ISSA Proceedings 1998 – The Effects Of Dialectical Fallacies In Interpersonal And Small Group Discussions: Empirical Evidence For The Pragma-Dialectical Approach

1. Introduction

Since Brockriede (1975) and O'Keefe (1977) publicly recognized the importance of studying arguments as they are made in the context of everyday discourse (O'Keefe's argument2), argumentation scholars have been increasingly interested in studying the phenomenon in terms of its value as a communication activity rather than a logical exercise. Rhetoricians have long been interested in the function of argumentation in persuading an audience but it has only been recently that argumentation scholars have taken up the task of examining how patterns of reason giving are created and used by those involved in everyday conversation. Scholars such as Jackson & Jacobs (1980), Trapp (1983), Walton (1992), and van Eemeren and his colleagues (e.g., van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1992; van Eemeren, Grootendorst, Jackson, & Jacobs, 1993) have extended the study of argumentation from the study of formal and informal logic structures to the study of the ways in which arguments function in resolving disputational communication.

One of the first and most productive lines of inquiry regarding the study of argumentation as it occurs in discourse has been the pragma-dialectical approach originating with van Eemeren & Grootendorst (1992). The pragma-dialectical (PD) perspective extends the traditional normative logical approach of evaluating arguments by creating standards for reasonableness that have a functional rather than a structural focus. An argument is evaluated in terms of its usefulness in moving a critical discussion toward a well reasoned resolution rather than concentrating exclusively on the relationship of premises to conclusions. The PD approach recognizes the importance of normative standards for judging the

strength or cogency of single argumentative acts but in addition recognizes that arguments are constructed in order to achieve a communicative goal.
As evaluative criteria for the quality of arguments, the PD posits several normative guidelines for how communication in resolving or managing a dispute should proceed. While several argumentation scholars have elaborated, extended, or some way adopted portions of PD (e.g., Walton, 1992; Weger & Jacobs, 1995), there has been little direct empirical research seeking to verify that the violation of the kinds of discussion rules identified by van Eemeren & Grootendorst (1992) indeed causes problems in the management of disagreements. The purpose of this essay is to examine empirical research in interpersonal and small group argument in order to discover what harms, if any, result from the violation of rules for critical discussion. The essay will begin by examining the effects of following and violating discussions rules on the ability to resolve disputes and the quality of the decisions that result. The next section of the essay will examine the interpersonal and relational outcomes that are associated with following or violating discussion rules as articulated by van Eemeren and his associates.

In Argumentation, Communication and Fallacies, van Eemeren & Grootendorst (1992) lay the foundation for the pragmadialectical approach to argumentation study. They begin by arguing that the standard treatment of argumentation and fallacies either ignores the communicative functions in favor of examining reason/claim relationships or abandon entirely normative standards of evaluation in favor of examining whether the argument achieves the goal of gaining the acceptance of an audience. The traditional logical approach evaluates arguments based on decontextualized, abstract structural features of arguments that are applied across situations. The rhetorical perspective, on the other hand, tends to evaluates the quality of an argument in terms of its persuasiveness. PD provides an advance on these perspectives by suggesting that normative guidelines for evaluating the quality of an argument requires attention to the communicative functions served by arguing as well as the logical structure of the lines of reasoning used in the dialogue.
The functional perspective on argument is based first on the belief that argumentation is a communicative activity. And second, it is based on a functional view of communication in which messages are studied in terms of the purposes they serve and the goals they achieve. At its most fundamental level, the purpose of argumentative dialogue is the resolution and management of real or potential disputes. Therefore, it is a mistake to evaluate arguments out of the context in

which they are used or in a way that looks only at the logical structure without a description of the way certain argumentative moves effect the ability to manage or resolve a dispute based on good reasons. A functional perspective requires that arguments be studied, in part, by how they contribute to the communicative goals of resolving or managing a dispute.

