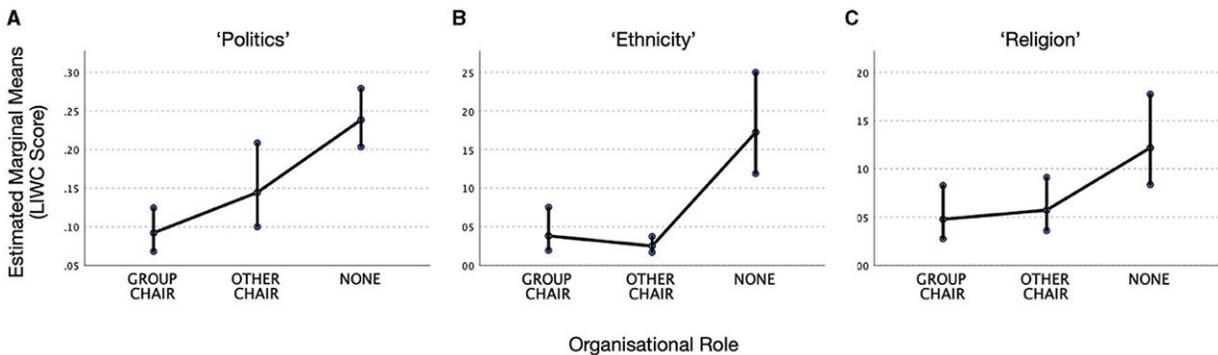


People in power found to avoid using sensitive language at work

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Patterns of language use by organizational role. Estimated marginal means for the LIWC categories: (A) Politics, (B) Ethnicity, and (C) Religion. Error bars show 95% confidence intervals. Credit: *Frontiers in Psychology* (2024). DOI: 10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1266425

A new [study](#) published in the journal *Frontiers in Psychology* finds that people in positions of power are three times less likely to use sensitive language in work-related emails than people junior to them.

This challenges common assumptions about the nature of social [power](#) and stereotypes about leadership behavior as typically insensitive and autocratic.

The study, led by Professor Pat Healey of Queen Mary University of

London, analyzed a large corpus of organizational emails for uses of sensitive language.

The researchers found that people in positions of relative social power are much less likely to use words connected with sensitive topics (politics, religion, ethnicity) than people who are not in positions of power. They suggest that this is because positions of power can also be positions of vulnerability and exposure: a leader's words are scrutinized more closely by more people over longer periods.

"Our findings challenge a common stereotype about the behavior of powerful people," said Professor Healey. "Instead of being relatively uninhibited in their [language use](#), it suggests they are actually extra cautious."

In the context of UK COVID-19 Inquiry

The researchers believe that this caution is due to the greater exposure to scrutiny that people in power face. When people in power use sensitive language, they are more likely to be criticized or even punished over potentially unpredictable time periods. This risk is highlighted by the recent revelations from the UK COVID-19 Inquiry, which has used trails of WhatsApp messages to expose tensions and disagreements within the government's response to the pandemic.

Messages exchanged between Simon Case, Lee Cain, and Dominic Cummings, three senior government figures, provide a glimpse into the inner workings of government during the crisis. The language used in these messages has surprised many by its openly abusive character.

While the full extent of these tensions remains to be determined, the [messages](#) underscore both how the words of people in positions of power can be held accountable in unexpected ways and what happens to

organizational communication when leadership breaks down.

The study has implications for our understanding of leadership, the exercise of power, and the pressures on people in senior roles. It also suggests an alternative way of thinking about politeness.

"Traditionally, politeness has been seen as a way of showing respect to others," said Professor Healey. "But our research suggests that politeness can also be seen as a way of protecting oneself from scrutiny. Some leadership stereotypes, and perhaps some leaders, might need to be updated."

The study could also be linked to the stories of verbal bullying by ministers such as Priti Patel and Dominic Raab. It would suggest those situations are the exception rather than the rule.

The researchers believe that their findings could be used to help organizations create more inclusive and respectful workplaces. For example, organizations could provide training on sensitive language to help people in power understand the potential risks of using such language.

More information: Patrick G. T. Healey et al, Power and vulnerability: managing sensitive language in organizational communication, *Frontiers in Psychology* (2024). [DOI: 10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1266425](https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1266425)

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