect ongoing double standards in many organisations. As a result, workplace affairs can affect credibility, teamwork, and trust among employees (Iqbal et al., 2022).

The effects of workplace affairs on performance and behaviour are mixed. Some consensual relationships may increase job satisfaction and motivation in the short term because partners support each other emotionally (Ali et al., 2024; Iqbal et al., 2022). However, when the relationship becomes public or controversial, it can lead to gossip, conflict, and decreased productivity. Women often experience harsher professional consequences such as demotion or reputational damage compared to men (Venegas, 2025; Chukwu Nyemeche, 2025). This shows that gender bias and organisational culture strongly influence the outcomes of workplace scandals.

Gender Differences in Motivation, Relationship Patterns, and Consequences of Workplace Affairs

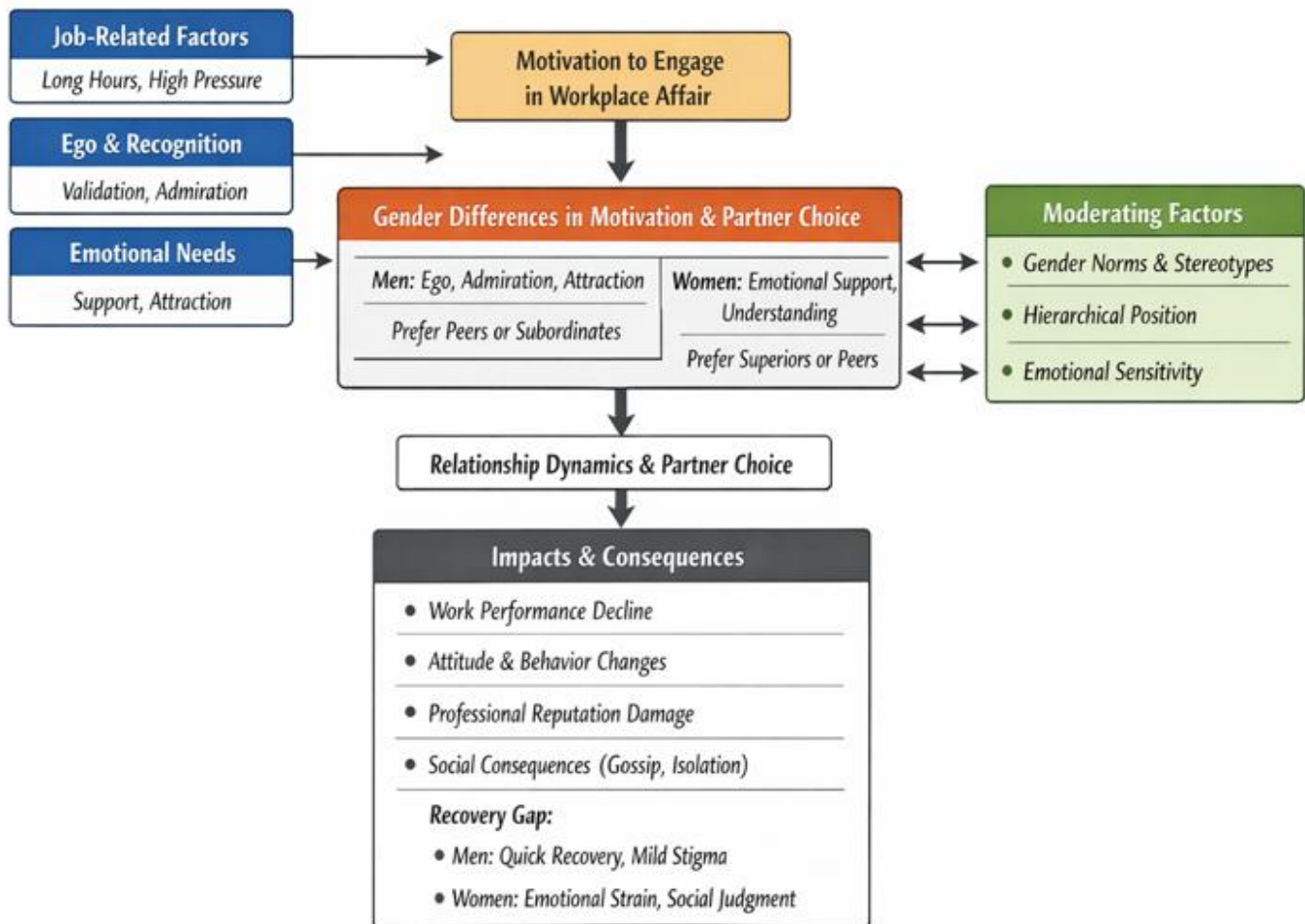


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

METHODOLOGY

This study used a qualitative research design to explore social and emotional experiences in the workplace. Qualitative research focuses on understanding how individuals perceive their experiences and interactions rather than measuring them numerically. Thematic analysis was applied to identify patterns and themes in participants' experiences, including motives for workplace affairs, partner selection, work-related impacts, and gender differences.

