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The crisis of dialogue and relationship in marriage in the perspective of the attachment theory

Kryzys dialogu i więzi w małżeństwie w perspektywie teorii przywiązania[1]

Abstract: There have been many analyzes of changes and crisis, or – as some put it – "the lifestyle revolution", in the face of the changes in the structure and functioning of marriage and family in the last thirty years. In culture and social life, trends related to individualism, autonomy and independence come to the fore, for which new means of virtual communication constitute the ideal space. The aspects of gender differences in emotionality, communication and coping with difficult situations by spouses will be indicated in describing the psychological conditions of marital communication at the background of the aforementioned changes and attachment-forming processes. In this context, the main thesis of the article was put forward that the lack of proper communication in a marriage leads to the breakdown of ties and relationships. Considering this issue, the experience of conflicts and crises by spouses, virtual communication depriving them of their actual presence, negotiating goals related to distance and closeness were considered. Ultimately, attempts were made to outline the consequences that result from the breakdown of relationships – loneliness, isolation and exclusion.
Keywords: dialogue, crisis, attachment theory, marriage relationship

Abstrakt: W obliczu przemian struktury i funkcjonowania małżeństwa i rodziny w ostatnich trzydziestu latach, pojawiło się wiele analiz dotyczących zmian, kryzysu, bądź też – jak niektórzy ujmują tę sytuację – „rewolucji stylu życia". W kulturze i życiu społecznym na plan pierwszy wysuwają się trendy związane z indywidualizmem, autonomią czy niezależnością, dla których idealną przestrzeń stanowią nowe środki komunikacji wirtualnej. Opisując psychologiczne uwarunkowania komunikacji małżeńskiej na tle wspomnianych zmian oraz procesów kształtowania przywiązania zostaną wskazane wątki różnic płci w emocjonalności, komunikowaniu i radzeniu sobie z trudnymi sytuacjami przez małżonków. W tym kontekście postawiono zasadniczą tezę artykułu, iż brak prawidłowej komunikacji w małżeństwie prowadzi do rozpadu więzi oraz związków. Rozpatrując to zagadnienie, zastanawiano się nad doświadczaniem konfliktów i kryzysów przez małżonków, komunikacją wirtualną pozbawiającą faktycznej obecności, negocjowaniem celów związanych z dystansem i bliskością. Ostatecznie podjęto się próby zarysowania konsekwencji, które wynikają z rozpadu więzi – osamotnienia, izolacji i wykluczenia.
Słowa kluczowe: dialog, kryzys, teoria przywiązania, więź małżeńska

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[1] Wersja w języku polskim na stronie:
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1. Changes to the structure and functioning of marriages over the last thirty years

The cultural and civilisational changes observed over the last thirty years have triggered reorganisation in the systems of values, the ways in which people understand the reality, and the traditional structures determining how the transient (traditional) world's image is perceived. Culture has changed, but so have men and women themselves, as their identity, attitude towards other people, approach to interpersonal bonds and relationships have redeveloped. The domain of uncertainty about what human beings truly are and who they would like to be has grown. We have entered the age of individualism, modernisation, industrialisation, and westernisation (Miluska, 2014). Ever since the emergence of multiple systems of values perceived and addressed from a relativistic point of view, the sensitivity to objective values, including the dialogue between individuals, has been fading away.

The predominant values of the culture of the West (i.e. the American culture), and the ideas of freedom, equality, and independence in the first place, have greatly affected the entire Western culture, becoming decisive of the new ways in which one adapts to contemporary reality (Hoover, 2016). The abandonment of traditional systems of values or religious beliefs initiated the processes of individualisation and autonomisation of individuals, separated them from the communities which used to provide support (e.g. family), and led to the absolutisation of freedom. The young generation (referred to as *generation Me*) began to define their needs and expectations, as well as the ways in which they are to be catered for, in a somewhat different manner, relying on such behaviour patterns as the concentration on one's own goals and plans, individualisation of needs, increased self-esteem, as well as empowerment to pursue self-actualisation (Twenge, Donnelly, 2016). In search of happiness, the young generation began to act according to the slogan "what's good and right for me," while romantic relationships have become a means to attain self-fulfilment and happiness in a couple. Love must be satisfying and ideal, because otherwise, it leads to frustration and ultimately to a decision to leave the partner.

