Elżbieta Wesołowska, Ph.D.
Social Science Department
Warmia and Mazury University in Olsztyn, Poland

THE PROCESSES OF OPINION DIVERGENCY CONSTRUCTION IN DELIBERATING GROUPS

ABSTRACT

Two goals were set out in this paper. The first of them was the explanation of social and psychological mechanisms of reaching an agreement in groups of people whose initial opinions were very different. The second goal was the diagnosis of possible antagonistic processes in such groups. The goals were achieved through the analysis of empirical data. The data included DVD recordings of focused group interviews with parents of school children who discussed the problem of sexual education at schools.

The theoretical framework of these analysis was the model of deliberation developed by Gutmann and Thompson. According to that model it is possible for a group of people to reach an agreement if they undertake the collective analysis of the problematic issue from a common good perspective under the conditions of equality, freedom and publicity. In the analytic process the disputants should openly articulate their claims and standpoints providing at the same time their justifications. While justifying they should try to apply their opponents categories of thinking (which is named as the “reciprocity principle”).

It was found out that the revealing of worldviews justifying the claims made in the debate may foster finding an agreement if the following conditions are met: (1) there exists at least some area of commonly shared opinions in the group which could serve as a starting point for agreement in other areas, (2) if the different worldviews articulated are not negatively evaluated or diminished by the audience, (3) the disputants try to argue in their opponents way of thinking. It also turned out that in the deliberative conditions other processes then the rational analysis of the controversy can take place and lead to finding an agreement. Among them were noticed: the actualization of any common social identity or remembering past experiences and emotions accompanying them.

Also made were some observations concerning the antagonistic processes. Namely, the analytical approach does not bring about bridging differences of opinions if the reciprocity rule is broken in communication. If the articulated worldviews are negatively evaluated by the audience, it results in escalation of conflict. The search may be fruitless if some participants believe that people of different worldviews should live in separation from each other instead of trying to understand the different perspectives.
The essence of the deliberative democracy boils down to the conviction that numerous controversies and conflicts of public sphere should be resolved by other means than voting, bargaining or a decision of arbitrary institutions. Moral controversies, values systems, worldviews or division of limited goods are among the controversies that should not be dealt with by the means of adversary democracy. In all such situations (as well as in some others) the recommended procedure of searching for a solution would be the deliberative debate.

Such a debate could be defined very briefly by distinguishing its procedural requirements such as: (1) equal status of the participants, (2) free access, (3) authentic and mutual exchange of opinions, proposals and their justifications, (4) decision making on the basis of “the power of the better argument” (Habermas 2005, Gutmann and Thompson 1996, Dryzek and Braithwaite 2000). The advocates of the deliberation viewpoint claim that this procedure of collective decision making brings numerous benefits when it comes to the quality of the final decision as well as the competences of particular participants and the social relationships among them (Neblo 2005).

The empirical research on various group discussions bring however mixed results. On one hand there are observations of the positive effects of deliberative discussion such as increase in legitimization and rationality of decision, a transformation of initial preferences of the participants towards more consensus among them and an increase in the sophistication of the participants political thinking, an increase in following civic activity of the participants (Gastil, Deess and Weiser 2002, Gastil and Dillard 1999, Dryzek and Braithwaite 2000, Gastil, Black and Moscovitz 2005). On the other hand there is research showing that the discussion which deserve to be named deliberative debates are very rare in the real world (Rosenberg 2005), that the group discussions may come to decisions very different from experts’ opinions and to conclusions which the participants come to regret later (Ryfe 2005a).
It also happens quite frequently that the debates turn to a chaotic exchange of views and even quarrels which lead to no conclusion at all and even the positions of the participants after the discussion becoming more diversified than ever before (Sulkin and Simon 2001, Sunstein 2002).

The ambiguous empirical observations may suggest that the group situation regulated by the requirements of the deliberative procedure, may have both constructive as well as destructive potential. The essence of this potential may possibly rely in psychological and social processes that are activated in discussion groups. Some of them are likely to lead to group synergy which results in agreement despite the initial differences of opinions while other processes increase the group antagonism.

Such social and psychological processes in some of the empirical studies on deliberation are treated as “the black box”. Namely, the situational context of the discussion is defined, for example, the rules which should be obeyed during the discussion are formulated for the participants. After the discussion its results (such as the group consensus or the attitudes of the participants) are evaluated. It is assumed that the discussion that took place was a deliberative debate at least to some extent and the main research focus is on the results of the debate. However, the fact that different outcomes can be observed under similarly defined conditions, may indicate that various social and psychological processes may have taken place.

