Emotional Fallacies in Public Discourse: A Proposed Perspective for Research

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Abstract:

It is widely believed that "emotion leads to action while reason leads to conclusions", emotionalists can, then, consume others and be consumed by others to take action and reach specific conclusions (even if they were unsound). Pathos – for example - as a communication technique is used for persuading the public to have belief in a certain idea or take a specific action by appealing to their prejudices and by repeating and intensifying the words and phrases that can trigger their emotions towards that idea or that action. Such a technique may lead to get the public confused between *what is* and *what should be*. This is what is termed the *fallacy of shoulds* which targets influencing the public, positively or negatively, regardless appealing to logic or looking for the truth. Managing emotions is considered a big challenge particularly because fallacies, are intentionally committed in daily public discourse whoever its parties are, departing from emotions are powerful forces for influencing others.

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This is why the author believes that "emotional fallacies" is an issue that needs to be thoroughly and deeply explored. Therefore, this current paper tackles five main domains: public discourse, a quick view on logical fallacies, emotional fallacies overview, reasons behind emotional fallacies, and a proposed perspective for analyzing emotional fallacies.

Keywords: **public discourse; logical fallacies; emotional fallacies; arguments.**

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Public discourse:

Public discourse is believed to be one of the most important aspects of a democracy where it defines and limits the powers of the government, but also of individuals … it assumes the existence of a "res publica" … the range of purposes and needs that people have in common, and above all their common need to coordinate their private interests, so that the well-being of each individual benefits as much as possible from the shared well-being of the community (Sellers, 2003). But the daily conversations and dialogs in non-democratic communities are not less important, specifically when getting involved in heated discussions or arguments for or against specific national issues and daily concerns, i.e., when it comes to differences of opinion. This is because the public often want to live by their own rules and expectations, and then do whatever they want. If this is the case with a certain issue in any society, public views and opinions should be voiced as for all sides of the issue, wants and concerns should not be neglected but deeply explored, different perspectives should be considered and above all an attempt to find a compromise is searched for the public's safety, security and welfare.

And since the public life is generally divided by significant moral, social and political disagreements, argumentation and debate, each divide involved in the conversation(s) is forced to primarily accept the exchange of views and the exchange of reasons, with ground rules, norms,

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and neutrality. But the real situation is different from that. Most daily public conversations are rife with fallacies, unsound reasoning, confused claims and therefore hasty generalizations and/or erroneous conclusions. Such generalizations and conclusions can - in a way or another - affect others' opinions and high policies.

Public discourse, as Tollefson (2009) believes, is an attempt to re-create part of public space, to re-create the context in which the impersonal communication of ideas and arguments can be carried out where competing positions must communicate—not just to those who already share their views, but to those who do not; they must be part of a public conversation. This conversation is not just, however, an exchange of views. It must be an exchange of reasons. It must have the character of a public argument. In the same stream, Rosenberg cited in Blocher (2012) asserts that public discourse is defined by the forms of communication constitutionally deemed necessary for formation of public opinion. The aim of public discourse is, thus, to construct a communication-based environment, or to create a public culture among groups and individuals as for public issues, (Biakolo, 2013).

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Logical fallacies, a quick view:

Bearing in mind the fact that logical fallacies are defined from different lenses along the human history, there are hundreds of definitions that have been commonly explored. The fallacy is seen as a …

- a method of deceptive and persuasive reasoning from the part of the reasoner, Goodnight (1991).
- a speech act which prejudices or frustrates efforts to resolve a difference of opinion, Van Eemeren and Grootendorst (in Sillars, 1995, p. 5)
- an argument (or at least something that purports to be an argument that falls short of some standard of correctness used in a context of dialogue for various reasons, (Johnson,1998).
- a technique of argumentation that is used inappropriately by one party against another in a dialogue, (Walton, 2003).
- an error in reasoning common enough to warrant a fancy name, TBS STAFF (2020).
- illegitimate arguments or irrelevant points and are often identified because they lack evidence that supports their claim. (Purdue University, 2020).
- false but popular beliefs and that they are deceptively bad arguments, Hansen (2020).

