

Think back to the last time you argued with a male: friend, boss, bank manager, lover. Question: who do you think won the debate/discussion/quarrel? Answer: it doesn't really matter. According to Elizabeth Mapstone, psychologist and author of *War Of Words: Women And Men Arguing*, nine times out of 10, he will probably assume your point of view is incidental anyway.

If you are disagreeing with him at a dinner party, he certainly won't compete to win you over. It's not worth his while. And it won't matter to him what you're saying, unless you are relatively young and attractive; he may indulge your opinion. If he is a colleague, equal or subordinate, he will probably reason afterwards that you were too emotional about some of the views you expressed, a little too "personally involved" in the subject to enter into "objective" debate.

If all this sounds grim yet predictable, that's because it still is, Mapstone argues. "It's so awful," she almost wails at one point. "The more I see and hear from my research, the more convinced I am that people are simply blind. Young women really think it's all OK in the post-feminist era, but if you were to present a diary of an argument you had with a man, chances would be 95 per cent that he assumed you were being too over-emotional and personally involved."

Over the past 12 years, Mapstone has completed in-depth interviews with more than 600 men and women, asking many of them to keep argument "diaries" and write down their thoughts and feelings after the event. She believes the bones of an argument are less significant than how it is actually remembered, "what happens after the words are over and we take stock". Her research rests on the premise that there is no such thing as objective truth, only subjective versions of it. And how depressive subjective they are. Mapstone finds that the same old stereotypical dinosaurs dominate opposite-sex dialectics. The reigning perception is that when women argue, they are emotional, disagreeable or aggressive. Yet when men argue, they are considered rational, reasonable and firm.

So what's new? Perhaps the fact that we are now paying so much attention to arguing. Thirty years ago, arguments, like sexual habits, were confined to the privacy of your own home. You certainly didn't talk about them, much less air them in public. Yet in the self-improving nineties, argument has become a focus for the whole messy business of mis-communication between the sexes. Self-help guides have forsaken sexual intercourse in favour of verbal.

What has really shifted is the idea that argument, rather than being an end in itself, can lead to resolution. According to popular thought, how we row may well expose the cultural abyss between men and women, but — hey — it can also heal that rift. Thus there is a whole market out there that acknowledges that men and women are conditioned to speak different languages. Following on from John Gray's *Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus* and Deborah Tanner's *You Just Don't Understand: Women And Men In Conversation* comes Relate's self-help guide, *Stop Arguing, Start Talking*, published next week.

The book's author, psychologist Susan Quilliam, says: "Everything is up for negotiation. Until 10 or 15 years ago, we didn't see argument as a conflict resolution tool, but as a sign of marriage breakdown. It's not sex, not money, but conflict resolution that is the key to relationship commitment." No wonder there is so much pressure to get it right.

Mapstone also discovered the dynamics of argument alter radically between same-sex friends. Her interviews revealed that younger men enjoy sparring verbally with each other and view it as a way of cementing friendship. This belief is reversed

Mapstone herself grew up in a household in which discussion and debate were encouraged. "We always enjoyed arguing. It was not considered the sort of thing a girl shouldn't do. Then in my late thirties and forties, I realised I was being either criticised or ignored."

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Mapstone admits that if she wants to negotiate successfully with a man, she will go in cautiously. She talks about aggressive feminists she knows don't have the freedom to choose and that's where we have to choose an argument. Men don't have to choose and that's where we have to choose an argument. Men don't have to choose and that's where we have to choose an argument.

On the strength of her findings, Mapstone, now 61, has learnt some valuable, but not necessarily groundbreaking lessons. For example, she recognises that if women want to be heard, they have to make certain choices about how they appear during an argument. "Men don't hear, they have to make certain choices about how they appear during an argument. Men don't hear, they have to make certain choices about how they appear during an argument."

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