Sampling was purposive, selecting participants who could provide meaningful insights. All participants were full-time healthcare employees with at least one year of experience to ensure sufficient exposure to workplace interactions. Ten participants were selected, with equal numbers of males and females. This small sample size allowed for in-depth exploration of experiences while keeping data manageable.

Data collection involved semi-structured interviews, allowing participants to share their experiences openly while covering key research topics. Interviews were conducted online and lasted 30 to 45 minutes. All participants gave informed consent, and confidentiality was ensured. Audio recordings were transcribed, and thematic analysis was performed to identify recurring themes and patterns, such as workplace motives, partner choice, effects on work, and gender-specific outcomes. This approach ensured ethical and comprehensive data collection while capturing participants' lived experiences.

RESULT

Participant	Gender and Age	Occupation / Field	Experience Type	Duration
1	Male, 30	Office Employee	No direct experience; reflective only	None
2	Male, 29	Medical Staff	Indirect experience; witnessed interpersonal closeness	1–2 years
3	Male, 30	Medical Staff	Indirect experience; observed teamwork-related stress	Approximately 2 years
4	Male, 32	Medical Assistant	Indirect experience; observed emotional attachment	Approximately 3 years
5	Male, 28	Medical Staff	Indirect experience; observed bonding due to long working hours	Approximately 2 years
6	Female, 29	Nurse	Indirect experience; observed emotional understanding	2–3 years
7	Female, 27	Healthcare Employee	Indirect experience; observed attachment	1–2 years
8	Female, 31	Professional	Indirect experience; observed stress and emotional dependency	3–4 years
9	Female, 38	Senior Healthcare Worker	Direct experience; affair with junior colleague	8 months
10	Female, 26	Nurse	Direct experience; emotional involvement with doctor	6 months

The study involved ten participants, five men and five women, aged 26 to 38 years, working in healthcare and professional sectors such as medical personnel, nurses, medical assistants, and administrative staff. Most participants worked in high-pressure environments with long hours, collaboration, and emotional demands.

Male participants, aged 28 to 32, were mostly medical personnel or assistants with 1–3 years of experience. They generally shared indirect experiences, observing emotional connections among colleagues rather than being directly involved. For example, one office worker reflected on how teamwork and stress contributed to workplace bonds.

Female participants, aged 26 to 38, included nurses and senior healthcare professionals. Their experiences ranged from observing emotional connections to being directly involved in workplace relationships. Two women reported firsthand experiences: one had a relationship with a junior colleague for eight months, and the other formed an emotional bond with a physician for six months. The diversity in age, role, and experience helped capture how stress, teamwork, and emotional support shape workplace relationships.

Past studies have highlighted several factors influencing workplace affairs. Regarding job-related factors and organisational environment, Iqbal et al. (2022) found that close interaction and shared tasks increase emotional attachment and the likelihood of workplace romances, which aligns with participants' reports of bonding through critical tasks and high-pressure projects (P2, P3, P5, P7). Similarly, Chory et al. (2023) noted that teamwork, deadlines, and mutual support often blur professional boundaries, making personal bonds more likely (P1, P4, P10).

In terms of ego, recognition, and power dynamics, King and Smith (2022) observed that recognition and status-seeking can motivate romantic involvement, with hierarchical positions shaping opportunities for relationships. Participants reported feeling valued and recognized by colleagues, which sometimes led to emotional or romantic involvement (P1, P2, P3, P5, P6, P7, P10). Iqbal et al. (2022) further emphasized that men are often driven by ego gratification, while women seek emotional support, reflecting differences seen in participant motives (P1–P10).

Emotional attachment also plays a crucial role. Abdalla and Agustina (2025) reported that emotional support between colleagues enhances morale and motivation, but prolonged or secretive relationships can cause stress and distraction, as seen in participants' experiences of tension and guilt (P3, P4, P8, P10). Chory et al. (2023) similarly found that acts of care, empathy, and support foster emotional bonds beyond professional interaction (P6, P7, P8, P9, P10).

Hierarchical patterns and partner selection influence relationships as well. Nadia and Akbar (2026) stated that most workplace affairs occur between colleagues of equal rank, while relationships involving superiors or subordinates involve considerations of power, matching participant reports (P1, P2, P3, P5, P6, P7, P10). King and Smith (2022) observed that women sometimes seek superiors for mentorship or guidance, whereas men rarely pursue superiors due to professional risk.