There were efforts undertaken to capture the essence of the deliberative processes through coding the statements that were uttered in the discussion. This involved the analysis of the meaning, message, internal structure and logical relationship between the elements of all the statements in the discussion. The research team of Bächtiger, Spörndli, Steenbergen and Steiner (2005) developed a method of parliamentary debate coding. The categories for coding in this method are based on the theory of discourse by Jürgen Habermas. Such
methods of coding allow for the comparison of the real discussions with the assumptions of theoretical models of deliberation and on the basis of it assessing the quality of different debates. Afterwards, we can examine the conditions (situational or institutional contexts) in which the debates of “low” and “high” quality have taken place and analyze the consequences of such debates. This kind of research, however, does not allow for the answer to the question of how (by what means) is the agreement reached in a group of people who differ in their initial attitudes and preferences. It does not allow for recognizing the potential obstacles on the way to consensus.

On the grounds of social psychology there are descriptions and explanations of both destructive and constructive processes that can happen during the exchange of opinions and decision making in a group of people. As one example the “group think syndrome” can be mentioned. In this phenomenon a group of competent people makes a wrong decision as a result of a group dynamics domination over the aspiration to find a good solution to a problem. Another example can be the “public conformity effect” in which a person publicly presents a judgement or behavior compliant with a group norm, even though it is contradictory to a personal standard (Wojciszke 2002, Oyster 2000).

The above described phenomena, as well as many others, were observed by social psychologists under the group conditions very different from the procedure of the deliberative debate. There are no obvious descriptions of the possible processes of arriving at an agreement and potential obstacles in situations when the individuals participate in a discussion as equals, free from any external pressures and try collectively to consider a problematic issue with the perspective of ‘common good’ in mind. Some detailed theoretical models of what the deliberation should look like, were developed on the grounds of philosophy of politics.

The deliberative debate model.
One of the theoretical models of the deliberative debate between the persons holding different points of view was described by Amy Gutmann and Denis Thompson (1996). Their model is graphically presented in diagram 1.

INSERT DIAGRAM HERE

According to this model the deliberative debate is a procedure of searching for an agreement which can be characterized by the following requirements.

1. The individuals participate in a discussion free from any external pressures and their status in the debate is equal.
2. The participants try to find an agreement through the collective analysis of the controversial issue.
3. During the analysis the participants openly express their positions on the issue and set forth their proposals presenting their justifications.
4. While justifying the proposals the participants should obey two principles: the reciprocity principle and the publicity principle.
4A. Obeying the reciprocity principle the participants should refer to reasons and regulations which the other disputants are able to understand and possibly accept. This means that the deliberative justification of one’s own position should reject the opposite position as little as possible. In an ideal situation the presented justifications of one position should refer to the assumptions, norms and values accepted by the opposite side.
4B. The publicity principle relates to the assumption that the deliberative debate takes place in an open forum. The necessity to justify one’s preferences in public should induce the speakers to employ reasons which can potentially be accepted by a pluralistic audience. The principle imposes some limitations on the contents and the form of
argumentation. It excludes the use of any justifications which are discriminating, offensive or diminishing to the value of opposing points of view and their holders.

5. The deliberative search for agreement may involve the following processes:

5A. The consideration of a controversial issue from the ‘public good’ perspective. This means efforts to overcome the perspective of a particular interest of the involved sides and attempts to take the viewpoint of people whose interests and needs may not be represented in the ongoing debate.

5B. The disclosure of basic assumptions, convictions and values as well as concerns underlying the proposals.

6. The agreement can be reached through one of the following mechanisms:

6A. The first is the discovery of the preexisting similarity of the participants belief and value systems underlying the different articulated proposals.

6B. The second mechanism, called “the principle of economizing on moral disagreement”, consists in searching for an organizational solution or practice which can be accepted by individuals adhering to different worldviews and values. In practice it may mean that the participants try not to tackle each others deepest moral convictions if it is not crucial for finding a solution to a given problem.

6C. The third mechanism, called “the moral accommodation” involves such changes in the cognitive structures of the participants that admit the opposite moral stance as equally valid as one’s own. The opponents, maintaining the integrity of their own beliefs and values systems, continue the discussion in the search for spheres, where complete understanding between them is possible.

It should be noted that the above presented deliberation model can be described as moderate. There is also a more radical concept of a deliberative debate developed in the
discourse theory of Jürgen Habermas. The radicalism of the discourse theory is revealed in three aspects. First, according to Habermas, every set of beliefs and ideas can undergo a detailed examination in the discourse process (including the truthfulness of descriptive sentences and legitimacy of norms). Secondly, Habermas imposes very strict restrictions on the internal logic and rationality of all the discoursive statements and their exchanges. They should all be rational and consistent with the rules of logic. Thirdly, the philosopher expects a modification even in the participants' deepest belief systems as a result of the discourse (Szachaj 1990, Habermas 1999).