The PD perspective also commits itself to a dialectical framework in which arguments are assumed to be the basis of critical discussions aimed at arriving at the truth or falsity of some standpoint or set of standpoints. It is therefore, not enough to simply describe arguments and their effects. A complete picture of argument can only be arrived at by examining the quality of an argument both in terms of its usefulness in resolving or managing a dispute and in terms of its validity or cogency according to normative standards of reasonableness.

The dual requirements of usefulness and reasonableness have given rise to ten normative criteria for conducting rational critical discussions (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1992). These rules are organized around the functions that argumentative speech acts perform at the beginning, in the middle and at the end of a critical discussion. In the opening stage of a dispute a speaker presents a standpoint as true while their counterpart casts doubt upon it through presenting objections or counterproposals. In order for the dialogue to continue toward a resolution of the disagreement, arguers must maintain a climate of open exchange of ideas. The first rule presented in the pragma-dialectical approach is that, "parties must not prevent each other from presenting standpoints or casting doubt on standpoints" (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1992; p. 108). Tactics such as attacking an opponent personally violate this rule because it is an attempt to forestall discussion by disqualifying an opponent to speak on the issue, or to distract the opponent from the issue under discussion. For a critical discussion to advanced past confrontation, arguers must also be willing to defend standpoints. The second rule for critical discussions requires that interlocutors defend standpoints once entered into discussion. Violation of the either of the first two rules essential precludes rational testing of the truth of a proposition.

At the argumentation stage PD discussion rules chiefly concern the ways in which lines of reasoning are developed and how logical structures are applied to defending standpoints. Rules three and four require that protagonists and antagonists extend their reasoning in a way that is relevant to their own and their opponent's positions regarding the standpoint under consideration. Rule five deals with the responsibility of arguers to accurately represent the expressed and

unexpressed premises that each party is actually accountable for. This rule declares as unacceptable the attack on an unexpressed premise that is either not relevant to the opponent's standpoint or that the opponent has not committed herself to defending. Rules six and seven prohibit the representation of a premise as accepted or defended as true if the starting point has not been accepted or conclusively defended. The sixth and seventh rules also prohibit the denial of a previously accepted or conclusively defended premise. The final normative guideline at the argumentation stage stipulates that reasons ought to be logically related to the standpoint(s) they are meant to defend. Standpoints that can't, at least in principle, be shown to follow logically from the arguments offered to support them, must be withdrawn from the discussion.

The ninth rule for the rational management of critical discussions involves the closing stage. The ninth rule necessitates that standpoints that are conclusively defeated or upon which doubt has been cast must be withdrawn. The goal of offering arguments that support or cast doubt upon a standpoint is to come to some conclusion about the point at issue. Rule nine is important because it recognizes that an issue can only be resolved if discussants are willing to recognized and acknowledge that their standpoint has been shown to be untenable.

Rule ten applies at all stages of a critical discussion. Rule ten requires that arguments be made clearly and unambiguously and that an opponent's arguments must be given a faithful and charitable interpretation. Resolving a dispute on the merits of each person or group's case depends on both party's cooperation. The use of ambiguous wording, syntax, or logical schemes prevents cooperative discussion because what exactly is at issue or even whether or not a dispute actually exists is open to question. Cooperative disagreement management also depends on each party's ability and willingness to accurately interpret their opponent's messages so that counter reasoning is directed at the actual point at issue in the dispute.

These normative assumptions about what is required to successfully negotiate a controversy have a great deal of intuitive and theoretical appeal. Recent research has provided evidence of the PD model as a tool for argument criticism (e.g., van Eemeren et al, 1993). Little, if any, direct research has been conducted that examines the outcomes of following or violating these rules, however. Fortunately, a critical examination of empirical research in group and interpersonal argument illustrates that following or violating these rules are

related to the kinds of decisions that are reached regarding the point at issue as well as the perceived satisfaction with the interaction, the perceived competence of the speaker, and the perceived quality of the relationship.

