Writing sample 2

A Report

Fallacies in Planning Practice Discourses, A Report

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Everyday-planning is full of talking and listening, and therefore full of fallacies. The definition of fallacy as Merriam-Webster dictionary says is: “a deceptive appearance, an often plausible argument using false or invalid inference”. This verbal tool of planning is worth a thorough analyze. This mission has been under attention since the communicative turn of planning theory but yet it is discussed in detail half as nearly as it should be. The importance of this concept comes to light with lens of analytical philosophy. Planning can be a language game _in words of Wittgenstein_ in which the players can learn and re-learn the rules. (Wittgenstein 1953) The players can be better in this game as they practice more, and exercise their senses to point out the patterns of the game. Here the pattern that is under focus is *fallacy*.

Introduction

This report is from the 12th June 2019, 3.5-hour long session of the Supreme Council of Urban Planning and Architecture in the ministry of road and urban development of Iran for evaluating the master plan of Arak city.

This session was not open to outside audience but with the facilitation of a guest member of the panel, the attendance became possible. This member was the professor of the Tehran university and the lecture for the course *theories of planning* for class2018 of master of urban planning. He decided to spend one session of the class in the Supreme Council of Urban

Planning and Architecture in order to introduce the practice to the young generation of planners that have never seen more than what was happening in their classes. you can see a photo of such plan evaluation sessions below.

Picture 1: A session in the Supreme Council of Urban Planning and Architecture in the ministry of road and urban development of Iran (Source: Mosayeb Mazaheri)

The process of a master plan approval in Iran

As soon as the plan get the approval from the local authorities in province level, it is send to the central government to evaluate it and in case of approval, pass it as the law. In this process the plan and the planners that represent it go through several sessions packed with objections, negotiation, need of justification and suggestions of revision.

The session is formal only with the presence of the majority from 12 ministers or their special deputy of ministries and an observer in the main hall of ministry of roads and urban development. The presenter of the sessions is the group of planners that conducted the plan, along with members of the local government of the city. Mostly these sessions have more members from academics (in the fields of economy, planning, farming, etc.), and members of city councils, and rarely the NGOs. (And in an unprecedented case the presence of a whole class in the hall.) But none of these latter members has a vote in the final verdict. But this does not mean that they cannot use their words to influence.

Based on the 2009 revision of the law of the establishment of the Supreme Council of Urban Planning and Architecture of Iran in 1972, the members of the Supreme Council of Urban Planning and Architecture of Iran are:

1- Minister (or their special deputy) of Housing and Urban Development

2- Minister (or their special deputy) of the Interior

3- Minister (or their special deputy) of Industries

4- Minister (or their special deputy) of Culture and Higher Education

5- Minister (or their special deputy) of Islamic Guidance

6- Minister (or their special deputy) of Energy

7- Minister (or their special deputy) of Agriculture

8- Minister (or their special deputy) of Defense and Support

9- Minister (or their special deputy) of Construction Jihad

10- Head (or their special deputy) of the program and budget organization

11- Head (or their special deputy) of Environmental Protection Organization

12- Minister (or their special deputy) of Roads and Transport

13- A member of the Housing and Urban Planning and Road and Transportation Commission of the Islamic Council will participate as an observer in the meetings of the Supreme Council of Urban Planning and Architecture upon the proposal of the commission and the approval of the parliament.

Generally, two categories can define the members of the session: those who are in favor of approval of the plan and those who are against it or think it needs revision. Both parties try to introduce their viewpoint as strong as possible and gain followers. This is when the use of fallacy become crucial, and being able to recognize them even more crucial and a game changer.

Fallacies and examples

Here 8 categories of fallacy are explained with the logical form and an example of it. Then the direct speeches from members of the supreme council in the session are put forward as an example of using the fallacies in planning environment.

1- Special pleading

Applying standards, principles, and/or rules to other people or circumstances, while making oneself or certain circumstances exempt from the same critical criteria, without providing adequate justification. Special pleading is often a result of strong emotional beliefs that interfere with reason. (Bennett 2012)

Logical Form:

If X Then Y, but not when it hurts my position.

