

Researchers link willingness to apologize with conscientiousness

26 March 2015, by Michelle Wheeler



"I thought '[a willingness to apologise] is an interesting construct' because we all have a few friends in our lives who just never apologise," he says. Credit: iStock

We were all taught to say it in the playground and everyone learnt later to always say it to our spouses but it seems people with particular personality traits are more willing to actually apologise when they transgress.

A WA-led study found people who are honest and humble and conscientious are more likely to say sorry with one [sample group](#) suggesting people who were agreeable were more likely to say sorry too.

The research, published last month in the journal *Personality and Individual Differences*, examined six [personality](#) traits—honesty-humility, emotionality, extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness and openness to experience.

Together these personality traits are known as the 'HEXACO' model.

UWA psychologist Patrick Dunlop says he had the idea for the study after reading research linking apologising to wellbeing and having a soft heart.

"I thought '[a willingness to apologise] is an interesting construct' because we all have a few friends in our lives who just never apologise," he says.

"Even when it has been demonstrated with absolute 100 per cent certainty that a person transgressed...some still refuse to apologise for it."

Apologising about power positions

Dr Dunlop says saying sorry involves acknowledging that what you've done is wrong and putting yourself in a position of less power—things people low on honesty-humility might struggle with.

He says honesty-humility captures the extent to which people are inclined to be upfront, genuine, not susceptible to fraud, comfortable living modest lifestyles and not materialistic or self-important.

"People who are very high on these traits are sincere with people, they're fair-minded, they wouldn't cheat, they don't really need to accumulate and show off their wealth," Dr Dunlop says.

"People who are very low on this trait...they tend to be quite comfortable manipulating others by lying to them or laughing at their crappy jokes or flattering them.

"They're more easily susceptible to opportunities to steal or cheat if they think they can get away with it, and they're going to need the fastest, shiniest car, the biggest house on the block, the biggest flat screen."

The research team was surprised at the link between apologising and conscientiousness, Dr Dunlop says.

"Conscientiousness is really typically thought of more as a task orientation-type personality factor," he says.

"We speculated that...maybe if you feel like you owe somebody an apology and you haven't done it, you haven't apologised, then you might feel like there's a 'task' that's still floating around and needs resolving."

More information: "Please accept my sincere and humble apologies: The HEXACO model of personality and the proclivity to apologize," *Personality and Individual Differences*, Volume 79, June 2015, Pages 140-145, ISSN 0191-8869, [dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2015.02.004](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2015.02.004)

Provided by Science Network WA

APA citation: Researchers link willingness to apologize with conscientiousness (2015, March 26) retrieved 17 May 2021 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2015-03-link-willingness-conscientiousness.html>

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