The model formulated by the philosophers presents one of the possible ways of coming to an agreement by the group. The basic question which comes to mind after analyzing the model is the following. Is the theoretical model achievable in practice? In other words, is it possible that individuals of divergent opinions will be able to reach an agreement if they engage in a discussion in appropriately arranged conditions, implementing the assumptions of the theoretical model? And if so, do all the assumptions of the model have to be implemented in order for the consensus to be reached? Perhaps some of the postulations are the indispensable conditions while others are only supportive conditions? Is the analytical approach involving the exchange of appropriate argumentation the only way to agreement? Perhaps there are some other ways of arriving at a consensus? Besides this, it is worth noticing that the existing state of knowledge lacks a theoretical model that would explain what kind of antagonistic processes may take place in the deliberating group and what kind of blockades or impediments can be expected on the way to agreement.

There are two goals of the present paper. The first of them is the explanation of the psychological and social mechanisms of arriving at a consensus in a group of people whose initial opinions are very divergent. The second aim is the diagnosis of the antagonistic processes in such a group of people. The frame of reference for the analysis will be the
theoretical model presented earlier. The empirical data for the analysis were gathered in the research project entitled “Psychological prerequisites and consequences of deliberative functioning in political groups” directed by Professor Janusz Reykowski of Institute of Psychology, Polish Academy of Sciences in Warsaw.

2.METHOD

2.1. The general outline of the project

Within the empirical project twenty focused group interviews with the parents of school children were conducted. The discussions were moderated by an appropriately pre-trained psychologist- called the facilitator. The topic of the discussions were the ways of conducting the subject sexual education in public schools. The topic was quite controversial because it touched the value systems of the parents. The experimental procedure implemented the following assumptions of the theoretical model of deliberation.

1. The precondition of freedom was warranted by voluntary participation in the discussion. The equal opportunities of participation were ensured by the basic rules of debating introduced by the facilitator. The facilitator also made sure that these rules were obeyed during the discussion. Namely, he intervened in the situations when the participants interrupted each other, excluded others from voicing personal opinion or spoke simultaneously.

2. The participants were encouraged to collectively analyze the controversial issue and to work out a common set of recommendations regarding sexual education in schools.

3. The participants were told that the recommendations should refer to all public schools in Poland. This was meant to incline the disputants to take the perspective of public good. Another piece of information given was that the recommendations
would be presented at the Ministry of Education. This was supposed to implement the publicity principle (which is one of the requirements of deliberation).

4. The rules of deliberation introduced by the facilitator required that the participants listened carefully to one another, treated each other with respect and avoided phrases that potentially could be insulting.

5. In some of the groups, the participants were additionally reminded that the aim of the discussion is “the collective comprehension of the problem and finding the most fair solution which would as far as possible consider divergent points of view”. The subjects were also asked to “try to understand in which respects their opinions differ and most of all what do they have in common”. The participants received the rules of the deliberation in writing in order to remind them during the course of the discussion. When a major difference of opinions appeared, the adversaries were asked to provide the justifications of their stances and propose a solution which could possibly be accepted by the opponents. The idea behind such a procedure was to induce the disputants to obey the reciprocity principle.

The discussions in all the groups were filmed and then transcribed. Before the discussions and soon afterwards, the participants filled out a set of questionnaires meant to measure their attitudes towards sexual education and some individual predispositions which could hypothetically influence their behavior during the deliberation. Among these predispositions the following were measured: the way of understanding the concept of democracy, the sense of self-efficacy and self-esteem. On the whole 195 parents, divided into twenty groups took part in this part of the research. There were six to thirteen people in each group.
In order to explain the mechanisms of consensus seeking, among the twenty discussion groups three groups with the largest differences of opinions were selected. The differences appeared in the questionnaires of attitudes to sexual behavior administered before the discussions. The standard deviations of these attitudes in the three groups of parents selected for further analysis was equal to analogous indicators in groups of politicians of extremely opposite political parties in terms of ideologies (such as extreme right and extreme left). Such groups of politicians took part in the further stages of the empirical project. The three groups of parents very diversified with respect to their views on sexual education, did not differ significantly in any other individual characteristics of the participants which were captured in the initial questionnaires. One way analysis of variance (ANOVAs) were performed and none of them showed differences of statistical significance.

The three parent groups of the most divergent initial attitudes reached very different final outcomes after the discussion. In one of them no consensus was reached at all. Two versions of the sexual education program were prepared: one based on the values of the Catholic Church and the other one based on lay worldview. In further analysis the group will be referred to as “antagonistic”. In the second group some common recommendations concerning some of the discussed issues (but not all of them) were worked out. This group will be called “the group with partial agreement”. In the last group one set of common recommendations was formulated and this is why the group will be called “consensual”. For the lack of space only two of these groups will be presented in this paper in detail.

