



How to Support an Argument

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As part of a theoretical discussion or literature review one is often called upon to provide support for an argument. Logical support for an argument usually takes an "If ... then" form. You should be able to say: "If point A (or B or C) is true, then the claim (or thesis) is true." This also implies that if point A (or B or C) were not true, then the claim (or thesis) is probably not true.

Once the logical structure has been identified, support for the claim usually consists of demonstrating which points are true and which are not. The following are examples of some of the ways this may be done. They are not meant to be exhaustive since the support of arguments is an elaborate and extensive issue (much of the philosophy of science, epistemology, and rhetoric focuses on this issue). Instead, I have focused on some examples from the social science literature which represent the common structure of support found in theoretical discussions or literature reviews.

1. Support by example.

In the seemingly endless search for correctives to the "delinquency problem", paid employment has long been considered a potential antidote. Part-time work while attending school, it has been argued, teaches young people proper work habits, strengthens their work ethic, instills a sense of responsibility, forces them to learn "that money doesn't grow on trees," keeps them "off the streets" and "out of trouble," and provides job skills for the future. Extensive work-based socialization should, it is assumed, produce a non-delinquent teenager and, ultimately, a responsible adult labour force participant (Carnegie Council on Policy Studies in Higher Education, 1979; National Commission on Youth, 1980).

(Tanner and Krahn, 1991:282)

Comment: In this paragraph, the authors claim that "employment has long been considered a potential antidote" to delinquency. They support this claim in two ways.

- they provide examples from colloquial expressions which reflect this belief (remember, they are not arguing that it is true, simply that it is a long standing claim).
- they provide references to literature which assumes the claim is true.

In addition, these examples add to the stylistic quality of the paragraph by elaborating what the authors mean by their claim.

2. Support by demonstrating logical relationships.

These programs have been informed, implicitly or explicitly, by theories of criminal behaviour. From the perspective of control theory (Hirschi, 1969), part-time jobs should increase the range of adolescents' conventional involvements, restrict the amount of time they have for delinquency, and create pro-social learning experiences. Classical strain theory (Merton, 1938; Cloward and Ohlin, 1960) postulates that delinquency reflects an inability to achieve societal "success goals". In this case, lack

of a job and the income associated with it could encourage a criminal response on the part of unemployed youth.

(Tanner and Krahn, 1991:282-283)

Comment: In this paragraph, the authors claim that various theories of criminal behaviour underlie some of the educational programs they discuss previously. They support this claim by linking the general theories (ie. control theory, and strain theory) to particular claims relevant to the issue of employment. The structure of their argument is: if these propositions about work and delinquency can be derived from control theory and strain theory, then those theories must "inform" the claims. They provide references so that the reader can verify the derivations which they have identified.

3. Support by citing literature

The research on social disorganization processes is inconsistent, particularly for the effects of urbanization on urban crime rates (Hartnagel and Lee, 1990). Multivariate analysis using aggregate level variables reveals conflicting effects of social disorganization on crime in urban areas (Neuman and Berger, 1988; Land, McCall, and Cohen, 1990). For example, Krahn, Hartnagel, and Gartrell (1986) report no effect of ethnic heterogeneity on homicide rates when controlling for income inequality, whereas Avison and Loring (1986) report the opposite finding.

(Kennedy, Silverman, Forde, 1991:399)

Comment: In this example, the authors support their claim by citing the relevant literature, then providing the details of one example from that literature.

4. Support by citing the data

Although the performance view successfully challenges the role of sheer dominance, these arguments exist without regard to the sex of the dominator. Performance theorists are either interested in the main effects ... or try to reject the efficacy of dominance ... without directly exploiting gender-based interpretations of dominance. For example, in her attempts to investigate the relative effects of dominance versus performance, Ridgeway (1987) does not emphasize the fact that her disliked confederate was a dominant woman. As a result, although the interactive link between gender and dominance is acknowledged (Ridgeway, 1987:693; Ridgeway and Diekema, 1989:83), the link itself remains to be tested.

(Sev'er, 1991:267)

Comment: In this example, the author supports her claim by referring to a specific case which demonstrates her claim. She selects this from the major works in the field and thus provides a critique of these works at the same time.

Accompanying this change in educational participation was a dramatic decline in fertility. Over the past 50 years, the inverse relationship between education and lifetime fertility is a well established fact in fertility research (Westoff and Ryder, 1971; Balakrishnan et. al., 1979; Grindstaff, 1988). The more educated have smaller numbers of children, a phenomenon that can be observed universally in almost all societies. In Canada in 1971, ever married women with less than a grade nine education had 3.5 children on average compared to 1.8 children for women who had some university

training. Even the baby-boom cohort 40-44 years of age showed more than a one child differential across the extremes of educational attainment, 3.9 compared to 2.7 children (Balakrishnan et al., 1979:74).

(Grindstaff, Balakrishnan, Dewitt, 1991:325)

Comment: This example not only supports the claim by referring the reader to relevant literature, but provides some of the data as well.

References

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