Moreover, new ways of communication have moved conversation to the digital realm where young people feel native as opposed to the older generation of digital immigrants (Small, Vorgan, 2008). What one can observe at this day and age is a renaissance of communication, also referred to as the age of conversation. We are experiencing both the powerful development of remote communication tools and the accompanying compulsion to use them, representing a response to the need for communication with others, and the overwhelming loneliness of people which virtually fills the space.

Parallel to the changes taking place in the sphere of communication, the structure and the functioning of the most fundamental social units, namely marriage and family, have been evolving. One can observe the following change trends: growing number of short-lived relationships, acceptability of different lifestyles, increasing divorce rates, and postponing

the decisions on entering into a formal relationship, leaving family homes, starting a family, and having children, all in favour of professional career development (Szlendak, 2010, p. 420). The changes taking place in the sphere of romantic relationships have significantly raised the popularity of the *together but apart* phenomenon, thus revising the definition of love and intimacy. According to Tomasz Szlendak (*Ibidem*, p. 457-458), the nature of social bonds has been evolving in favour of less durable and cohesive relationships of people residing in a shared household, while the shape of relationships has become completely governed by the contradictory motives of the pursuit of community and autonomy, the need for freedom and dependence.

James White defined a family as "a social network, not necessarily residing in a single shared territory, which is based on culturally identifiable biological, marital, sexual, and friendly ties" (White, Klein, 2000, p. 463). According to a survey by the Centre for Public Opinion Research (Polish CBOS), most young adults in Poland, as nearly all around the world, prefer the model of a family with children, and consider such a lifestyle as one of the higher, if not the highest, priority values (Boguszewski, 2015). Nevertheless, the actual structure of a contemporary family slightly diverges from the traditional *two plus two* format, while the one currently preferred comprises two adults and a single child (or possibly a dog). What can also be witnessed is a progressing birth rate decline (especially with regard to the second and subsequent children) and an increase in the age of mothers giving birth to their first child (from 24 years in 2000 to 27 in 2014) (Stańczak, Stelmach, Urbanowicz, 2016).

The contemporary family formats "are tailored to the age of individualism," as Szlendak notes (2010, pp. 457-501) reflecting the social changes observed. Next to a traditional heterosexual family with children, various new and alternative forms of marriage and family have emerged. Sociologists propose the following breakdown of family systems, both the alternative ones and those which resemble marital relationships: cohabitation[2], patchwork (reconstructed) family, single parents (mainly single mothers)[3], partnerships (including homo-families)[4], circles of friends (communes), LAT[5] as well as DINKS-type quasi families[6], social networks of elderly people, and singles.

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[2]According to Wojciszke (2021), the form of cohabitation is an alternative for few young and educated people and a successful family life is one of the most valued by Poles.

[3]It is estimated that there are over 9 million single mothers in the USA, and about 1.5 million in Poland (Szlendak, 2010, pp. 476-477).

[4]Homo-families around the world include same-sex partners who live together and have children under their care, while in Poland they are still not legalized. In the first decade of the 21st century, there were 10% of such families in Norway and 3.5% in the USA. Of the homosexual relationships surveyed in the UK, only 10% reported having children, and 5% reported living with a child (Edwards et al., 2016).

[5] Long-distance relationships – Living Apart Together, which means living together but in separate households, usually for professional reasons.

[6] DINKS – Double Income No Kids, spouses have a double income, but do not have born or adopted children.