2.2. The analysis of empirical data

The units of analysis of discussions were exchanges of statements. The focus was on statements that were in accordance with the assumptions of theoretical models of deliberation and on the statements which meaning or form contradicted the principles set by the model. Particular attention was put on these moments of the discussion when the divergences of
opinions appeared and the disputants attempted to find a common stance. Therefore, the following questions were analyzed.

- The manner of presenting the disputants stances and their justifications with a particular attention paid to the adherence to the reciprocity principle.

- The manner of searching for an agreement and in particular:
  - the attempts to analyze the controversial issue,
  - the cases of taking the common good perspective,
  - the cases of revealing the believes and values underlying the proposals,
  - other kinds of endeavors and actions which are not described in the theoretical model.

Besides the processes of searching for an agreement, also the outcomes of these were studied. The outcomes were studied in the context of the revealed differences of opinions. Namely, the points of interest were the following:

- Was there any discovery of the existing similarity of opinions and if so in what sphere did it happen?
- What kinds of organizational solutions were adopted by the disputants despite the existence among them of differences in value systems?
- Whether the recommendation included opposite worldviews on the basis of their equal status, and if so, in what sphere did the accommodation occur?
- Did the group reach any kind of agreement other then the one predicted by the model?

The analysis of the groups functioning in the terms of the theoretical model will be presented in the next section. It was assumed that in all the groups the initial and necessary
preconditions of freedom and equal opportunities of participation as well as the attempts to collectively solve the problem were fulfilled.

3. CASE STUDIES

THE ANTAGONISTIC GROUP

The group consisted of three men and three women, all of whom were at the age of 29-47 with a secondary education. The main controversies of the discussion revolved around values which should constitute the basis of sexual education at schools. One of the most active participants (person identified with [E]), believed that the sex-education should be rooted in the values of the Catholic Church. His major opponent (person [D]) expressed support for liberal values. The other participants presented worldviews located in between these two extremes. The difference of value systems surfaced in the participants stances on other issues such as: (1) the general view of human sexuality, (2) the accordance between the school program for children and the parents values, and (3) the way of presenting the topics of contraception and abortion. Person [E] maintained that, the Catholic Church point of view on sexuality should be presented at schools and the program of sex-education should be compliant with the parents values. He was also convinced that the contraception should be presented as a sin and the abortion as the murder of an unborn human being. His opponents opted for the very detailed presentation of the physiology of the sexual life and for universal school curriculum for all the children regardless of their parents’ values. They also wanted to present all the medical details of contraception and to inform the students that abortion is permissible in some cases.

Besides the major controversies revolving around different value systems, there were also differences of opinions not directly related to the topic of the discussion. They concerned the evaluation of the former socialist political system in Poland, the proper ways of...
up children and the quality of public education. On all of these issues, the person [E] held the opposite point of view from the rest of the group. The religious values advocate was very critical in evaluating Poland’s former political system and very positive about the present opportunities to make individual choices in many spheres of life under the democratic system. His opponents pointed to the shortcomings of the present economic situation such as the high unemployment rate as an example. [E] was in favor of a very strict parental control over the youth while others preferred more liberal upbringing. [E] was very skeptical about the Polish educational system and his opponents were convinced that “professionals” can work out a good teaching curriculum which can be implemented at public schools with success.

The manner of presenting the main stances and their justifications.

The reciprocity principle. The activist [E] in his very first statement in the discussion presented his stance in the peremptory, uncompromising manner and was disrespectful of the reciprocity principle: „[0’04’07] [E] (...) I would request from school (... ) and not only request but simply demand that teachers should present the human sexuality from the Catholic Church perspective (...) Otherwise I would not allow for any other kind of teaching (...)”. In his further statements [E] used uncompromising formulations such as “demand” and “reject”. Contradictory to the reciprocity principle also was his expectation that the other disputants should accept the Catholic Church perspective as the only guidance of their children’s education. The other participants neither broke nor obeyed the reciprocity principle. They tried to persuade others to their own point of view without adopting the opponents perspective.

The ways of searching for an agreement and their outcomes.

The analytical approach. There were attempts in the antagonistic group to solve the major controversy through the analysis of the opposite stance. The protagonist of Catholic values, observing that his conception of sexual education was not accepted by the other
participants, asked them to clarify their conception: “[16’19] [E] What would you like Your children to know about the sexual life? And what for?” It turned out that the main opponents hold diametrically different views on sexuality: for [E] the sexual life should start only after marriage whereas for [D] sex was a “natural physiological drive” which can be satisfied in circumstances limited only by partners mutual consent. The disclosure of such a basic difference of opinions turned to an exchange of negative and insulting comments towards the opponents and their worldviews.

The common good perspective. The person [E] making his claims concerning sexual education program, stressed the perspective of his own children: “I care first of all about the good of my own children”. When the opponents pointed to the group task which was preparing the common recommendations for all public schools in Poland, [E] expressed his opinion “everyone should have the right to bring up his/her own children the way s/he considers right and nobody else should interfere”.

