

Kritiks and Their Implications in IPDA

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Abstract

Kritiks are a form of argumentation that first found their way into debate in the early 1990s. They ask the judge to look at assumptions made by the opposition and the harms those assumptions have on the round and on society at large. While they have been controversial in almost all debate formats, this is especially true in the International Public Debate Association (IPDA). This paper looks at three main arguments against using kritiks in IPDA and shows how they are based on fallacious arguments. Then, it shows that these false arguments are not only repeated in formal IPDA publications, but also create a culture that fears kritiks and discourages their use for no real reason.

Introduction

Academic debate is broken down into two sides, one affirming the resolution (the affirmative) and one negating the resolution (the negative). Within the context of their round, both sides are required to hold up a specific burden. The affirmative has the burden of proving the resolution true, and the negative has the burden to clash with the affirmative. The negative, therefore, is not necessarily charged with proving the resolution false, but merely clashing against the affirmative's advocacy (Edwards, 2008, p. 99; Prager, 2002, Chapter 14, p. 3).

As debate has evolved, both sides have developed increasingly creative measures to advocate their position and fulfill their respective burdens. One of these revolutionary ideas that has risen is known as meta-argumentation, or meta-analysis. These terms are used to mean debating about debate. They are usually presented as arguments of topicality or kritiks. Both of these styles of argumentation are found primarily in policy debate. Topicality has been an important part of policy debate for quite some time, and is one of the five stock issues (Edwards, 2008, p. 73).

However, kritiks are relatively new on the scene, having been used for the first time in 1991 (Bennett, 1996, p. 1). A kritik is another type of argument also found primarily in policy debate. Bennett describes a kritik as "a form of attack that attempts to redirect the focus of debate to whether or not to reject ideas which support or uphold undesirable ideology, language, institutions or world views" (p. 1). Essentially, the kritik asks the judge to reject the opposition's argument because it is founded on some unsavory principle.

There are almost limitless types of kritiks found functioning in policy debate. Bennett breaks them into three overarching categories: thinking, rhetoric/language, and values.

Thinking kritiks looks at presuppositions and assumptions about rules, frameworks, structures, and systems of thought. Language kritiks examine use of rhetoric that is sexist, bigoted, or dangerous. Value kritiks challenge the premises or expose contradictions at either external or internal ethical levels. (p. 1)

Prager (2002) breaks these down into specific kritiks, and outlines thirty different categories of kritiks, admitting it is only a partial list. Some of the kritiks he lists are capitalism, feminism, international relations, patriarchy, security, and statism. These popular kritiks are named by the problem area they are used to point out in an opposition's argument. Thus, a feminism kritik would be one that points out that the opposing team's argument is based on some principle that is intrinsically harmful to women, etc.

Kritiks are used to point out a major flaw or assumption in an argument. One example would be to explain "You operate within paradigm X. Paradigm X is bad. Therefore, your plan is bad." This works when a debater proposes a plan that operates under paradigm X. Paradigm X could be any of the above-listed kritiks that Prager mentioned, or a myriad of essentially limitless others. For example, communism: one debater would argue that the opposition's plan works within the realms of communism, which is bad for certain reasons that the debater would supply. The debater would then ask the judge to reject the opposition's plan based on this flaw.

A kritik is a more advanced tool in a debater's box. It requires a debater to take a step back from the issue and look at the assumptions made before the argument was even created. It also requires that a debater convince a judge to do the same - to step back from the issue and look at the larger picture.

Kritiks in the International Public Debate Association

The International Public Debate Association (IPDA) was founded in 1997 as a breakaway group from traditional formats of debate. It sought to provide a forum for more extemporaneous and public style debate than the academic debate forums of the time offered (IPDA Mission & Philosophy, n.d.). Almost 15 years later, IPDA holds to the notion that debate should be a public activity that supports education and real-world applicable debate and speaking formats (IPDA Constitution).

The founders believed that debate in other formats became overly technical because judges were recycled. By this, they meant that a debater went through his or her four years in college, learning from senior debaters (who had also gone through their four years) and coaches. He or she was judged by graduate students, former debaters and coaches. Thus, everyone had the same mentality when it came to debate.

To prevent the new format of debate from having this same problem, and to continue to encourage the extemporaneous speaking style, it was proposed that tournament directors use lay, or non-professional, judges to adjudicate IPDA debate rounds. The IPDA Constitution (2010) requires that any IPDA judge have a ninth grade education and be of “average intelligence.” Tournament directors are also encouraged to train judges as little as possible, presumably to prevent any biasing of judges.

