

WHY DO PEOPLE ACTUALLY ARGUE?

According to a study carried out by Guilherme Lopes from the University of Oakland sex, money, power, jealousy, household chores and attention paid to the partner, are the most common causes of arguments among young American couples. This raises the question - are these the only reasons behind the discord? I believe that there is more to it. Conflicts arise because we do not know how to talk with each other. Let us take a look at some approaches to solve problems at an early stage.

In Lopes' study, university students were asked to come up with hundreds of topics they thought married couples might argue over. Then they created a list of over 80 possibilities in order to check which ones would be the most common among 107 heterosexual couples from the local area who married in the past year. Topping the list was a feeling that the partner does not pay enough attention or lacks affection towards their loved one. Other main sources of disagreement revolve around sex, money, control, jealousy and housework. However, does the subject of the dispute tell us everything about the conflict? In fact, it does not. Below I describe seven underestimated factors that one should be aware of as there is an there is a separate impact regardless of who initiated the conflict.

1) Automatic thinking. According to a theory presented by Daniel Gilbert, we initially believe in everything we see or hear. Then we evaluate and, if necessary, reject the falsehood. Unfortunately, the phase consisting of critical comprehension and the arrival at a negative decision takes time and effort, so if the recipients are tired, for example, they are more likely to believe in false information, which could lead to arguments in the future.

2) The angry iceberg theory is quite well known. It states that if, for some time we hide the fact that we feel stressed, disappointed, overwhelmed, guilty or embarrassed, we accumulate such emotions within ourselves. Meaning that when we receive an impulse (like bad news) it provokes an explosive reaction and presents itself only as the tip of an iceberg. In fact, it is the manifestation of different hidden emotions. As this reaction arises in response to one specific impulse, our interlocutor may think that it was because of them, which in turn creates a distorted image of us.

3) Restricted or elaborated codes. British sociologist, Basil Bernstein, argued that depending on our upbringing and customs in the family home, we use restricted or elaborated codes. This means that we communicate with different varieties of language. The users of restricted code are less likely to understand metaphors or symbols. A seemingly insignificant difference in the code may lead to misperception of a person as inauthentic and detached from reality. This is the best way to a misunderstanding.

4) Stereotypes. A word that all of us know, but at the same time not always aware of. Their functioning is sometimes clear to us. It amuses us when we hear that Italians are passionate lovers and saddens us when Poles are identified with drunks. However, we often do not notice that even our own language is filled with stereotypes. According to some researchers, "it is in language that the stereotype lives". For example, when someone starts an argument, we call them a "drama queen" and not a "drama king". Through such expressions, we suggest that women quarrel more often for no specific reason and that they initiate arguments more frequently, although neither gender would like to be associated with such behaviour.

5) Concentration. The shortening of the time in which we are able to maintain focus is among the most urgent challenges today. An international research group has proven that our interest appears and disappears just as quickly. Using the popularity of Twitter hashtags as an example, researchers presented the extent of the loss of interest. Their analysis indicated back in 2013, that interest depended on keywords forming trends. As an example, keywords that remained on the list of the 50 most popular phrases for an average of 17.5 hours. Three years later, this time dropped to 11.9 hours. The symptoms of decreased attention time were also noticed by educational institutions, which shortened the time of classes even down to 15 minutes. This trend is also reflected in the popularity of TED-Talks - short educational videos that have gained popularity owing to how condensed knowledge is presented in an attractive form.

It is easy to show how the lack of concentration deepens the argument. If we are unable to focus on the other person's message, the risk of misunderstanding them increases. For many of us, putting the phone aside during our daily conversations, even with our family, is a huge effort that we are reluctant to make. If we are constantly distracted and drowned by waves of information from various sources and on various topics, we must be aware that our interlocutor is going through the same. This makes communication difficult, especially in the long-term, when we expect the other person to remember something we told them some time ago.

6) Dialogue or monologue? At my family gatherings, there are simultaneous discussions at the table in which participants are looking for a favourable pair of ears that would be interested in the topic they want to discuss. In the case of a large family (and a large table) it seems natural and quite fun, but in the case of a relationship between two people, the fight for the interlocutor's attention can be exhausting. Just as it is impolite to interrupt it is also wrong to monopolise the conversation. The basic remedy to heal the discussion is to notice your tendency to lead a monologue, interrupt, or 'disconnecting' while the other side is speaking, which is equally harmful to the dialogue.

7) What does that mean? The last point is where the discussion should really start. How many times during an argument do we find out that we have misunderstood a problem or a word but are too proud to admit it? The dispute over... taxes in Poland is a great illustration of the problem. In one of the studies, Poles were asked whether they prefer a progressive or a linear tax system. It turned out that when the question was accompanied by a clear explanation, the preference for flat tax increased threefold.

How to learn (not) to argue?

It turns out that the art of cultural and substantive argumentation is so demanding that it has been given a sporting dimension. For several years, the popularity of debating tournaments in Poland has been growing and more and more schools are introducing classes in rhetoric into curriculum. Debate as a sport gives us some useful tools that we can use in our daily discussions. One of them is the obligation to clarify / define the problem at the very beginning of the discussion, to be sure that all participants have the same understanding of the topic and that there will be no misunderstandings on these grounds.. The second characteristic feature of debating treated as a sport is the strict adherence to the time given with each speaker only allowed a few minutes. There is also an obligation to accept questions from opponents. It is the person who speaks that decides when to accept the question (this cannot last longer than a few seconds). Such rules aid in avoiding monologues and prevent the listener from losing attention. They also force them to listen actively, because if you want to relate to what your opponents have said, you have to prove that you understood them well. Above all, debates teach the culture of discussion, severely punishing participants for insulting their opponent and teaching them how not to get carried away.

“In a dialogue that is real, all sides are ready to change” ~ Nhat Hanh

In conclusion, I propose a simple exercise. Think of an opinion you have. It may relate to a topic that you and your friend disagree on. Are you able to explain your view in a concise and clear manner? Can you give a precise answer to the questions that arise on this topic? Do you understand why someone might have a different opinion? Are all the reasons supporting your view understandable? Try to stand in front of the mirror and look at yourself through the interlocutor's eyes. You can record yourself and listen to yourself. Whatever you learn from this exercise, remember that a discussion is almost always like a sport so if you learn the rules once, you won't forget them, but if you don't practice the cultural discussion, you will fall out of shape.

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