The disclosure of the basic believes. The participants adhering to opposite value systems expressed openly their basic convictions and values underlying the claims they made concerning the sexual education program. The person [E] requested that the Catholic Church perspective and values should be presented: „[0’47’14] [E] I believe and that is what I teach to my children- the abortion is a murder of an unborn human being. Contraception is a sin. I want the teachers at school to teach the same.” The other persons were in favor of conveying comprehensive and multi-facited information on all aspects and consequences of sexual life. The extremely antithetical opinions were openly articulated. After the participants were unable to find any compromise they resorted to personal insults and started to diminish the value of worldviews different then they own.

Other ways of searching for an agreement. After the analytical approach revealed the fundamental differences of worldview, the disputants adopted two other attempts at
solving the controversy. The first of them was the proposal made by the person [E] that the parents should decide whether their child would attend the class on sexual education or not. He also suggested that in the cases of discrepancy between the parents values and the school curriculum, the parents should have the right to withdraw their offspring from the class. This suggestion was rejected by the group. They pointed to the benefits of teaching sex-education by a well-prepared professional and indicated the need to counterbalance the vulgar information presented sometimes by the mass-media and the peers within school education.

The second attempt of arriving at common recommendations can be classified as a specific sort of persuasion. The person [E] first articulated his own stance on the discussed issue and having done this he encouraged the opponents to express their opinions. When he heard the arguments undermining legitimacy of his point of view - he attacked them with very rough and offensive words. The attacked adversaries at first tried to avoid the discussion. Nevertheless, the discussed issues turned out to be so loaded with emotions that finally all the participants engaged in a fierce exchange of words. Noone managed to persuade the opponents and no shared recommendations were made.

The way of dealing with the differences of opinions that was initiated by [E] in the first part of the discussion became the model for the later phase in which the group was meant to decide how to present the problem of pedophilia. When the person [E] did not take part in the discussion, now his opponents encouraged him to voice his opinion. When he declared that he had no clear idea how to present the problem for school children, the adversaries reacted with disapproval: “[D] how come You do not know what pedophilia is and that is a big harm to children?”. [E] tried to clarify the misunderstanding: “I know what pedophilia is, but I do not know the psychological structure of a young person, and I have no idea how to pass the knowledge without confusing and scaring the youngsters. I would gladly hear Your
opinion”. Despite the clarification the opponents still behaved as if they heard [E] expressing a concrete suggestion: they presented counterarguments and tried to persuade [E].

**The achieved agreements.** The antagonistic group did not reach any agreements on any of the discussed issues. The recommendations they decided to write down included projects of two alternative versions of sexual education program: one based on Catholic Church values and the other one based on more liberal values. At the end the participants expressed their disappointment with the way the discussion went and with such a solution: [0'46'16][D]: “It makes no sense to discuss any longer, we will not reach any agreement any way”.

**THE GROUP WITH A PARTIAL AGREEMENT**

The group consisted of eight women aged 29 to 47. Five of them had a secondary education and three- higher education. **The main controversies** were brought to light in the later part of the discussion. During the first twenty minutes of the discussion the participants expressed quite similar views that the sexual life should be presented in the context of love and good interpersonal relationships. They also seemed to agree that some introduction to sex education could be introduced as early as the first grades of elementary schools. The facilitator noticed the similarity of opinions and asked the group to dictate common recommendations. However, in the meantime it turned out that the two main activists (persons [E] and [B]) differed very much when it comes to the values which should constitute the basis of the teaching. [E] was in favor of the praxis in some schools where the topics of family and sexual life are touched on during the religion class. According to [B] sexual education should be taught independently of religion.

In the further parts of the discussion it turned out that persons [E] and [B] hold different views on values and ideas that should be presented to children in the education process and the role of school in this process. This turned out to be the crucial clash of
worldviews in which all the other controversies in this group originated. The person [E] thought that the main responsibility for a child’s upbringing relies on their parents and it is their job to shape the children’s proper attitudes about sexual life. She insisted that the school’s influence on children should be in accordance with the parent’s worldviews. The second of the main activists held the opinion that the school should be neutral and pass the knowledge that has been scientifically proven. In her opinion, schools should inform about the facts without evaluating them and should not induce any values. She supported the universal school curriculum which would allow for compensation of possible deficits in the home education.

After the discrepancy of the basic beliefs was revealed, the proponent of the family education ([E]) requested that the parents be guaranteed the possibility to influence over the curriculum and have the ability to decide who was going to teach the subject. The person [E] proposed that in the cases of discrepancy between the school program and the parental values, the parents should have the right to withdraw their children from the classes about sexual education. Having stated that, [E] proposed some postponing in introducing the sexual education to schools for children between the ages of eleven and thirteen.