Example 1:

Yes, I do think that all drunk drivers should go to prison, but your honor, he is my son! He is a good boy who just made a mistake!

- Planning example:

The special deputy of energy in the response to an infrastructure dysfunction:

"….it is our duty to …but specifically for this region the circumstances are different and we are not responsible."

2- False dilemma fallacy

(also known as: all-or-nothing fallacy, false dichotomy [form of], the either-or fallacy, either-or reasoning, fallacy of false choice, fallacy of false alternatives, black-and-white thinking, the fallacy of exhaustive hypotheses, bifurcation, excluded middle, no middle ground, polarization)

When only two choices are presented yet more exist, or a spectrum of possible choices exists between two extremes. False dilemmas are usually characterized by "either this or that" language, but can also be characterized by omissions of choices. Another variety is the false trilemma, which is when three choices are presented when more exist. (Bennett 2012)

Logical Forms:

Either X or Y is true.

Example 1:

You are either with God or against him.

- Planning examples:

- One of the primitive members: "if we don't want to face problems in plans, the only solution is rational planning."

- A member of planning group: "we only had two options, to increase the FAR or to adhere a new area to the city."

3- Appeal to false authority fallacy

(also known as: appeal to doubtful authority, appeal to dubious authority, appeal to improper authority, appeal to inappropriate authority, appeal to irrelevant authority, appeal to misplaced authority, appeal to unqualified authority, argument from false authority)

Using an alleged authority as evidence in your argument when the authority is not really an authority on the facts relevant to the argument. As the audience, allowing an irrelevant authority to add credibility to the claim being made. (Bennett 2012)

Logical Forms:

According to person 1 (who offers little or no expertise on Y being true), Y is true. Therefore, Y is more likely to be true.

or

Expert A gives her view on issue B.
Expert A's area of expertise has little or nothing to do with issue B.
Expert A's opinion influences how people feel about issue B.

Example 1:

My 5th-grade teacher once told me that girls would go crazy for boys if they learn how to dance. Therefore, if you want to make the ladies go crazy for you, learn to dance.

- Planning examples:

- One of the primitive members in defense of another planner: "we should listen to what he implies as he is like a doctor having the ability to save the city."

- One of the primitive members speaking in favor of the comprehensive plans: "Once I spoke to a female French planner, she believed that comprehensive planning is most successful method of planning, it's like this all over the world."

4- Whataboutism fallacy

Whataboutism gives a clue to its meaning in its name. It is not merely the changing of a subject ("What about the economy?") to deflect away from an earlier subject as a political strategy; it's essentially a reversal of accusation, arguing that an opponent is guilty of an offense just as egregious or worse than what the original party was accused of doing, however unconnected the offenses may be. (Merriam-Webster Dictionary)

Logical Form:

A person complains about problem with person T.
Instead of responding to the point made about T the second person says, "What about person O?"
So, instead of responding to the statement about T Person 2 deflects the argument to something about Person O.

- Planning example:

One of the primitive members trying to remind the late arrival of a member and subsequently refute his opinion: “you haven’t been present for the first one hour of the session [so you cannot talk]”

5- Strawman fallacy

Substituting a person’s actual position or argument with a distorted, exaggerated, or misrepresented version of the position of the argument. (Bennett 2012)

Logical Form:

Person 1 makes claim Y.

Person 2 restates person 1’s claim (in a distorted way).

Person 2 attacks the distorted version of the claim.

Therefore, claim Y is false.

Example 1:

Ted: Biological evolution is both a theory and a fact.

Edwin: That is ridiculous! How can you possibly be absolutely certain that we evolved from pond scum!

Ted: Actually, that is a gross misrepresentation of my assertion. I never claimed we evolved from pond scum. Unlike math and logic, science is based on empirical evidence and, therefore, a scientific fact is something that is confirmed to such a degree that it would be perverse to withhold provisional consent. The empirical evidence for the fact that biological evolution does occur falls into this category.

