

Lesson 10: Logical fallacy literacy

Key ideas:

- (1) Logical fallacies are instances of deceptive or specious reasoning that make weak arguments appear to be superficially attractive. They are sleights of hand that attempt to divert attention from the core issue to irrelevant considerations.
- (2) There are hundreds of logical fallacies that have been cataloged, but this lesson will focus on those that some politicians and disinformation specialists often employ, including argumentum ad hominem, the straw man fallacy, and the argument from pity.
- (3) One is only successful with this strategy of confronting logical fallacies if the proponents are willing to engage in rational discourse, although the fact that they are using them is likely to indicate that this would not be the course. However, one can point out the nature of the fallacy to third-party observers.
- (4) A given argument can entail more than one fallacy.

A fallacy has two general meanings: (1) a false or erroneous statement, something that is untrue, and (2) deceptive or specious reasoning. Logical fallacies fall into the latter category because they are attempts to weaken one's opponent's arguments by trying to deflect attention away from the content of the argument to irrelevant issues. Fallacious arguments can be quite persuasive, at least to the casual reader or listener. One can find dozens of examples of fallacious reasoning in newspapers, advertisements, and all through political rhetoric, whether of a liberal or a conservative stripe. Mastering the recognition of or understanding logical fallacies provides a rhetorical advantage in being able to deflect the intended effect of fallacies, to deceive and misdirect.

There are hundreds of logical fallacies, as given in such compendiums as Bo Bennett's *The Ultimate Collection of over Three Hundred Logical Fallacies* (2019)

(<https://www.logicallyfallacious.com/tools/lp/Bo/LogicalFallacies/205/What-is-a-Logical-Fallacy-Exactly>). For illustrations, we will sketch a few cases of them, but others can be included in an elaborated lesson.

The *argumentum ad hominem*, an argument against the person. This fallacy occurs when one attacks the character of the person advancing the argument, rather than addressing or refuting the argument itself. It moves the discussion from issues to personalities or characteristics of one's opponent. Demolishing an argument by attacking the opponent's motives, background, or personal traits is an *ad hominem* attack. This is a fallacy because the only way to address an issue is with reasons or evidence with regard to claims of the person advancing the argument, not comments about their character. It is perhaps the most heavily used logical fallacy in Trump's arsenal of fallacies. Some of Trump's early advertisements attacked Hillary Clinton's health instead of her policies: "Hillary Clinton doesn't have the fortitude, strength or stamina to lead in our world. She failed as Secretary of State. Don't let her fail us again" (Beckwith, 2016). *The New York Times* has kept track of the victims of Trump's *ad hominem* tweets, which are mostly examples of name-calling, and it publishes these in an ongoing list (Lee & Quealy, 2019 - started in 2016, but current – as of May 2019, 598 persons).

The straw man fallacy. This fallacy occurs when one distorts the opponent's position and frames it into easily refutable terms. By criticizing this distortion, the fallacy maker claims victory over the opponent, whose original argument was quite different. Trump claimed that "Hillary Clinton wants to take your

guns away, and she wants to abolish the Second Amendment!” While she advocated for gun control, she never has suggested that she wants to eliminate guns. The NRA produced an ad called “Don’t Let Hillary Clinton Leave You Defenseless,” which depicts a woman who is alone at night when her house is breached. She reaches for her gun, but Hillary and her Supreme Justices have taken gun rights away, so there is no gun. Because it takes too long for the police to arrive, the woman becomes a victim for the reason that she could not defend herself (Dumenco, 2016).

Appeal to Pity (*ad misericordiam*). Donald Trump has repeatedly claimed that no president in history has been treated worse than him, ever. For example, at the commencement ceremony for the U.S. Coast Guard Academy, he said: “No politician in history, and I say this with great surety, has been treated worse or more unfairly” (Nakamura, 2017). On one level, that may be true, but he seems to be unaware that it is the result of his actions, policies, appointments and administration.

A given case can illustrate more than one logical fallacy. Responding to Ilhan Omar’s supposedly “anti-Semitic” tweet about Israel, Sarah Huckabee Sanders, one of the White House press secretaries under Trump, defended President Trump’s assertion that the Democratic Party has become “anti-Israel” and “anti-Jewish”:

The president has been an unwavering and committed ally to Israel and the Jewish people, and frankly the remarks that have been made by a number of Democrats and failed to be called out by Democratic leadership is frankly abhorrent, and it’s sad, and it’s something that should be called by name. (Moore, 2019)

This assertion could be seen as a Red Herring fallacy. It involves drawing attention to irrelevant points, changing the subject or dodging the issue. “Red Herring” is a hunting term that refers to dragging a herring on the hunting course to lead the hounds away from the pursuit of the prey. Sanders does not discuss the issue of the Democratic party being anti-Jewish; instead, she talks about how Trump supports the Jewish people. That fact may or may not be true, but it has nothing to do about the stance of the Democratic party.

Sanders’s remarks also exemplify the Hasty Generalization (or Jumping to a Conclusion) fallacy. That is, it is drawn from inadequate evidence. Sanders indicates that remarks by some Democrats such as Ilhan Omar must mean that all Democrats are anti-Semitic.

Sanders’s remarks can also be seen as instances of Begging the Question or Circular Reasoning. That is, something is assumed to be true that has yet to be established or demonstrated. In this case, she implies that because Democrats failed to challenge those statements, they must be anti-Semitic. Thus, she proves something not with evidence but with a lack thereof.

While Trump frequently engages in psychological projection, a psychological process in which persons defend themselves against their own unconscious qualities or impulses by denying their occurrence in themselves while projecting them onto others. For example, he portrays himself as a man of the people, while arguing that Hillary Clinton was the embodiment of special interests, when, in fact, it is more the case with him. He accuses others, such as the Clintons of running a criminal foundation, while denying it in his foundation (which the New York Attorney General had pressured to dissolve because of a “shocking pattern of illegality” (Goldmacher, 2018)). Any news with which he disagrees he deems as fake news, where his assertions are

often examples of fake news. The Daily Kos characterizes his projection issues as a Projection Derangement Syndrome, which has the following characteristics:

- The behavior and traits of the subject are perceived as being in someone else.
- The behavior and traits exist in the subject to an extreme degree
- The other person accused of the behavior barely manifests these traits or behaviors, if at all.
- The subject has no awareness he has the behavior or traits he sees in others.
- This projection frequently causes great harm to self or others.
- This pattern of projection is pervasive and persistent (Dreyfus, 2019).

It seems that this process, typical to many politicians and their rhetoric, is not simply psychological but fallacious as well. Such projections can be seen either a form of *tu quoque* argument or the kettle-calling-the-pot black argument (E.g., you are a fine one telling me not to cheat on my income tax, you do it all the time), though in this case, the politician seems unconscious of his own flaws; or a red herring argument in which one draws attention to irrelevant points, changes the subject or dodges the issue. Rather than confronting his own racist rhetoric, Trump accuses Democrats of being racists.

Exercise suggestions will call on participants to consider the following questions:

Using a guide such as Lily Lou's *Spot the Flaw in a Politician's Argument With This Guide to Logical Fallacies* (2017), <https://lifehacker.com/spot-the-flaw-in-a-politicians-argument-with-this-guide-1796333209> or Bo Bennett's *The Ultimate Collection of over Three Hundred Logical Fallacies* <https://www.logicallyfallacious.com/tools/lp/Bo/LogicalFallacies/205/What-is-a-Logical-Fallacy-Exactly>, can you find specific cases of logical fallacies in advertisements, in political speeches or on the Internet, and explain why each instance is a specific case of one or more logical fallacies