The person [B], the advocate of compensational function of the school, proposed that sexual education in schools should begin with the first grade of elementary school and the uniform curriculum should be obligatory for all the children. She objected that the teaching of sexual education was based on religious values. In her opinion the public school should remain neutral.

**The manner of presenting the main stances and their justifications.**

**The reciprocity principle.** The only case of argumentation referring to the opponents’ convictions took place during solving the difference of opinions on the function of the family and the school in upbringing children. [B] tried to refer to her opponent’s ([E]) earlier
statement. It did not bring any noticeable results, because [B] misunderstood [E]’s point of view. While dealing with this discrepancy there was also a violation of the reciprocity principle. Namely, one of the disputants described her vision of school as “the only correct way”.

Despite the more and more visible discrepancy of opinions, no one used offensive, insulting expressions directed against other participants and their opinions. Only civilized, polite terms were used. In most of the cases the participants voiced their opinions in moderate and sometimes indirect ways. For example, the persons who would willingly accept sexual education based on the Catholic Church teaching, put their expectations in a indirect way. For example they quoted the abstract example of schools where such a solution is adopted or took the perspective of an hypothetical person attached to this set of values. Also some of the objections to other people’s proposals were voiced in a meandering way such as: “well I don’t know”, “yes, but…” and only from the context of the further statements one could infer that the speaker did not agree with her predecessor.

The ways of searching for an agreement and their outcomes.

The analytical approach. There were a few attempts of analyzing the different standpoint. For example, the proponent of late introduction of sexual education to schools [E] asked her adversary [B] for clarification of her point: “So what do You think the children in the forth grade should be taught in their sexual education class?” Since the person [B] did not answer the question, [E] continued to present her own opinion. [B] started a counterargument with [E]’s point of view. The exchange of argumentation did not lead to any settlements.

Other attempts of closer examination of a opposite point of view were undertaken during the polemics of the group majority with the disputant [E]’s stance that the sexual education at school should be done in accordance with the parents’ values. The group wanted
to know how [E] would imagine implementing in real life her postulate of parental control over the topics covered at school. [E] did not answer the group’s questions.

The analytical approach to the controversial issue was encouraged by the facilitator who asked the opponents to clarify what topics of sexual education should be taught to younger children and what should be taught to older children. When [B] presented her conception, [E] objected it, claiming that what [B] perceives as the school topics should be passed on at home.

**The common good perspective** was taken by the person’s [F] in her postulate that the teacher should be “well informed on all religions so that he could reach all the children”. The person [E] objected such a perspective saying: “I do not think that the school should substitute parents in sexual education”.

**The disclosure of the basic believes.** The justifications of the claims made by one of the main activists ([E]) were very general and abstract. For example, she postulated that the sexual education should be “consistent with some values” but she did not specify what values she had in mind. She wanted the teacher to have “the right moral attitude”, but did not explain what convictions should be at the core of such an attitude. The other activist ([B]) directly and openly presented her views.

**Other ways of searching for an agreement.** One attempt to find agreement on the crucial controversy (concerning the relationship between the school and family in education) relied on making suggestions of how to select a proper teacher for the subject. The opponents [E] and [B] formulated conditions that a teacher should fulfill. They both agreed that the quality and contents of education depends very much on the qualifications, skills and attitudes of the teachers. They both tried to bring about the selection of such a person who would teach the subject according to their own conception. The person [B] aimed at a situation in which a neutral school would convey information without evaluating it. The person [E] wanted to
guarantee a situation in which the parents could control the issues that were taught at school in accordance with their values. To achieve this she proposed that the parents meet the potential teacher and the curriculum and decide whether they would agree to the curriculum. [E]’s standpoint remained unchanged until the end of the discussion. She repeated it many times as her only answer to other participants questions and objections.

The achieved agreements. The participants coped with their worldviews discrepancy through working out a set of requirements which should be fulfilled by the potential teacher. It included the postulates of both adversaries. The group did not reach any consensus as to whether there should be any formal acceptance of the teacher by the parents and what should be done if the teacher was not accepted by the parents. [B] thought that the subject should be obligatory for all the children, and [E] believed that parents should have the right to withdraw their children from the class if they did not accept either the teacher or the topics.

The participants discovered that they had similar opinions on the issue that teaching about contraception should start with presenting sexual life as a consequence of mutual love and respect. However, despite a lengthy exchange of opinions and despite the facilitator’s efforts to encourage the analytical approach, the group did not work out the common recommendations of how the sex education class would be organized.