From those definitions and many others, fallacies can be classified into two main categories; the formal revolves

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around the **construct** of the argument and is subdivided into *Propositional fallacies, Quantification fallacies, and Formal syllogistic fallacies*. The informal fallacies are committed for the **content** of the argument, and are subdivided into *Improper premise, Faulty generalizations, Questionable cause, and Relevance fallacies*. Under each type, there are many fallacies. Behind each fallacy, there is some reason or more. Among them are the poor ability to understand logic, a lack of scientific understanding, and some are philosophical mistakes or any other reasons cited in different sources tackling fallacies (e.g., Clark & Clark, 2005; Damer, 2009; Dowden, 2010; Engel, 1994; Fogelin, 2010; Hamblin, 2004; Paul & Elder, 2006; Pirie, 2006;   Sinnott-Armstrong & Tindale, 2007; Walton, 2008; Wilson, 1999).

Whether resorting to reason or resorting to emotions in order to bring change – to the worst or to the best, fallacies are there. How far the influence it should be, how strong and effective the argument is   and how deep the fallacies lead to change and how fast the change is - as for the arguers and the arguees on equal terms, becomes a big questionable issue. And since the main core of the current paper is to shed light on emotional fallacies in particular, the author finds it suitable to handle them in some detail.

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Resorting to reason   **Resorting to emotions**
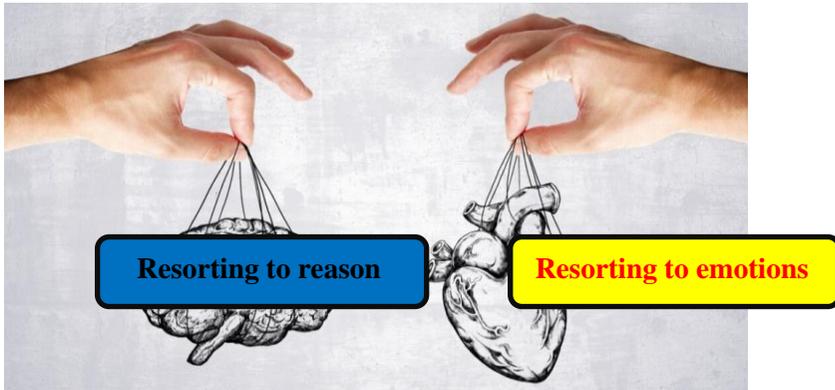
Emotional fallacies overview:

Emotional fallacies are psychological fallacies in which claims rest on emotional appeals rather than logic and evidence (Northwest University Information Technology Office, 2021). They are also known as playing on emotions, argument by vehemence, appeal to pathos … or placing reason or valid logic with emotions in an attempt to win the argument, Brinton (1988).

According to Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia (2020), emotional fallacies refer to "argument from passion" that is characterized by persuading the recipient(s) and manipulating emotions to get their attention away from an important issue and   drawing inward feelings in order to win an argument, especially in the absence of factual evidence. This kind of appeal to emotion includes negative emotions like fear and anxiety, guilt, ridicule, anger, sadness, helplessness, disgust, and positive emotions like empathy and compassion, pride, relief, hope, pity, wishful thinking. In the same line of thought, Utah State Board of Education (2020), considers the emotional fallacies are arguments designed to appeal to

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(often irrational) feelings in order to override or circumvent logical judgment: "a. They are employed to arouse strong feelings in an audience, b. They are based on the concept of "transfer." **Transfer** is a device of association in which the connotations (deeper, embedded meanings) of words (or images) manipulate our responses. **Positive transfer** presents ideas in the most pleasing, most positive fashion. **Negative transfer** presents ideas in ways that play on our negative emotions such as fear, anger, envy etc."