Describing characteristics of alternative relationships in comparison with those of traditional families, one should highlight the following aspects: a structure open to change; living with a male/female partner without formally being married (cohabitation) or living alone (singles); egalitarian marriage, where both spouses pursue their professional careers; one parent, divorced or never married; numerous adults (communes, groups of friends, elderly people's social networks); hetero- and homosexuality. Among the most important forms in which these relationships function, the following should be mentioned: both the formation and dissolution of a relationship is very easy; there are no legal ties and co-ownership (inheritance from the partner is only possible on the testamentary basis); partners have no obligation to provide for the family; no personal obligations towards the partner exist, including no obligation to provide mutual support and care; divorce is admissible (this includes reconstructed and patchwork families); there is no exclusivity (swingers' relationships, open relationships). Alternative family forms are mainly chosen by young and highly educated people who choose to have few or no children, religious but non-practicing or atheists (Szlendak, 2010, p. 462). Interestingly, this kind of relationship is preferred by far more men, especially young men, than women.

2. Psychological determinants of marital communication vis-à-vis attachment processes

According to the contemporary theories describing interpersonal communication processes, communication of any kind is an interaction between subjects at the same time (Janicka, Liberska, 2014, p. 36). Irena Namysłowska (2000, p. 95) is of a similar opinion, claiming that "interpersonal communication can be understood as exchange of information between two persons against a specific social context." Nevertheless, as agreed by Paul Watzlawick, "one cannot not communicate" (Griffin, 2003, p. 182). Hence the conclusion that every communication affects the relationship between those who communicate as well as the manner in which they communicate. Additionally, one can refer to any response to verbal or nonverbal message as responsiveness, being the ability to reply or the readiness to react. What matters about this response is how a person has understood and interpreted the message and what meaning they have assigned to it. Therefore, there is an additional and intentional interaction between persons in the acts of communication, meaning that a message is of bond-forming nature.

The determinants of communication processes can be generally divided into subjective and non-subjective (socio-cultural). The first group consists of such factors as personality (temperament, intelligence, communication competence), gender, cognitive and motivational processes, level of self-esteem, emotional state, and linguistic habits (Harwas-Napierała, 2006, pp. 36-57). The group of non-subjective factors includes the environment

and the social context, norms and customs, or models of specific forms of communication inherited from parents. Barbara Harwas-Napierała has indicated the necessary conditions of communication which determine the quality of mutual understanding, namely the level of an individual's development (maturity), self-esteem (image of the self, sense of worth), empathy and trust, and the lack of defensive distortion[7].

Gregory Bateson (Griffin, 2003, p. 186), one of the forefathers of the systems theory, has emphasised that every family member participates in the family in a unique manner. The understanding of how to function together in a family is based on a conviction that there is a framework of interpretation of this specific experience that is common to the family members. This framework is what Bateson refers to as *metacommunication*, i.e. communication about communication within the family. According to an analysis by Hill et al., the accuracy in the framework of understanding of meanings and the experience of individual differences in the perception of phenomena are linked by a process in which both complement each other (Hill, Fonagy, Safier, Sargent, 2003). The family systems theory indicates that clarity of communication is one of the prerequisites for the family's proper functioning, while mutual understanding of differences and the negotiation of distance and closeness related goals strengthen it.

One of the most significant factors decisive of the shape of communication and the wide range of individual differences is gender. Gender differences tend to be extensively discussed in the contemporary social discourse, and at this point of the consideration, one should refer to the differences between men and women in terms of their interpersonal communication styles. According to Reinisch et al., the developmental differences between female and male infants indicate different modes of perceptual, cognitive, and temperamental response (Reinisch, Rosenblum, Rubin, Schulsinger, 2003). Women gain an advantage in the domain of verbal capacity, non-verbal communication, or evoking images of the people once encountered in memory, but the actual differences between men and women become apparent in how they implement communication processes.

Having reviewed the differences between men and women in terms of individual competences of verbal and non-verbal communication, one could establish the following areas of behavioural differences: self-disclosure; verbal skills (verbal fluency); social competence; performing the interlocutor's role while engaged in a conversation; keeping a distance; reading verbal and non-verbal messages; intensity, frequency and use of interludes and digressions; looking at others during interaction; using touch during verbal communication; blushing during conversation; crying or smiling[8]. Analyses show that men and women indeed differ significantly in terms of their communication styles, but it should also be emphasised that men and women use the same language and similar ways of

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[7] List of studies, as per Janicka, Liberska, 2014, pp. 51-53.
[8] List of studies, as per Kornaszewska-Polak, 2020, pp. 52-54.

expressing themselves, yet each gender does it with different frequency and intensity of specific behaviours.