- Planning example:

The dialogue between two members of the council with opposing ideas:

“ – As you can see this is the projected population of the city in year 2034

- I do not believe this number is correct

- You are trying to insult us and infer that we do not understand ”

6- Sunk cost fallacy

(also known as: argument from inertia, concorde fallacy, finish the job fallacy)

Reasoning that further investment is warranted on the fact that the resources already invested will be lost otherwise, not taking into consideration the overall losses involved in the further investment. (Bennett 2012)

Logical Form:

X has already been invested in project Y.

Z more investment would be needed to complete project Y, otherwise X will be lost.

Therefore, Z is justified.

Example 1:

I have already paid a consultant $1000 to look into the pros and cons of starting that new business division. He advised that I shouldn’t move forward with it because it is a declining market. However, if I don’t move forward, that $1000 would have been wasted, so I better move forward anyway.

- Planning example:

The reasoning of a primitive member of the council that was trying to convince another member: “Up until now a lot of governmental authorities accepted this plan, can we ignore all of them and do otherwise? “

7- McNamara fallacy

(also known as: quantitative fallacy, Skittles fallacy)

When a decision is based solely on quantitative observations (i.e., metrics, hard data, statistics) and all qualitative factors are ignored. (Bennett 2012)

Logical Form:

> Measure whatever can be easily measured.
> Disregard that which cannot be measured easily.
> Presume that which cannot be measured easily is not important.
> Presume that which cannot be measured easily does not exist.

Example 1:

Donald Trump Jr. Tweeted:

If I had a bowl of skittles and I told you just three would kill you. Would you take a handful? That's our Syrian refugee problem.

- Planning example:

The justification of the planning group member to an objection to their plans for public places:

"We planned the public places according to the suitable ratio introduced in the enactment of ministry"

8- Lying with statistics

(also known as: statistical fallacy/fallacies, misunderstanding the nature of statistics [form of], fallacy of curve fitting, the fallacy of overfitting)

This can be seen as an entire class of fallacies that result in presenting statistical data in a very biased way, and of course, interpreting statistics without questioning the methods behind collecting and presenting the data. The many methods of this fallacy can be find in the book *How to Lie with Statistics* by Darrell Huff, 1954. (Bennett 2012)

Logical Form:

Claim A is made. Statistic S is manipulated to support claim A.

Example 1:

Did you see that bar graph in USA Today? It showed a HUGE spike in the moral decline of our country!

- Planning examples:

Though the use of this fallacy cannot be proved but the possibility of its presence was obvious in the presentations of the planning group as they were using various numbers. Some of these numbers were ostensibly results of computational processes and therefore unbiased.

Another suspicious use of numbers from the planning group was when they were trying to justify one of the two alternatives for planning with the numbers that claimed to be from analysis but the planners can simply change them or carry them out as they want.

What happened?

The session came to an end without reaching an agreement for approval of the plan. So the planners needed to revise the parts of the plan that have been criticized. But the students gain a firsthand experience of how the power dynamics of the planning practice can be altered with communication. One of these communication tools is the *fallacy*. Only a few of these fallacies were mentioned here. The game of fallacies is not finish indeed. It is a tricky game that sometimes even the act of revealing another member's use of fallacy is a fallacy:

"the member X tried to gain votes with unfair use of language and distortion of the truth, though all of his words are unreliable thus must not be trusted." (strawman fallacy)

Conclusion

There are two insights in this report for the planning practice. First, it is clear that being exposed to what is really happening in the planning and educate yourself to be able to decode the games

that people are playing would inevitably make you a better player in the game of planning. Although the use of fallacies is a common tool among negotiators, the value-loaded aspect of it, is not mentioned here and is left to the considerations of the readers. By accepting the uncertain and complex aspects of this language game planners can become closer to what Flyvbjerg name “Phronetic planner”. (Flyvbjerg 2001, 4) Then not only they learn to actualize their power to understand the fallacies that others use, but also to intentionally develop their potential to use the fallacies.

Secondly, the other important thing that has made all of this possible was act of a teacher that decided the classroom was not enough for the students. This action is admirable in the light that it follows the same values it introduces; that you can learn the planning in the game of planning, you cannot analyze it, nor absorb it holistically if you won’t be able to participate in it. This can be an inspiration for other classes that try to induce a gap between planning theory and practice and yet claim to be in search of a solution to bridge this gap. (Lord 2014)

References

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