McKeever (2020) holds the belief that appeals to emotion tap into and exploit our feelings, such as indignation, enthusiasm, compassion, fear, ambition, desire for belonging. Appeals to emotion that depend on suggestion and loaded language are often used in calls to action— donate, buy, vote, join, do me this favor. This means that the ultimate aim is influencing people to take action voluntarily by creating what is called emotional load. Transformational Processing Institute (1994) supports that claim noting: *We go by the most available emotional load, not by what ought to have the biggest reaction. Most loads exist in the form of a potential load. That means that currently there is no active emotion on it, but there would be under certain circumstances. Certain phenomena would activate or trigger the emotion and then it can be dealt with.*

Lumen (2020) takes another stand that focuses on pathos as a communication technique used for persuasion. That mode can be carried out in various ways: by providing a metaphor or storytelling in a persuasive language, common

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as a hook, by a general passion in the delivery, by getting an emotional reaction that serves the target of the persuader, or – when understanding the audience, appealing to their prejudices by repeating and intensifying the words and phrases that can trigger the audience's emotions towards a specific idea or action. Such a technique may lead to what is termed *the fallacy of shoulds* which is referred to the inability to distinguish between what is and what should be, (Scatteredrainbows, 2007). Therefore, when people get confused, they are easy to be controlled, led, and directed to what is intended because their emotions have easily distorted their thinking and clouded their judgment. At the same time, that "shoulding" has made them defensive and satisfied with what is or what was, specifically when is shaped as "demands" of authoritative discourse. At the other side, those who are fancy with *should* or who might be called *shoulders* /ʃʊdəz/ stimulate others to behave in a different way they themselves sometimes do not prefer. To them, influencing people, positively or negatively, is more important than looking for truth. They thrive to and are committed to build specific content with a specific context and consistently and continually create a community of collaborators or enablers whose aim is to influence the targeted audience.

From a transformational point of view, and according to the author's belief, emotional fallacies can be resorted to in order to fulfill a series of well controlled steps: (a) understanding others' emotions, (b) touching their emotions to get the best out of them, (c) directing them towards

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building new frames of reference in which the targeted audience are easily controlled and driven to take the action planned, (d) getting the change of their habits of mind. Such a view stresses the notion that says: *The only way to change someone's mind is to connect with them from the heart.*

From the pragmatic side, the shoulders use implicatures in their interactional language coated with or touched by emotions focusing on implied meanings, bridging or neglecting the literal meaning of words, since the public (mainly the lay people who are ignorant but ambitious, or are labeled as *received knowers* who get their knowledge from listening to others and remember what they have to say, Belenky and Stanton, 2009) do not or cannot have the opportunity to negotiate meanings. Therefore, the stress is on the context in general rather than the text itself as a component of that context. By so doing, the shoulders create a pragmatic trap or an implicature trap.

Whatever the matter is, there are – to the author's belief – three levels of interaction when committing emotional fallacies: the first is the <u>macro level</u> concerned with the shoulders who are the elite, authorities or some decision makers. They think for others and have their own hidden goals. They thrive to and are committed to build specific content within a specific context and consistently and continually create a community of collaborators or enablers whose aim is to influence the targeted audience The second is <u>the meso level</u> that is concerned with collaborators or the enablers who transit the message of the shoulders to its

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destination through touching the emotions of the audience and winning their trust. They cooperate and collaborate with the shoulders to win the play. Whereas the third level is <u>the micro one</u> that is concerned with the targeted subjects/audience. Those subjects might be individuals or local communities or special interest groups. The nearer they are to the intermediaries, the more they get influenced by them. Thus, there are – to the author's claim – eight C's that are taken into consideration. Those eight C's stands for the *content* to be delivered, the *context* in which the fallacy is manipulated, the *communication* processes to be carried out, the *collaboration* to be experienced, how far *consistency* is there along the argument in which the emotional fallacy is committed, how far the *continuity* of the influence is desired, the *community* to be influenced, how far *commitment* to the process of committing fallacies is stuck to.