Next to the differences in the communication skills, there are also those between men and women which pertain to the emotional domain. The ways in which we communicate with one another affect the emotions we experience, and vice versa – our emotional states affect communication. When communicating, women try to establish and maintain emotional bonds by means of which they express their feelings and attitudes. Through processes of socialisation, girls develop proficiency in reading both verbal and non-verbal modes of communication (Kornaszewska-Polak, 2020). Boys, on the other hand, are characterised by the following communication related competences: they control the course of conversations by speaking more loudly; they display more dominance and more signs of higher status; they express themselves precisely, but interrupt more frequently, and are more inclined to taking control; they are reluctant to disclose information about themselves[9].

The model of communication which functions in marriage is referred to as bilateral because the nature of the interactions between spouses is that of feedback. It is precisely for such communication that every marriage is highly specific as both partners affect each other with feedback. Marital dialogue is often referred to as systemic communication, which Watzlawick calls "maintaining the family homeostasis" or "maintaining the family status quo" (Griffin, 2003, p. 183). Proper communication is conducive to the maintenance of bonds, even though the intensity of the feeling of love gradually fades. Depending on the phase of the relationship development, the communication process is subject to transformations: it begins with specific communication focused on self-disclosure and information seeking (partners becoming familiar with each other); throughout the engagement, the sense of intimacy is experienced and confirmed; further on, marital roles are negotiated and formulated; and finally, communication strategies are created to sustain the relationship and strengthen the bond (*Ibidem*, pp. 175-178). Many authors note that the quality of communication decreases in a marriage as time passes (Izdebski, Kotyśko, 2016). The frequency of communication via new media is not conducive to physical presence, this factor being essential for the development of appropriate bonds, as claimed by John Bowlby (Cassidy, 2016, pp. 3-24).

Studies of marital communication indicate that age and gender are important factors differentiating the ways in which men and women communicate, and that virtual communication affects marital communication (especially among young people) (Kornaszewska-Polak, 2012a). In young women, positive correlations were observed between the satisfaction with conversations with their spouses and the satisfaction experienced while communicating with the spouses over the internet. Also positive were the

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[8] List of studies, as per Kornaszewska-Polak, 2020, p. 131.

correlations found between their involvement in communication and the satisfaction with face-to-face talks.

Many of the emotional exchange processes in play in marriage are synchronous. This synchronicity can be compared to the processes of emotional matching, attunement or contagion within a couple, although a notion being the closest to this concept is *responsiveness,* as proposed by Mary Ainsworth (Cassidy, Shaver, 2016, p. 368). Couples achieving a high degree of synchrony were characterised by matching activity levels, temporal coordination in the orientation of both bodies relative to each other, matching facial expressions, coordination of perceptual processes involved in using the tone of voice, and coordination of vision. Such temporally coordinated behavioural matching may resemble well-rehearsed dance moves or dialogue. Synchronicity in a dyad enhances the formation of a sense of attachment through responsiveness: responding to needs quickly, interpreting verbal and non-verbal stimuli appropriately, responding adequately to the other person's need, and assuming the other person's point of view (De Wolff i van Ijzendoorn, 2006).

The processes in which bonds and attachment are formed take place at different levels: individual, dyadic (marital), and systemic (family) (Hill et al., 2003). They are conditioned by biological, cultural and social factors, namely by the processes of communicating, exploring, and acting, i.e. interpersonal processes. According to Iniewicz (2008, p. 130), the higher the level of dependence (sense of security), the easier it is for individuals to separate, to express one's personal opinion, or to differ from their partner/spouse. People of trustful attachment nature are characterised by high social competences (trust, acceptance) and a sense of autonomy which allows them to reveal their own weaknesses and needs, and which affects intimacy in relationships (Feeney, Woodhouse, 2016). Individuals characterised by a low level of trust (insecure attachment styles) treat themselves and others as untrustworthy, developing a negative image of both themselves and others. These people also treat others as rejecting, and their communication skills are lower, which makes it difficult for them to sustain interpersonal relationships.

