

Making up is hard to do

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It all started out pleasantly enough. It was late and Hiro and I had visited a couple of favorite bars. We were at our third bar when the argument started. I think I raised my voice. Then Hiro raised his and interrupted me.

I shouted, "Shut up. I'm not finished."

"Yes, you are." He shouted back. "Especially if you are going to say such stupid things."

"Stupid things?"

"Yeah, stupid things."

"Well, they're not even close to as stupid as the things you were just saying."

"Oh." Hiro shouted. "Is that what you think?"

"Yeah." I said. "That's what I think."

"I'm not going to stay here and be insulted."

"Then go. No one's keeping you."

Hiro slammed his beer glass on the counter. Beer spilled out and hit the front of my shirt.

"You jerk." I screamed. "Watch out!"

Without another word, Hiro walked out.

The next morning all I remembered is that we had had an argument and that we had to make up. But how? The first time I called him all I got was his answering machine. "Ah, sorry about last night. Ah, how's your head?" A good start, perhaps, but not enough. Not nearly enough.

A couple of nights later I ran into Hiro at a local bar. "About the other night ..."

"I don't want to talk about it." He said and cut me off. "Just give me some space." Hiro said and moved to another stool.

"Well, well." I thought. "Space. OK, space he will get."

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My response to the argument and Hiro's very different response started me thinking about the different strategies people use to make up. Was it me

being an American? Was it Hiro being a guy?

I started to find out by asking an assortment of Japanese friends and sending e-mail messages to some American friends. I asked them all the same basic question, "How do you make up with a friend when you've had an argument." There were a whole range of responses, but I started to notice a pattern.

One standard response from my friends was to take a principled stand. These people thought along the lines of "It's not my fault, so I'm not going to apologize." Robert's response is an example of this. "Thomas, what we're talking about is a matter of principle. Why should I apologize for something that isn't my fault? If I make a dumb mistake, of course I'll take responsibility for it and make an apology. But, hey, if it's not my fault, why say so?"

My friend Shoichi agreed. "Remember our argument over some baseball scores. I refused to back down and so did you. When we found the stats, I was right and you were wrong. If I apologize for being right, it makes a bad impression.

"Also, everyone should be mature enough to give themselves a while to cool off. How long? It's case by case depending on who you're angry with and what you're angry about. After a while, you will recognize who was responsible and you can go on from there without saying anything. It's just common sense"

Sarah had a slightly different common sense approach to making up. "An argument is nasty. Is it really worth fighting with a friend just to prove a point? I don't think so. It doesn't matter who is right and who is wrong. What's important is staying friends with friends. I say, sit down with each other over a quiet cup of tea. You can talk the matter over, recognize the possibility of fault on both sides, apologize to each other, and get it over with."

When I talked with Asako she agreed with half of

Sarah’s thinking. She, too, believes that the important thing was the relationship between the two people. “I mean, you’re friends. Friends. You’ve know each other for years. That’s the principle.” And she was all for a cooling off period after an argument. “Because, you see, if you’re angry, you might say something that you don’t really mean. Something that really hurts the other person. Let things sit for a while. Think about it. But sit down and talk about it? No. Analyzing feelings is not the way to do it. It’s too cold. You’re friends. You’ll know when the matter is settled. You’ll know.”

I checked back with Robert on his feelings about this “let time heal the wounds” and intuitive approach to making up. “Yes, I can see the point. I disagree with it, but I can see it. I’m different. I need to get clear in my mind just what happened. Then, if there’s a problem in the future, I can avoid it.”

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Once all the e-mails were in and the telephone calls made two patterns were clear.

One pattern concerned the relative importance of principles and people. Robert and Shoichi were in favor of standing up for principles. Asako and Sarah, on the other hand, felt that the relationship between friends was more important.

Gender was clearly operating here, regardless of cultural background. Being right is a guy thing. The male stereotype held, at least among my friends. My women friends valued the relationship more than the principle. They just wanted an end to the unpleasantness. The stereotype of a women being person-oriented held. Certainly this is not always true. Times are changing and the social roles of men and women are changing. But, in this sample, traditional gender behaviors and patterns seemed to hold.

The other pattern concerned the method of making up — talking things over, which was Sarah and Robert’s position, or letting things quietly cool off, Asako and Shoichi’s position.

In this instance, the responses fell into cultural groups, with the Americans being more analytic, and the Japanese being more intuitive.

The American response makes cultural sense in at least two ways. In the historical sense, the United States, and Western culture as whole, values clarity of expression, and analytic ability. These values underlie many Western approaches to technical and social problems.

A more particularly American take on the matter starts from the fact that the United States is a diverse country with people from many social, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds all living together, working together, and playing together. This diversity requires special skills for dealing with the inevitable disagreements. One skill that Americans have developed is the willingness to talk about differences. This is not neutral. From one angle, this is about openness and clarity. From another angle, this is about aggression.

The Japanese responses also make more sense if understood culturally. Japan comes from a historical tradition which valued deference to authority. Subtlety of expression was the desired communicative skill, both for its aesthetic value and for its ability to deflect undesirable consequences.

At a more everyday level, despite great social diversity, Japan presents itself as a homogeneous country. The sense is that talking about differences, which officially should not exist, is inappropriate. The shared cultural background should suffice. As in the American case, this assumption is not neutral. Positively, it requires that people listen carefully to what others are saying. Less positively, it is about hiding what you feel.

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Hiro and I ran into each other a couple of weeks later. We made awkward conversation for a few minutes, then I asked, “Do you want to talk about it?”

“Talk about what?” He looked confused for a moment. “Oh, ‘it’.” He paused. “No. Not particularly. There isn’t really anything to talk about, is there?”

It was my turn to pause for a second. “No, I guess there isn’t. Want some of these peanuts?”