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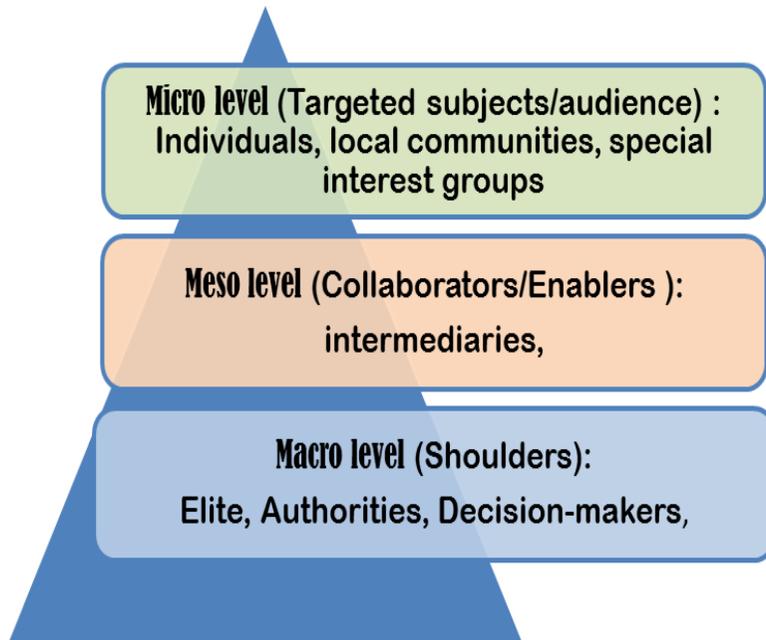
Reasons behind emotional fallacies:

Noting that "the new media provide people everywhere a virtual space for self-expression (e,g., Chen,2015; Collin et al., 2011) allow them to actively participate in public affairs, empower silenced voice to be heard, as well as exhibit new interaction patterns and bring about both positive and negative social consequences (Chen, 2015). Moreover, changes in laws and policies may come to existence owing to analyzing the conversations and dialogs of the public, Scollon (2008). Behind each objective of the aforementioned, a fallacy or more can be committed.

Fallacies are generally thought to be made due to some factors concerning the arguer and other ones as for the

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audience or the arguee. Though Voth (1998) – like others – discusses the intentional fallacy in which the arguer determines stated intentions in his messages, he points to a critical gap – not less important than the former sort that may affect the communication situation in which argumentation takes place. That sort of fallacy is called "the receptional fallacy" where what the hearer says the message means is mistaken for what the message actually says, i.e. where the arguee misinterprets the message he is receiving (p. 395).