As Bretherton believes, communication is the main way to sustain attachment-based relationships (Bretherton, 1990; as per Cassidy, Shaver, 2016, p. 446).

Found to be a crucial aspect of communication, the patterns of self-disclosure (openness) are correlated with attachment styles. Trusting and anxious-ambivalent individuals show more openness than avoidant persons, while trusting individuals also send more open messages concerning emotions towards their partners (Feeney, 2011). Certain bidirectional relationships have been found to function between attachment and communication: internal beliefs (internal operating models) and relationship-related experience are complementarily reinforcing, which is precisely why the insecure styles of avoidance and anxiety are associated with lower communication competence. Longitudinal surveys of young married couples revealed that husbands of trustful attachment nature

showed more commitment, openness, and satisfaction, while wives of anxious attachment nature showed more dominance, combative disposition, and lack of satisfaction with the relationship (see Feeney, 2011).

3. Disintegration of the traditional forms of communication and bonding

One of the basic human needs is to be understood by others, and the pursuit thereof shapes the "moving toward people" attitude, as described by Karen Horney. This attitude expresses the desire to belong to others, to affiliate, to communicate, and to connect. At present, dialogue is mainly understood as *staying in touch*, which the contemporary means of information transfer enable. True dialogue, moulded through interaction and genuine presence, along with the entire dimension of non-verbal communication and emotions, is very difficult to attain nowadays. Therefore, one of the gravest symptoms of this day and age is the breakdown of dialogue, and what follows is the disintegration of close human relationships, especially of marital nature. What leads to the disintegration of communication and the breakdown of close relationships is the variety of problems related to the inability to communicate, difficulties in reaching an agreement, and the increasing number of misunderstandings and conflicts (Gottman, Silver, 2006). The average time for which spouses converse over a week is only 37 minutes. Without the sense of presence and closeness, communication of one's attitudes and expectations, and the formation of bonds become impossible because durability of personal relationships is largely dependent on the frequency of contact between partners (Wojciszke, 2021).

One can observe a truly disturbing phenomenon when analysing the patterns of marital communication, since more and more everyday conversations turn into arguments, which then become a way to maintain communication when partners have nothing to talk about. Research has shown that "arguments are a way to vent emotions, and to test one's own strengths in confrontation with a partner, aimed to force their decisions through. They tend to manifest powerlessness or helplessness in cases of absence of emotional contact" (Holak, 2016, p. 97). On the other hand, the research by Krystyna Slany (2002) revealed the fundamental expectations of young people towards the family, as it should be based on a high-quality bond understood as love. However, female students displayed stronger inclinations towards self-fulfilment in the area of professional career, gaining education and appropriate competences, which also expressed their need to strive for greater independence and fuller egalitarianism. Hence the conclusion that it is increasingly difficult for young people to agree on shared life goals and ways of pursuing them.

Aware of what makes them different, young spouses can take disparate positions, which may lead to their agreement and reconciliation, and become an opportunity for development. However, this is a less and less frequent case. Conflict-focused communication

entails affect regulation-related attachment processes (Pietromonaco, Greenwood, Barrett, 2004; as per Cassidy, Shaver, 2016, p. 446). Partners' mutual trust in the course of conflict resolution was positively correlated with a style which involves integration and compromise seeking, and negatively correlated with avoidance attitudes. These research findings imply that a person with a high sense of security uses more constructive strategies to resolve conflicts, which consolidates the relationship. In contrast, studies of attachment anxiety indicated greater involvement in arguments of anxious individuals, especially wives, who felt higher insecurity when their husbands did not understand their spouses' concerns (Feeney, 2003; as per Cassidy, Shaver, 2016, p. 448).

