

# Perceptions of similar language may prevent understanding of sexual harassment policies

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Although the Society for Human Resource Management reports that 97 percent of U.S. companies have a written sexual harassment policy, a recent University of Missouri study indicates that those policies might not be effective in preventing workplace harassment. Researchers in the MU College of Arts and Science examined the way individuals define and explain their understanding of flirting and sexual harassment in an organizational setting. The researchers found that individuals' perceptions and their understanding are not always a perfect match.

"When we examined individuals' meaning of the terms 'sexual harassment' and 'flirting,' we discovered that many participants used similar language, but when asked to give examples, definitions, and comparisons of the terms, individuals indicated that the same language could have a wide range of meaning," said Debbie Dougherty, associate professor and director of graduate studies in the MU Department of Communication.

Conducting interviews with individuals from an array of work experiences, Dougherty found that despite the awareness that there were difference in perceptions, most people failed to acknowledge difference in underlying meaning. The participants simply did not consider that their meaning would be different from others. While participants acknowledge that others may perceive behaviors differently, they seemed to assume that they all used the same definition to determine when someone had crossed the same line.

The researchers also found that almost all the participants used some variant of the phrase "crossing the line" to distinguish [sexual harassment](#) from flirting, which indicated when flirting behavior became sexual harassment. Using shorthand language, such as "the line" in communication, can create an [illusion](#) of shared meaning. This "illusion" makes it difficult for an individual to understand when they have "crossed the line" with others.

"When policymakers create regulations, they need to understand there are underlining differences in meaning, which may make it difficult for policies to be truly effective," said Dougherty. "It is important to understand that a sexual harassment policy is just the first step in stopping harassment in the workplace. Manager and human resource professionals need to continue to provide training and dialog on the topic in order to close the gap between definition and [perception](#)."

More information: The study, "Language convergence and meaning divergence: A meaning centered communication theory," will be published in this month's issue of Communication Monographs and was co-authored by Dougherty; Michael Kramer, chair and professor of communication; Stephanie Klatzke, MU graduate student and Teddy Rogers, MU graduate student.

Source: University of Missouri-Columbia ([news](#) : [web](#))

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