The effects on work performance, attitude, and behaviour are mixed. Iqbal et al. (2022) noted that workplace affairs may initially boost engagement and job satisfaction, as reflected in participants feeling more motivated and collaborative (P1, P2, P6, P10), but can later lead to distraction. Abdalla and Agustina (2025) added that emotional involvement can alter behaviour, resulting in favouritism, social withdrawal, or reduced focus (P4, P5, P8, P10).

DISCUSSION

Workplace affairs often emerge in environments where employees interact closely and intensively. Participants highlighted that long working hours, high-pressure tasks, and collaborative projects create opportunities for emotional connections (P2–P6, P10). These findings are consistent with Iqbal et al. (2022), who noted that frequent interaction and shared responsibilities increase the likelihood of personal attachment, and Chory et al. (2023), who emphasised that organisational structures facilitate close interpersonal bonds.

Personal motives play a key role in driving workplace romances. Male participants commonly reported seeking recognition, admiration, and validation, reflecting ego-based motives (P1–P5), which aligns with King & Smith (2022). In contrast, female participants emphasized the need for emotional support, empathy, and reassurance (P6–P10), consistent with Chory et al. (2023). These findings suggest that individual needs interact with job-related factors to shape the development of workplace affairs.

Hierarchical patterns also influence relationship formation. Romantic involvement most frequently occurs between colleagues of equal rank, providing comfort, shared understanding, and minimal power negotiation (P1–P5; Narayanan, 2024). Nevertheless, some hierarchical relationships exist: women often engage with superiors for guidance, emotional stability, or perceived maturity (P6, P7, P10; Macdonald et al., 2025), while men occasionally pursue subordinates, reflecting ego reinforcement and power dynamics (Nadia & Akbar, 2026). Gender and individual motives thus moderate the influence of hierarchy on romantic involvement.

The impact of workplace affairs on performance and behaviour varies over time. Initially, relationships can enhance motivation, engagement, and productivity through emotional support and companionship (P1–P10; Abdalla & Agustina, 2025). However, when secrecy is involved or relationships become complicated, negative consequences emerge, including reduced concentration, distractions, and gossip (P1–P10; Vara-Horna et al., 2024). Women were more likely to internalize stress, negatively affecting focus and daily work attitude, while men maintained outward professionalism (P6–P10; Sukmahaningtyas & Syaebani, 2024).

Gender differences are evident in motives, partner choice, and post-exposure consequences. Men are often motivated by ego, physical attraction, and social validation, preferring colleagues of equal rank or subordinates

(P1–P5; Iqbal et al., 2022; King & Smith, 2022). Women, however, prioritize emotional fulfillment and reassurance, often engaging with superiors or peers with high emotional competence (P6–P10; Chory et al., 2023). Exposure of workplace affairs results in greater professional and social repercussions for women, including reputational damage, emotional stress, and reduced workplace confidence (P6–P10; Macdonald et al., 2025; Chukwu Nyemeche, 2025; Venegas, 2025). Men tend to recover more quickly with fewer social or career consequences (P1–P5). These findings underscore systemic gender inequality, reinforced by cultural norms and organisational practices.

Overall, the study highlights the complex interplay of job-related factors, personal motives, hierarchical dynamics, and gender in shaping workplace romances. While initial effects can be positive, long-term outcomes often reflect broader societal and organisational inequities, particularly for female employees, emphasising the need for policies that address gendered consequences and promote equitable workplace practices.

CONCLUSION

The findings highlight the importance of comprehensive organisational strategies to address the complexities of workplace relationships and their consequences. Clear policies outlining professional boundaries, confidentiality, and ethical conduct, combined with targeted training in emotional intelligence, conflict resolution, and ethical decision-making, are essential for fostering a professional and supportive work environment.

Employee support systems, such as counselling services, peer support groups, and transparent reporting channels, play a critical role in mitigating emotional stress and moral fatigue resulting from workplace scandals. Gender-sensitive approaches are also necessary to address the disproportionate social and professional impacts on female employees, including mentorship and guidance for navigating hierarchical relationships safely.

Future research should focus on longitudinal studies to understand the lasting effects of workplace relationships on mental health and career progression, while also examining the role of organisational culture and leadership in reducing negative outcomes. Additionally, strategies to alleviate moral anguish and support emotional labour, particularly in high-stress settings like healthcare, are crucial for sustaining workforce well-being and productivity. Overall, integrating policy, support systems, and gender-aware practices can promote a fair, ethical, and resilient workplace.

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