Nowadays, one of the main reasons for marriage breakdown is the disorders in the communication domain, and particularly the inability to become involved in a sincere dialogue. While in conversation, spouses communicate information about their mutual relationship, especially in stressful situations when the relational layer is perceived by the partner as more credible and genuine. Inconsistencies between the verbal and the non-verbal layer of the message are referred to as *double bind,* and they involve occurrence of repeatable loops of the double bind-type feedback between spouses (Griffin, 2003, p. 186). As suggested by Kornaszewska-Polak (2014b, p. 73), "the process in which a conflict develops between two persons is specific to each couple on account of the diverse nature of the relationship between the spouses." The mechanisms by which the given relationship functions become apparent in a conflict situation, when each spouse, seeking to fulfil their intent, exerts certain pressure on the other. "In such a cycle, the dysfunctional patterns of communication, and consequently of behaviour as well, show the partners' struggle for dominance and control in the relationship, which leads to frustration and profound dissatisfaction. Watzlawick describes such a disagreement in marriage as a depressing cycle of a family system which defends itself against changes" (Kornaszewska-Polak, 2020, p. 236).

The literature on the subject provides numerous classifications of problem-solving approaches, representing both the individual and the dyadic perspective, which cannot be addressed in this paper for objective reasons; nevertheless, one of the most serious conflict tackling situations is an attempt to avoid it. Trying to avoid problems, married couples simply fail to solve them, while the conflict itself is growing in intensity. This trend is particularly evident in persons of the avoidant attachment nature, who respond to a conflict with strong emotional arousal which they wish to avoid at all costs (Seedall i Wampler, 2012;as per Cassidy, Shaver, 2016, p. 448). In such situations, avoidant individuals apply specific tactics to diffuse the affect or supress it using diverse stimulants. Beck et al. video recorded conflict resolution situations involving young married couples, and the videos revealed that avoidant individuals were more likely to underestimate both their own and their partner's responsiveness (Beck, Pietromonaco, DeVito, Powers, Boyle, 2014). Avoidant

persons also displayed hostile and defensive reactions to the partner's expressions of emotion during conflict resolution.

Research shows that inclinations towards avoidance can put long-lasting satisfaction with a relationship at risk. However, it is not the conflicts per se which constitute the reason for marital breakdown, but rather the inability to resolve conflicts so as to integrate and strengthen the bond between partners. M. Ryś (1998, pp. 83-84) poses a question whether marital conflicts destroy or consolidate the relationship. Apart from normative crises, i.e. those connected with the stage of development of the family life, some non-normative crises may also emerge, being occasional and surprising, and often unpredictable in nature. When they overlap (co-occur), they turn into a chronic crisis which may last for months or years. In the past, such situations were referred to as *silent treatment*, but nowadays they in fact tend to be less and less silent because partners either argue constantly or the relationship simply disintegrates (Holak, 2016, p. 97).

More and more arguments perform only a negative function, since they enable both parties to freely present and justify their arguments, thus escalating the misunderstandings. The questions then posed may include: "why is she complaining" and "why is he withdrawing?" The attitudes of both commitment and distancing (*marital see-saw*) alternately determine the rhythm of married life (Kornaszewska-Polak, 2014b). While a conflict is escalating, every decision made in the marriage becomes a battleground in a war of arguments or beliefs, making one person win and the other lose. This results in growing anger, resentment, feeling of alienation and hostility. This is how a sense of harm and disappointment with the life partner as well as a conviction of being *unloved* develop.

Research proves that negative emotions outweigh the positive ones in unhappy marriages (Kornaszewska-Polak, 2020). In stressful situations, women often adopt the emotional coping styles of avoidance (withdrawal) and assuming responsibility (excessive situation control), but their preferred tactic is seeking social support, which promotes emotion venting and enables them to obtain physical and material help. Men, on the other hand, would use self-control tactics (as a means to regulate tensions in a difficult situation) and the strategy of distancing (where events were judged as unimportant and the possibility to intervene – low).