2. Fallacies and Quality of Decision Making in Group Argument

Research regarding the outcomes of critical discussions have largely appeared in the small group decision making literature. In general, two qualities of decision making outcomes have been studied. One is whether or not a group is able to come to a consensus. From a PD position, coming to a consensus about a standpoint is not essential but it is preferable since the goal of a critical discussion is to resolve a dispute to the satisfaction of all parties. Research indicates that violating discussion rules prevents groups from coming to consensus.

The failure to defend a standpoint, a violation of rule two, has been found to predict whether a group comes to a consensus (Canary, Brossmann, & Seibold, 1987; Hirokawa & Pace, 1983; Pace, 1985). For example, in a study examining low and high consensus groups, Canary et. al (1987) found that low consensus groups tended to produce more unsupported assertions than the high consensus groups. Furthermore, Pace (1985) found that standpoints were developed by a variety of group participants whether or not there was overt disagreement in high consensus, but not low consensus, groups. These studies point out the importance of offering evidence for standpoints in producing mutually agreeable decisions. The use of reasoning and support for asserted standpoints facilitates the critical examination of the issue by the group and exposes flaws in the quality of decisions advocated by group members. It is easier to derive a consensus about a decision when the flawed decision alternatives are unmasked. Group members are more persuaded to come to a common assessment about a decision alternative when they have been offered reasons to do so.

Another interesting characteristic of argument in high and low consensus groups involves the willingness of group members to switch their position during a discussion. Pace (1985) found that members of high consensus groups appeared to be more likely to explore both sides of a point at issue by offering reasons that both support and cast doubt upon it. This finding offers indirect support for the importance of following discussion rules that require that parties be willing to give up defeated standpoints and be willing to accept opposing standpoints that have been successfully defended. When arguers are willing to explore and ultimately give up their own perspective in favor of a more reasonable alternative

they are also more likely to find common ground in coming to a mutually agreeable conclusion based on the merits of the case for the standpoint under discussion. On the other hand, refusing to admit that a standpoint has been defeated and failing to accept an argument that is reasonable prevents groups from agreeing about which position appears to be the most sensible.
Finally, it appears that groups that reach consensus tend to follow rules regarding the relevance of their contributions to resolving the dispute (e.g., Gouran & Geonetta, 1977; Saine & Bock, 1973). Gouran and Geonetta (1977) for example, found that non consensus groups tended to be characterized by more random contributions than consensus groups. Non consensus groups also tend to be less responsive to issues raised by group members than consensus groups (Saine & Bock, 1973). Keeping argumentative contributions relevant leads to consensus because the discussion stays on track toward resolution. As van Eemeren & Grootendorst (1987) predict, the use of irrelevant argumentation prevents productive outcomes.

Along with predicting whether a group is able to reach consensus on an issue, violating rules for critical discussion is also associated with the quality of the decision a group makes. For example, Hirokawa and Pace (1983) found that groups that make effective decisions**[i]** engage in more support and defense of standpoints offered by group members than groups that make less effective decisions. This study indicates that the failure to defend standpoints once they are met with scrutiny, and offering standpoints with little or no reasoning in support of them, lead to conclusions that are judged to be unwarranted. Leathers (1970; 1972) has also found that irrelevant remarks (violation of rules three and four), negative messages (violation of rule one), and highly abstract statements (violation of rule ten) are all associated with decisions deemed by independent raters to be of poor quality. Small group research also indicates that groups who leave inferences implicit (Leathers, 1970), and groups who treat unexamined or unchallenged inferences as though they were facts tend to make poor decisions. Along with Leathers (1970), Hirokawa and Pace (1983) also find that ineffective groups tend to draw inferences that are at best only weakly supported by the facts of the case and that are characterized by unsound reasoning. Furthermore, the ineffective groups tend not to explore the strength of their inferential reasoning and once the inferences are drawn, treat them as uncontested facts upon which they base their decisions. It seems clear then that failing the requirement to produce logically sound arguments (rules six, seven, and eight) in

a critical discussion leads to coming to conclusions that are judged to be of lower quality.