4. THE DISCUSSION OF CASE STUDIES

How can the question about the possible mechanisms of reaching a consensus in a deliberating groups considering the empirical data be answered? The basic conditions of the deliberation (namely the equality, freedom and collective attempts to solve the problem) were realized through the experimental procedure. However, in the same initial conditions, each of the three groups functioned in a different way and arrived at a different conclusions. The individual dispositions of the participants could not be blamed because no differences of
The course of events in the antagonistic group turned out to be the implementation of fears voiced by the deliberation critics. They warn that the deliberation may uncover the fundamental discrepancies of opinions and result in the escalation of the conflict between disputants (see Shapiro 1999 and 2002). One example of this was the antagonistic group. Both the person strongly attached to the religious values and his opponents openly articulated their worldviews. They formulated their claims in a uncompromising way. The attempts of collective analysis of the controversial issues revealed the existence of further differences of opinions on all the issues that were tackled. There were also other non-analytical attempts of finding a common ground. Each side tried to persuade the other that their own point of view was correct while all other views were wrong. The conflict turned out to be intractable within the rules set up in this group. Two mutually exclusive programs of sexual education were prepared.

The complete opposite of the antagonistic group was the consensual group. The differences in the two groups’ functioning were noticeable from the very beginning. While in the antagonistic group the discussion started from the categorical declaration of one of the stances, in the consensual group – the starting point was the actualization of the more general social category (namely “we-mothers”). All the participants in the consensual group were women and they felt that they belonged in this category despite holding different views on the discussed issues. After the common social identity was quoted there were no clashes of
opposite worldviews in this group. All the standpoints and proposals were presented in a mild manner.

The solution worked out in the consensual group was the example of two mechanisms described by the theoretical model. The first of them was the discovery of the existing similarity of opinions in some areas. The second was the accommodation of different views: both religious and laic perspective of contraception were included as equally legitimate in the sexual education program. However, the solution was worked out through different processes than those described in the theoretical model. The positive outcomes of the reciprocity principle and its helpful application in reaching the consensus were observed. But the rational analysis of the problem was not the main mode of searching for a solution. In the discussion of the major controversies the common experiences of the participants and emotions accompanying them were quoted. These experiences and emotions were communicated through story telling. Through these stories the participants conveyed their knowledge, feelings and convictions in an easy to understand and memorable way (Trzebiński 2002). Such a mode of searching for an agreement could be described as empathy and experience sharing.

The functioning of the third group (the one with the partial agreement) was in between the extremes set by the antagonistic group and the consensual group. In the first stage of the discussion in this group both some similarities and some differences of opinions were expressed, but the participants did not take advantage of the reciprocity principle in situations of differing opinions. The analytical approach was not applied either because there were disturbances in the communication process which could potentially lead to the common analysis of the problem. Such disturbances were observed in the consensual group a few times. When one of the speakers asked another for explanation or clarification she did not receive it. The disturbances were caused by both of the activists defending different stances.
The group with a partial agreement managed to find a consensus in one of the fundamental controversies. The adversaries started from the presumption they all agreed that quality of education depends on the qualifications of the teachers. Beginning from that starting point they worked out a very detailed procedure of teacher selection which would result in implementing the appropriate vision of public education. In other words, the group was looking for an organizational solution which could possibly be accepted by people of different worldviews without discussing the details of these worldviews. Such a procedure could be an example of “economizing on moral disagreement” mechanism as described in the theoretical model.

Summing up briefly the observations of the way the three groups functioned, it can be stated that they realized to different extents the assumptions of the theoretical model. The example of the antagonistic group showed that the analytical approach does not lead to an agreement if the reciprocity principle is broken. It also demonstrated the escalation of conflict in the situation when the disputants who reveal their basic believes are negatively evaluated and attacked by their adversaries. In such a situation it is unlikely that any agreement would be reached.

The examples of the antagonistic group and the group with a partial agreement both illustrate how fruitless is the search for widespread and universal recommendations when such a general goal contradicts individual participant’s basic convictions. In both of the groups one of the activists believed that there was no need to coordinate the divergent perspectives and that if people happen to have different worldviews the best solution would be to organize the public sphere in such a way that everyone could live according to his/her values in separation from people of different views. Such a separation could be done for example by the means of alternative school programs or by parental control over the school curriculum.
If we compare the consensual group on one hand and the other two groups on the other, we can see how different the outcomes of the basic beliefs explication can be. The disclosure of such beliefs can be helpful in finding an agreement if the following conditions are met. First, there is at least some common ground between the adversaries which could be used as the starting point for searching for compromise in other spheres. Secondly, the disclosed different worldviews are not critically evaluated nor diminished. Thirdly, the participants try to argue in their opponents’ categories of thinking (try to apply the reciprocity principle). The first two of these conditions were met in the group with the partial agreement. All of them were met in the consensual group.