In interpersonal conflicts, spouses also adopt attitudes consistent with their gender because of the emotions they experience and the ways in which they communicate. Women's behaviour is characterised by strong emotions, with predominance of emotional ambivalence, while men tend to be relatively balanced and display a tendency to distancing and emotional withdrawal. This state of matters reflects the engagement–distancing conflict; when husbands inhibit their own emotions, wives usually sense them and respond to them with strong anxiety, agitation, and frustration. In marriages characterised by low involvement, women experience prolonged stress and their well-being is poorer, while men

who over-control their emotions only contribute to their cardiovascular disorders and myocardial infarctions (Bloch, Haase, Levenson, 2014).

One of the most significant factors conducive to the disintegration of interpersonal communication in close relationships and, consequently, of these relationships themselves is the excessive or incompetent and inadequate use of virtual communication tools, including the internet (computer) and mobile phones. The web makes communication easier and is beginning to play an increasingly important role in this domain, but sitting in front of a screen, talking or texting, too often do people abandon direct face-to-face dialogue. The neurochemical response accompanying real-life interactions is essential for well-being (Griffin, 2010). Many adults have become accustomed to this mode of communication, and the younger the interlocutors, the less willing they are to meet one another. Consequently, the distance and the sense of loneliness are growing, compensated for with an excess of virtual contact, much of which is superficial and leads to further deterioration of bonds. As a result of the notorious shortage of close contact with the spouse, as well as of schematic and routine conduct, partners misunderstand each other and misinterpret each other's actions. Conjectures, allegations, guesswork, and vague suggestions result in growing biases in thinking or acting, ultimately causing the partners to pass by, rather than to actually meet each other.

Data concerning the use of online communication networks clearly point at the sphere into which much of human communication has moved. The American youth have, on average, between ten and twenty friends, and ca. 150 online acquaintances (one-third of them have built networks of as many as 500 people) (*6 new facts about Facebook*, 2015). British research has revealed, on the other hand, that 38 million adults use the internet on a daily basis, at least 20 hours each week, and this sample represents 76% of all adults (Edwards et al., 2016). Among young adults, 27% of 18–24 years old persons use various applications and websites to engage in romantic relationships (*5 facts about online dating*, 2016). The author's own research on the contemporary modes of communication among students has shown that most of them (60%) use the internet 2–3 hours a day, while a significant group of them (37.5%) spend 4–5 hours or more in front of the computer screen[10]. A decided majority of the students (80%) have stated that they consider it important to keep in touch with others via remote communication messengers, while 20% of those surveyed feel compulsion to use these means to communicate permanently. Such a mode of communication contributes to the problems young people encounter in situations of conflict or crisis, as virtual friendships rarely offer genuine support which they would find so useful when facing a crisis (Best, Taylor, Manktelow, 2015).

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[10] 'The Communication and the Internet' survey, which examined the ways and frequency of using the Internet and opinions on interpersonal relationships, was conducted among students of the Humanitas University in Sosnowiec in the fall of 2009 (Kornaszewska-Polak, 2012a).

An extremely interesting phenomenon is that, over the last twenty years, what is referred to as *digital identity* of internet users has started to be created and subsequently developed. It contains information about a person (object) which computer systems use to identify them and validate their access rights. Such objects holding a digital identity can be people as well as organisations, applications or devices. The information which digital identities contain makes it possible to authenticate a user interacting with a system without human operators. Data concerning individuals and objects stored in computer systems are linked with their civil or national identity, and are often based on their online activity, including search history, date of birth, social or health insurance, and online shopping history (Olszewski, 2015). In a broader sense, digital identity is an aspect of a person's social identity, and enables computers and online networks to mediate in human relationships. By that means, people as a civilisation are shifting towards increasingly intense use of artificial intelligence, which many contemporaries consider a blessing, but which – when uncontrolled – may well become quite the opposite.

4. Consequences of the disintegration of human bonds – feeling of isolation and loneliness

Absence of dialogue, in its traditional understanding, triggers a sense of misunderstanding, loneliness, and alienation in relationships, and the main destroyer of understanding in marriage turns out to be the lack of genuine and sincere communication and presence. As Kotlarska-Michalska argues in her analysis (2001, p. 160), one of the main reasons for spousal loneliness is inadequate or insincere communication. In this respect, women complained about absence of conversation and support in daily chores, while men referred to absence of trust, sexual bond, and partnership. The changes pertaining to bonding in modern marriages and families, sometimes referred to as a family crisis or a lifestyle revolution, have triggered a massive and widespread phenomenon of deterioration and disintegration of close relationships. The general level of advancement of the ability to build intimate bonds has been declining, and partners are increasingly distant and isolated, which surfaced particularly in the times of the pandemic and social isolation. Shortage of time becomes an argument used to justify one's inability to seriously engage in close relationships.

