

# When immersed in sexual harassment, workers can't identify it

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People who work in industries with high levels of sexual harassment—including hospitality, retail, manufacturing and information—have a harder time identifying inappropriate workplace behavior, with only 57% of those surveyed identifying quid pro quo sexual harassment, according to new research from Cornell University's ILR School.

Other researchers have studied numerous potential factors to understand how workers perceive sexual harassment, but many have ignored the role that [different industries](#) play, the researchers said.

"It's very likely an individual's understanding of what 'counts' as sexual harassment is shaped by their workplace experiences," said Ph.D. candidate Phoebe Strom, lead author of the new study. "The fact that researchers have largely taken the workplace out of the equation and said the context doesn't matter is just astonishing to me. The results of our study clearly show this is a huge oversight."

In the paper, "Drawing the Line: How the Workplace Shapes the Naming of Sexual Harassment," forthcoming in *Personnel Psychology*, Strom and her colleagues conclude that employees who work in industries that experience a large amount of sexual harassment are far less likely to identify clear violations. And these workers may carry their increased tolerance for [inappropriate behavior](#) throughout their careers.

Strom's research, which she undertook with ILR School colleagues Chris Collins, associate professor of human resource studies; Ariel Avgar, professor of labor relations, law and history; and Katherine Ryan, examines if working in an industry with a high level of sexual harassment helps or hinders an individual's ability to recognize inappropriate behavior. The researchers also assessed the role human resources policies and practices play in changing industry norms and shifting individual worker's opinions on sexual harassment.

The team surveyed 420 adults currently employed in the United States and presented them with seven scenarios, each consistent with legal grounds to file a sexual harassment complaint and representing relatively clear-cut instances of sexual harassment.

To determine what industries have the highest levels of sexual harassment, the researchers obtained all complaints filed with Equal Employment Opportunity Commission from 2005 to 2015.

From the survey, the researchers found only 6% of respondents identified all seven scenarios as harassment, and only 25% identified only two or fewer scenarios—results that point to substantial difficulties in aligning individual understandings of sexual harassment with legal definitions.

The researchers also found implementing strong HR practices that signal a low tolerance for harassing behavior and create more avenues for employees to speak out regarding inappropriate behavior can decrease workplace sexual harassment. And the study showed the negative effects of the industry were diminished for participants who had strong HR policies at their workplaces.

"We hypothesized that these workplace factors would matter, but I don't think we expected the effects to be as strong as they were," Strom said. "As we kept working, I realized that we really were onto something. This is a huge gap in our understanding of sexual [harassment](#). It's a workplace phenomenon.

"The good news is that our findings also showed strong HR policies and practices can have a positive effect and contribute to combating [workplace sexual harassment](#)," Strom said.

**More information:** Phoebe Strom et al, Drawing the line: How the

workplace shapes the naming of sexual harassment, *Personnel Psychology* (2021). [DOI: 10.1111/peps.12496](https://doi.org/10.1111/peps.12496)

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