The main stream theories of deliberation suppress the function of emotion in the decision making process. If emotions are taken into account, it is done in the context of eliminating their negative impact and striving for as much rationality as possible (see Hoggett and Thompson 2002). The example of the consensual group indicates that rational analysis is not the only way to agreement.

5. SUMMARY

The empirical data presented in this paper can be the starting point for the verification of the theoretical model formed on the ground of political philosophy. Stating this briefly, the theoretical construction seems to be feasible in practice. It is possible that if the “average” “made of flesh and blood” citizens take part in the appropriately moderated discussion, they may reach the agreement according to one of the mechanisms described in the model.

It has to be said, that none of the studied cases was a pure exemplification of the theoretical model. In each of the groups there were some non-accomplishments of the theoretical assumptions. But on the other hand, the reality appeared to be richer in the potential of finding the agreement then the predictions of the model.
One example indicates what an important function can have the actualization of the common social identity in the group (see Turner and Pratkanis). It turned out that the narrative mode of communication in which the values, experience and the knowledge are passed in the form of story telling could lead to an agreement. So then, the effective deliberation does not have to be the exchange of rational argumentation. The analysis presented here as well as some other works (for example Ryfe 2002) indicate that in some situations when the disputants’ values differ, it may be helpful to establish positive interpersonal relationships between them and refer to their common experience.

Besides the contribution to the explanation of the group synergy processes, the empirical data also provides some clues on the antagonistic processes. It was witnessed that the violation of the deliberation requirements of respect and reciprocity evidently leads to the escalation of divergences. It was also observed that the collective analysis of the controversial issue with open articulation of the opponents’ basis believes, led to the disclosure of the fundamental differences in worldviews. In such situations two strategies escalating the group antagonism seemed to be plausible.

The first of these strategies relied on attempts to prove that the opponent’s moral views were wrong. In one of the presented cases such attempts included two operations: first “disclosing” the opponent’s views and then “attacking” them. The disclosure was done by articulating one’s own opinion on a given issue and then asking the opponents what they thought. After the opposite views were articulated the person who employed the described strategy attacked them with very insulting and discrediting terms. It could be seen how the strategy of attacking opposite views used by one person was easily teachable to other participants. The individuals whose views were attacked in the first part of the discussion retaliated the attacker later.
The second antagonistic strategy could be described as “blocking”. The person who employed this strategy did not allow any group settlements that were not in line with her own views to be written down. These strategy can be described in short: “if we do not accept the solution that I think is right we will not write down anything else”.

The information presented in this paper may give the impression that we learned more about the antagonistic potential of the deliberating groups then about the possibilities for group synergy. In the case studies described here we observed mainly emotional and social identity processes that led to group synergy. We did not observe here as much about the rational and cognitive processes that may help the group synergy. The paper presented only three out of twenty research groups selected on the basis of the largest initial opinions’ discrepancy. To complete the picture of the synergy processes it is worth to mention some phenomenon that was more vivid in the other groups not presented here. It can be described using Sunstain’s term (1998) as “incompletely theorized agreement”. In that phenomenon a group of people can reach consensus as to a given judgement or verdict without agreeing on the theoretical justifications of this judgement.

There are two possible variants of this way of reaching a consensus. The first of them is concretization and the other one is abstraction. Concretization relies in finding an organizational solution which could be accepted by the disputants of different worldviews even though they justify it with different rationales. In the other research groups (which analysis are presented elsewhere) the exemplifications of both kinds of such agreements were observed. For example, in one of the groups the parents agreed that the school should discourage the youth to use chemical contraception justifying this with very different reasons. Some parents indicated the health risks of using such chemicals while others pointed that it contradicts the Catholic Church teaching.
The case of solving a controversy through abstracting and finding such a general value or norm which could be accepted by the advocates of different organizational solutions was also observed. Namely, the proponents of different visions of sexual education at schools, accepted the general values of the freedom of individual choice and equal access to information. This group of people worked out a sexual education program which would present the issues both from the perspective of Catholic Church and from a more liberal perspective adding a clause that it would be a “non-obligatory (optional)” subject that the pupils could choose if they were interested and if they parents agreed.


Rosenberg, S.W. (2003). Reason, communicative competence and democratic
deliberation: do citizens have the capacities to effectively participate in deliberative decision-making? Typescript.


1. CONDITIONS OF EQUALITY AND FREEDOM

2. THE COLLECTIVE ANALYSIS OF CONTROVERSIAL ISSUE

4A. ECIPROCITY PRINCIPLE  
3. PRESENTATION OF CLAIMS WITH JUSTIFICATIONS  
4B. PUBLICITY PRINCIPLE

5. THE SEARCH FOR AN AGREEMENT:
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   5B. THE DISCLOSURE OF BASIC ASSUMPTIONS

6A. FINDING AN EXISTING SIMILARITY OF OPINIONS  
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6C. MORAL ACCOMODATION
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