Revisiting Kenneth Gergen's 'argumentation from nowhere'

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Political campaigns frequently demonstrate an exceptionally poor quality of discussion and debate. Fractious in tone, our politicians, press and broadcast media all indulge in aggressive trashing of opponents' personalities, and the consequent focus on interpersonal clashes and conflicts presented as entertainment generates a lot of heat but very little light.

So it may be a good time to promote my continuing enthusiasm for variations on Kenneth Gergen's 'argumentation from nowhere'. Gergen's experiment, which I first discovered in 'Social Construction in Context' (2001), was derived as "an attempt to remove the grounds for either claiming assertions to be 'one's own', or for viewing counter-assertions as challenges to one's integrity".

Gergen and his team invited a wide variety of people to contribute entries to a discussion while setting aside their personal position. The were asked to generate as many arguments as possible for either side of a polarised debate, and then to develop possible criticisms of those views. After contributing their thoughts they were able to read all the other entries, and were subsequently invited to comment again with any new alternatives, or with possible rejoinders to the views already included.

"The result is a multiplex array of discourse surrounding the issue at stake, essentially a map of possible arguments, justifications, citations of evidence and the like, on both sides of the issue". Participants reported considerable learning and felt that the experiment helped them see the issue in more complex terms. "Of special significance, they indicate that it would be difficult to resolve the issue by simply declaring one side the winner".

I have since worked with discussions in many groups based on 'argumentation from nowhere' as an alternative to oppositional debates. Participants are asked to think of the widest possible range of stakeholders in the issue under discussion (and I think the best definition I ever heard of a stakeholder is 'anyone who might give a damn') generating as many views as possible that might be held by each stakeholder group. They are encouraged to consider why those views might matter to people, and what kinds of belief systems they might logically derive from, guided by the question: in what way might each of those views make perfect sense? I will usually add the aspiration that, at the end of the exercise, no-one at the table would be entirely certain of the current personal views of any of their fellow participants.

The outcome has usually been very productive as argument turns into exploration, and condemnation gives way to curiosity. People who were previously opponents can sometimes come up with ingenious supports and logics for arguments they earlier disagreed with, perhaps because the need to agree has been removed, or because the activity itself is an intriguing exercise in thinking. The result has generally been far more openness to alternatives, a much richer discourse to draw on, a greater acceptance of the complexity and ambiguity inherent in most debates, and an increase in sociality between both participating colleagues and and absent stakeholders.

As Gergen says of his experiment: "No, this did not mean a resolution of differences. However, it did allow for productive exploration to take place in a context in which victory and defeat were removed from view".

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