3. Fallacies and Interpersonal Outcomes

In general, critical research involving the pragma-dialectical perspective focuses on evaluating the effects fallacies produce on the strength of the reasoning used to arrive at a conclusion or the effects fallacies have on qualities of the conversation itself. It is intuitively appealing to predict that fallacious reasoning in interpersonal disagreements will have identity management and relational impacts beyond the more instrumentally oriented outcomes that have been the focus of dialectical argumentation research. Structural properties of conversation seem to point a preference for at least the appearance of rationality in managing disagreements (Jackson & Jacobs, 1980). It seems likely that serious deviations from rational dialogue will produce less favorable evaluations of those who argue fallaciously.

However, because everyday arguers don't generally hold each other to strict standards of traditional logic in resolving disagreements, the traditional approach to fallacious argument doesn't provide an especially useful framework for examining fallacies in interpersonal disagreements. The PD perspective's conceptualization of fallacies as consisting of conversational moves that derail the problem solving process maps on well to what is known about how qualities of conflictual interaction are associated with identity and relational outcomes.

To begin, research indicates that tactics designed to prevent another party from advancing a standpoint are associated with negative perceptions of the arguer and the relationship. The use of ad hominem in the form of personal criticism and defensiveness have been shown to be associated with less relationship satisfaction (e.g., Gottman, 1979; 1994) and with perceiving the partner to be a less competent communicator (Canary and Spitzberg, 1989; Canary, Brossmann, Brossmann, & Weger, 1995). Complaints that focus on personal characteristics are perceived less favorably than complaints focusing on behaviors (Alberts, 1988). Finally, personal complaints tend to be associated with creating feelings of shame and rage leading to out of control escalation in personal disagreements (Retzinger, 1991). The use of ad hominem not only is logically irrelevant to the claim being examined it also prevents critical examination of a claim by creating strong emotional reactions in listeners that make critical inquiry almost impossible.

Another way in which conversational partners attempt to discourage the examination of a standpoint is to draw attention away from the substance of a partner's complaint by responding to it with the assertion that the act of complaining is itself so objectionable that the respondent need not be held accountable for answering the complaint. In other words, a person may discourage the examination of the standpoint by complaining about the complaint (Matoesan, 1993). Similarly, cross complaining can inhibit the examination of a standpoint by offering a competing complaint about the complainer's own actions, attitudes, or intentions. Complaining about a complaint is a type of ad hominem attack that forestalls discussion of the original standpoint by asserting the act of issuing the complaint points to some disagreeable quality in the complainer. Cross complaining is a form of tu qou que in which the original complaint is disqualified based on some equally disagreeable and complainable, though unrelated, attribute found in the source of the complaint. Cross complaining can be treated as a fallacy of consistency or as a fallacy of obscuration in which the dispute becomes mired in the attempt to resolve two entirely unrelated standpoints simultaneously. Each party in a cross complaint situation is attempting to defend their own standpoint while attacking their opponent's unrelated assertion. Cross complaining both prevents another from advancing a standpoint and creates an over complicated mixed dispute in which the progression toward resolution of one issue is irrelevantly linked to the resolution of an unrelated issue. Both complaints about complaints (Alberts, 1988; 1989) and cross complaining (Gottman, 1979) have been found to be judged unfavorably or associated with dissatisfaction with a romantic partner.

Along with fallacies that prevent others from advancing standpoints, it appears that the failure to defend a standpoint (rule two) and the failure to offer reasons in support of a standpoint (rules two and seven) are related to problematic interpersonal outcomes. First, a great deal of research indicates that couples who engage in demand/withdraw interaction patterns have a substantially greater chance of being dissatisfied and eventually terminating their relationship (Gottman, 1995; Heavy, Layne, & Christensen, 1993). The demand/withdraw pattern can be interpreted as a violation of the requirement that disputants defend their standpoints when asked to do so. Characteristic of the demand/withdrawal patterns is one party attempting to advance or cast doubt upon a standpoint while the opposing party stonewalls by evading the issue or simply refusing to do anything beyond reassert their original standpoint.

