

Gender perceptions of sexual harassment can influence workplace policy effectiveness

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Although 98 percent of all organizations have sexual harassment policies, sexual harassment remains an issue in the workplace. Researchers at the University of Missouri are evaluating how employees' interpretations of sexual harassment policies can invalidate the purpose of the policies. They found that employee perceptions of how exactly "sexual harassment" is defined by a company's policy can, in effect, eliminate or reshape the meaning of these policies and contradict the norms and values of the companies that try to enforce them.

"Even though 98 percent of all organizations have a [sexual harassment](#) policy, harassment continues in the workplace and poses serious problems," said Debbie Dougherty, associate dean of research and professor of organizational communication, in the MU College of Arts and Science. "Our study evaluates how people interpret sexual harassment policies and how they apply their personal perceptions of sexual harassment to those policies."

The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), defines sexual harassment as unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature. The explicit behaviors that are considered unwelcome are typically listed in policies.

Dougherty and co-author, Marlo Goldstein Hode, a postdoctoral fellow at MU, conducted the study of federal and regional sexual harassment policies of a large U.S. Government Organization (GOV). Participants of

the study were employed by the GOV and asked to participate in a gender-specific focus group, a gender-mixed focus group and an individual interview. Maintaining gender dynamics throughout the course of this study was essential to collecting factual data since men and women have differing views on sexual harassment, Dougherty said.

"Although the policy statement specified the importance of building a culture of dignity and respect, the participants in the study reinterpreted the policy in such a way that they believed it actually created a culture of fear," Dougherty said. "This inhibits the camaraderie participants believed was produced by normalized sexual banter, behavior and jokes. Our findings suggest that the ways in which employees construct meaning around the policy can preclude the usage and effectiveness of the policy; therefore, sexual harassment policy research should focus on the complex ways that our understandings shape policy meanings in order to find more effective ways to address sexual harassment in the workplace."

According to Dougherty, organizations need to discuss their sexual harassment policies in a clear, concise manner to ensure each employee has the same understanding of what is meant by sexual harassment. Organizations also would benefit from sexual harassment training that acknowledges the gender dynamics of harassment.

The study "Binary logics and the discursive interpretation of organizational policy: Making meaning of sexual harassment [policy](#)" recently was accepted for publication in the journal, *Human Relations*.

Provided by University of Missouri-Columbia

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