The feeling of loneliness in marriage may be surprising, since studies report that satisfaction with a relationship is higher in married couples than in those who have formed non-marital relationships (Krok, 2019). Nevertheless, the non-fulfilment of intimacy and closeness related needs very often entails the feeling of loneliness in a close relationship (Kornaszewska-Polak, 2016). Standing by the partner *for better or for worse* has been an increasingly serious challenge in young people's relationships, as they are generally less and

less determined to sacrifice for the community, while the inclination towards self-improvement and self-actualisation is growing in dominance. On the other hand, numerous couples feel overburdened with mutual closeness, which pushes them towards emotional distancing perceived as a viable solution. However, prolonged avoidance of contact with the spouse may lead to alienation and isolation, the solution for which is becoming a non-marital relationship. It provides for the stability of the couple's functioning over a period of time, but when prolonged, it can cause the marriage to break down. Those who cheat more often are men (21%), although women also tend to be unfaithful (16%) (Izdebski, 2012).

The feelings of loneliness, rejection, being misunderstood, and isolation can build a profound distance between spouses. Those deprived of emotional closeness and intimacy described their romantic relationships as poor in terms of adequate communication, reciprocity in affection displaying, and marital happiness. What proved to be a particularly negative factor was the anxious attachment style, as it reduced the relationship satisfaction (Overall, Grime, Lemany, Hammond, 2014). A cross-cultural study on loneliness revealed a correlation between loneliness and marital status of respondents (Krys, Capaldi, Zelenski et al., 2019). Widowers were most likely to experience relationship deficiencies, while every fifth person who had divorced or separated was very likely to experience loneliness. And the persons found to be the least lonely among those surveyed were actually married couples. Loneliness and social isolation, regardless of age, gender, nationality, and presence of clinical disorders, triggered suicidal and parasuicidal thoughts and attempts. Men were at a higher risk of committing suicide, especially men in midlife crisis or over 60 years of age (Yousaf, Grunfeld, Hunter, 2015). In contrast, husbands were exposed to a lower risk than singles, divorcees, or widowers.

A surprising fact is that, living in the *age of communication*, when everyone can communicate with anyone else, people are less and less likely to feel understood, their pursuit of self-actualisation is less and less satisfactory, and relationships are becoming superficial and impermanent. Owing to the contemporary model of virtual communication, people have numerous contacts, acquaintances and *friends*, but these friendships are much less valuable and often fail to stand the test of time. The isolation and social distancing in the time of pandemic contribute to growing suspicion and sense of threat. What thrives on such grounds is hostility, while *hate speech* begins to dominate social discourse. "The sense of exclusion is often built on the belief of inequality between the parties to a discourse or marginalisation of one of them. Consequently, when shaping the area of social communication in democratic spirit, what one should take into account is the increasing transparency, accessibility, as well as symmetry and unambiguity of communication processes. Thus, the culture of dialogue appears to be an important issue. It makes people feel *included* in the exchange of standpoints, invited to take part in the discourse, and to

express their own views openly, without being anxious about any potential criticism at the same time" (Kornaszewska-Polak, 2014a, p. 95).

The secure attachment style, as confirmed in many studies, significantly affects the level of satisfaction derived from close relationships[11]. Spouses of secure attachment nature are characterised by high quality of life, commitment, interdependence, and low divorce rates (Kornaszewska-Polak, 2015, pp. 26-27). Secure attachment is one of the most important factors protecting people against difficulties and crises in adult life, including against problems associated with communication and resolving difficult situations.

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[11] List of studies, as per Kornaszewska-Polak, 2016, p. 515.

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