Through that playful use of fallacy, the arguers accomplish controlling thoughts. From the other side, when touching the emotions as well, they can control everything. In this way, both logical fallacies and emotional fallacies have things in common, particularly when the counterparts are face to face. But when virtuality is there, the matter will be different because emotional fallacies come to existence mostly virtually in order for the emotionalists to hide or to take shelters. Each emotionalist has his or her rationale to do so for their own benefit or for others'. Sometimes they resort to the emotional escape as believing that it is an opportunity to create a virtual bright life or to find relief for themselves or for others as a type of social compensation. They might also have emotional camouflage seeking for emotional satisfaction or avoiding social rejection, or being victimized, or having distress or frustration. In most cases, emotional fallacies committers resort to dissociative anonymity to keep safe, to find new intergroup contact or to create new personal distance, or even help others keep away from probable problems. All those reasons and many others can drive
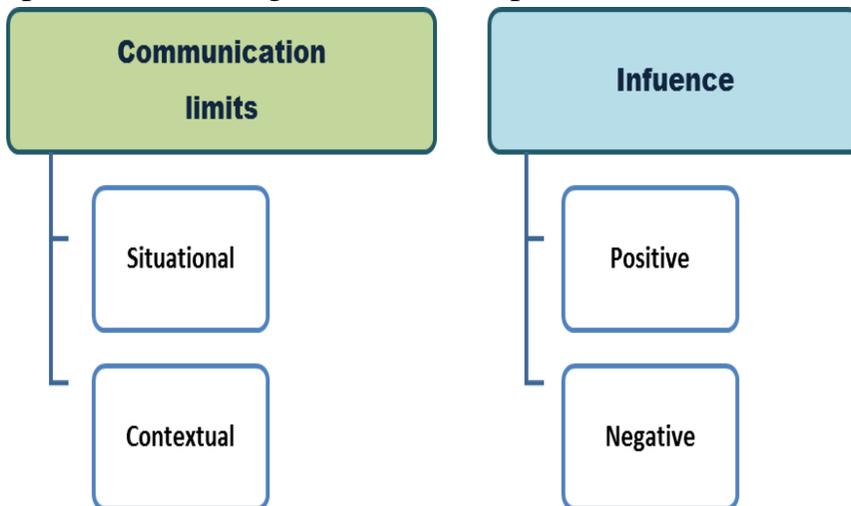
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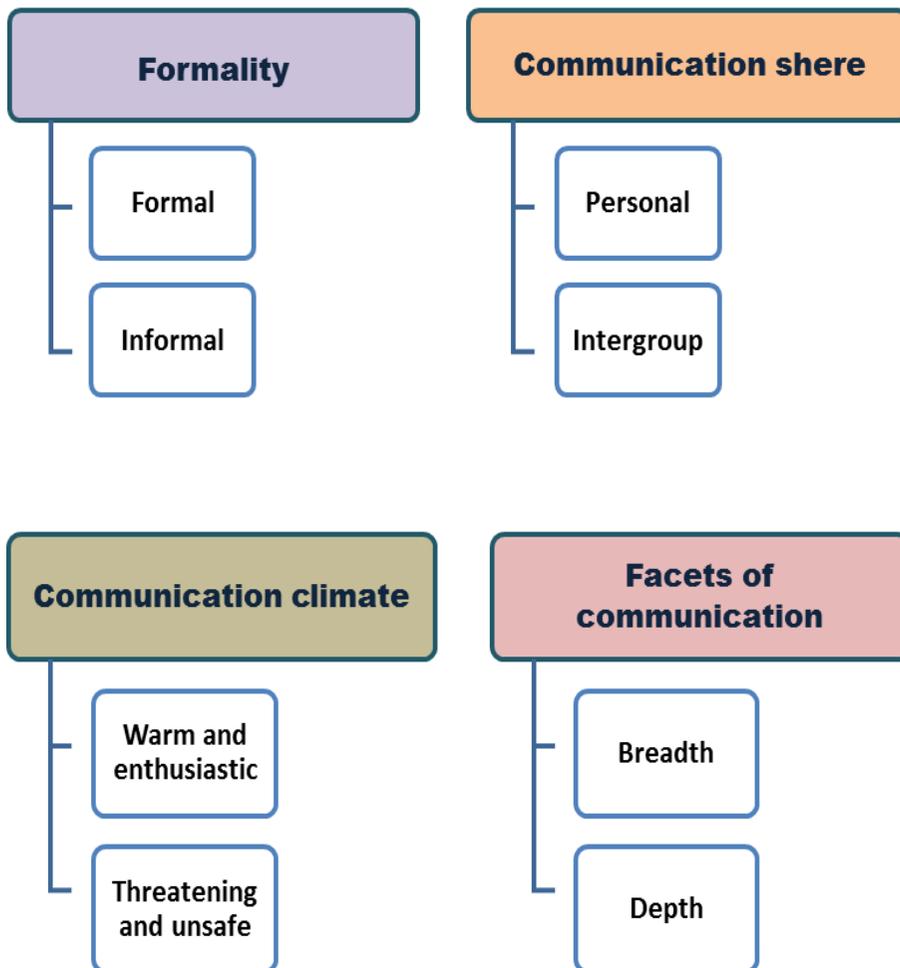arguers or the arguees to commit emotional fallacies in a way or another.