Stonewalling and withdrawing prevent resolution of important relationship issues, issues which left unresolved create tension and dissatisfaction with the relationship and the partner.

Second, standards for the logical acceptability of an argument require that a claim be accompanied by a supporting proposition that implies the truth of the asserted claim. Arguments which fail to provide reasoning for assertions therefore violate both rule two and rule seven (which requires that arguments be logically sound). Research by Canary and his associates (e.g., Canary, Brossmann, Sillars, & LoVette, 1987; Canary, et al, 1995) indicate that conversations that are characterized by the use of unsupported assertions result in less satisfaction with the interaction, with the perception that the conversational partner is an ineffective arguer, and with perceptions of decreased satisfaction with the relationship. Canary et al (1995) conclude by suggesting that everyday arguers have minimum standards for rationality in resolving disputes. In other words, in managing ordinary disputes, conversational partners prefer reasoned discourse over simple assertion and counter assertion. Not only does the use of reasoned discourse produce better decisions it produces more favorable interpretations of the conversational partner and the relationship.

4. Implications and Conclusion

This research review points to several ways in which the fields of argumentation, interpersonal, and small group communication intersect and offer implications for each other. One important implication is the usefulness of evaluating and studying small group and interpersonal conflict in terms of dialectical fallacies. Research in small group and especially in interpersonal conflict resolution tends to focus on strategies and tactics as they relate to interpersonal dimensions of the interaction. Rarely does research on interpersonal interaction examine conflict tactics in terms of their acceptability as rational contributions to the resolution of a dispute (cf. Canary et al, 1987; Canary, Weger, & Stafford, 1991; Canary et al, 1995). Furthermore, as Gottman (1994) admits, the relationship of behaviors such as personal criticism, defensiveness, and withdrawal to relational outcomes is more descriptive than theoretical. One possible theoretical explanation for this relationship is that the use of unproductive tactics prevents disputes from being resolved in ways that are acceptable and/or workable for the parties involved. When problems go unresolved partners build resentment toward each other and feel that the costs of staying in the relationship outweigh the rewards. Resolutions to interpersonal disputes that are arrived through a process of reason giving and

rational testing of ideas may not only produce logically sound conclusions but also personally satisfying ones as well.

Another implication of this research review is that argumentation scholarship would benefit by paying more attention to the relational as well as the content dimension of argumentative messages. For the most part, argument research devotes its attention to the propositional content of the messages in exclusion to any meaning the messages have for the identity of the hearer or the relationship between speaker and hearer. The dialectical approaches to argumentation theory, while better than traditional logical approaches, still tends to overlook the ways in which identity management and relationship goals have implications for the way people produce and respond to arguments. While correctly pointing out that speech acts such as expressives (i.e., messages that express a speaker's feelings) can contribute or detract from the progress of a critical discussion, van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1993) largely ignore the relational dimensions inherent in speech acts such as assertives, directives, declaritives, and so on. For example, the fallacy of ad hominem can be accomplished through an assertive speech act by simply asserting that an opponent has poor character. An ad hominem, however, produces poor argument both because it shifts the focus of the dispute to an irrelevant issue and because personal attacks create a hostile and defensive communication climate in which an arguer's attention to identity management and repair become more important than the original standpoint at issue. Being personally attacked also creates strong emotional reactions such as shame and rage (Retzinger, 1991) that place cognitive demands on the disputant that makes productive thinking about the situation difficult if not impossible (Zillman, 1990).

The research on small group, interpersonal, and relational argument and conflict can be taken together to suggest that normative requirements for an ideal model of critical discussion are operative in everyday instances of dispute resolution. We can see that the system developed by van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1987) for evaluating argumentation has more than intuitive appeal. Empirical research suggests that there are a number of instrumental, relational, and identity management advantages to avoiding dialectical fallacies.

NOTES

i. Effective and ineffective groups were determined by having independent judges rate the quality of each groups decision along four evaluative criteria.

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