

# THE EASIEST WORD

Why do we apologise so much, and is it really a problem, asks Moya Sarnier

**I**N THE past week, I've caught myself apologising to a stranger who was staring at her phone and nearly bumped into me, to a passenger who had placed his bag on the only available seat on the bus, and to a waiter for serving me the wrong drink. In this, I am not alone. A third of British adults think they apologise excessively in everyday conversations and a quarter of Americans would apologise if someone else bumped into them. It is with good reason that academics from science, history and politics have named ours the "Age of Apology".

You might think there's nothing wrong with just being polite, but the media tells us all this over-apologising is damaging our self-esteem, undermining us in the workplace, and could even be bad for our health. So as an ardent over-apologiser, should I do something about it? The answer is complex and depends on what the apology is for, but it's starting to become clear that saying sorry can have surprising upsides.

Much of the recent discussion on over-apologising has focused on the idea that women are particularly prone to it. One survey on the problem found that 44 per cent of women thought that women tend to apologise too much, whereas just 5 per cent of

them thought this was true of men. Men on the other hand tended to think that women and men both "got it about right".

When Karina Schumann of the University of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, began her post-graduate studies in psychology 11 years ago, she was confronted with similar ideas. "I kept coming across this stereotype. Big claims were being made with no real evidence: people were saying that men never apologise because they're unwilling to admit fault and their egos get in the way, whereas women apologise for everything without even thinking about it. I felt there needed to be some science to back this up," she says. So Schumann asked a group of Canadian students to keep a daily diary of any events that could have potentially deserved an apology, and whether they said sorry.

The women did indeed apologise more than the men, but that's as far as the stereotype went. The reason women apologised more was because they committed more offences that they felt were deserving of an apology than men did. In fact, both genders were equally likely to apologise when they perceived an offence had been committed, it's just that women apologised for things that men wouldn't.

Schumann and her team call this the

threshold hypothesis, which has been confirmed by other studies. "Men have a higher threshold for what might deserve an apology – or, to put it another way, women are more sensitive to what might require an apology," she says. This makes me wonder if I might be over-sensitive when thinking about which actions require an apology.

But even if women are apologising for more things than men, is it as big a problem as we are being led to believe? For instance, last year saw the launch of an email plug-in aimed predominantly at women, called Just Not Sorry, which scans draft messages to highlight diffident or apologetic words and phrases. The idea is to intercept such language because it weakens your authority, lowers your self-esteem, and damages your image in the workplace.

These assumptions might stem less from research and more from our cognitive biases. For a start, it can often feel very hard to apologise, even if we know the relationship will benefit. Research has also shown that people make "forecasting" errors about the potentially negative effects of apologising. "It is possible that people wrongly expect less benefit and more costs from apologising," says Michael Wenzel at Flinders University in South Australia, "so they fail to see or predict the positive psychological outcomes of apologies, and may be more preoccupied with the possible costs."

Wenzel and his colleagues wanted to understand why people might refuse to show contrition despite the obvious benefits.

## Unthinkingly apologetic

They found that when people refused to apologise for something they did that upset someone else, they reported feeling more powerful and felt that they'd stuck to their values more. As a result, they also had more self-esteem than in situations where they did nothing after committing the transgression.

"Our research shows what may be behind our refusals to apologise – a defensiveness of our ego, our desire to maintain our power and control, and our sense of having integrity and acting in a way that is consistent with our values," says Wenzel.

But what surprised the team was the finding that when people did apologise, they got the same benefits – an increased sense of power and the feeling they were sticking to their values – compared with when no action was



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