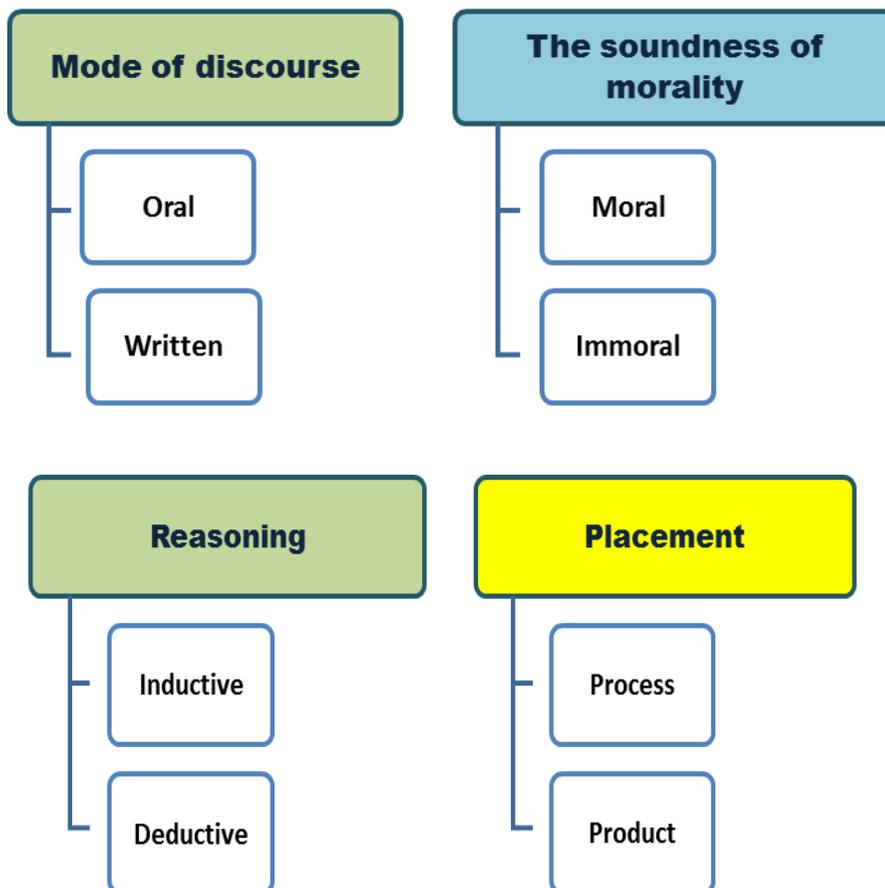## A proposed perspective for analyzing emotional fallacies:

In order for emotional fallacies to be analyzed and assessed, the author proposes a conceptual framework for handling them in the public discourse considering the following domains that can help.

1. Communication limits: whether the fallacy is situational (only one situation with an emotional frame usually unexpected or threatening) or contextual (all surrounding influencing environmental factors or events) .

2. Influence: whether the influence desired is positive or negative.

3. Formality: whether the fallacy is formal (occurs in the form or structure of an argument) or informal (occurs in the content of an argument).

4. Communication sphere: whether the target of the fallacy is directed to one single person, or one or more persons in a specific group that might affect the whole group.

5. Communication climate: whether it is warm and enthusiastic due to the social tone of a relationship and both parties are mutually valued, or threatening and unsafe due to the power experienced from a party over the other.

6. Facets of communication: concerning breadth (various facets of the targeted person) or depth (the tiny details of that person)

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7. <u>Mode of discourse</u>: whether the fallacy is committed in oral discourse using loaded language, or takes the graphic form using ambiguous language.

8. <u>The soundness of morality</u>: whether the fallacy is of moral normativity or in an immoral order.

9. <u>Reasoning</u>: whether reasoning inside the fallacy is inductive that goes from the general to specifics or examples, or deductive that goes the opposite way.

10. <u>Placement</u>: whether the fallacy is committed in the process of the argument or in its product.

Communication limits
- Situational
- Contextual

Infuence
- Positive
- Negative

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Formality
- Formal
- Informal

Communication shere
- Personal
- Intergroup

Communication climate
- Warm and enthusiastic
- Threatening and unsafe

Facets of communication
- Breadth
- Depth

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Mode of discourse	The soundness of morality
Oral	Moral
Written	Immoral

Reasoning	Placement
Inductive	Process
Deductive	Product

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