Aside from eligibility, there are only a handful of rules to IPDA. One of the few is that the affirmative has the right to define, but must do so fairly (IPDA Constitution, 2010). Another rule specifically states that the reading of evidence verbatim is not allowed. Debaters are allowed to paraphrase and memorize information, but not read it exactly. Aside from these, there are very few formal rules limiting a debater’s ability to define and debate the round as he or she sees fit.

However, some debaters argue that there are implicit rules and regulations that prevent debaters from using certain forms of argumentation. Ducote and Puckett (2009) suggest in their article “Meta-Debate: A necessity for any debate style” that IPDA uses “tacit understandings and pressure” (p. 65) to discourage the use of meta arguments in debate rounds. They say that IPDA members encourage the idea that meta-arguments should not be used, cannot be used, and are not understood when they are used.

The following will analyze the rhetoric of the arguments against running meta-arguments, specifically kritikis, in IPDA rounds. This will be broken down into three main arguments used against the specific meta-argument format kritikis: (1) Kritikis require running standards, which are not allowed in IPDA; (2) kritikis do not fit into the “real world” style of IPDA and won’t be understood by lay judges; and (3) kritikis are a unique argumentation format that are too different from other types of argumentation to be applied to IPDA. Following the analysis of these arguments, evidence of the repetition of these arguments and the implications of continued discouragement of kritikis will be analyzed.

Standards don’t apply.

The first argument is based around the idea that to run a kritik, a debater must also run the standards that apply to that kritik. This means that within each step of the kritik, the debater will explain an issue of the affirmative’s case then explain it with historical and status quo evidence. It also means that at the end of the kritik shell, the debater will give a decision rule, or explain to the judge why the kritik is a voting issue.

The crucial part of explaining these standards is backing them up with evidence. The argument about standards relies on this fact coupled with the IPDA rule that prohibits the verbatim reading of evidence. Proponents of this argument say with these factors mixed, it is impossible to run a “true” kritik.

Bennett (1996) said there are three requirements to present a kritik well. The first is that it should be presented as early as possible in the debate. The second is that it must be, and show how it is, relevant to the debate. The third, and final, is that it has to be understandable.

Prager (2002) said there are five characteristics of a successful kritik. First, it questions assumptions made in the round. Second, it is presented as an absolute argument (it cannot be weighed and required either a yes or a no from the judge). Third, it is not required to be unique. Fourth, it does not have to present an alternative, so it is non-comparative. Fifth and finally, it is a *priori* (meaning it should be judged before all other issues).

Neither of these models requires that a kritik be backed with standards or evidence to be successful. Instead of standards and evidence being a requirement of a successful kritik, it is more likely that they are just traditional kritik structures in policy debate. For example, there is no requirement in the IPDA constitution that a competitor present a weighing mechanism during the round, but it is something that is usually standard in an affirmative argument (IPDA Constitution).

It is also important to remember that IPDA does use topics that require the presentation of evidence, just not in the traditional policy debate format. IPDA debaters use current events and examples that are common knowledge to prove points within round. This style of presenting information could also be used to back a kritik.

Looking at Bennett's model, general knowledge information could be used to fulfill all three requirements. The first, presenting the argument early, has nothing to do with using evidence. The second, showing the relevance to the debate, can be explained through analogies, popular current events, and historical examples. The third, understandability, has nothing to do with the presentation of evidence. Thus, under Bennett's model, a kritik could successfully be run in IPDA without reading evidence and standards.

Prager's five step model appears to have the same results as Bennett's. The first characteristic, questioning the assumptions in the round, has little to nothing to do with using evidence and mostly relies on critical analysis. The second, presentation as an absolute, also has nothing to do with evidence or standards. Neither do uniqueness or being non-comparative. The fifth, *a priori*, is the only one that could require standards. However, explaining to the adjudicator *a priori* in round is not outlawed in the IPDA Constitution, and therefore could still be done.

Thus, looking through the requirements to run a successful kritik, it can be seen that standards and evidence are not reason enough to prevent a kritik from being run in an IPDA round. The argument that running a kritik also requires running standards and evidence does not hold up when analyzed.

This is the real world

However, in analysis of the requirements for a kritik, a new issue and

another common argument arises. This is the argument that kritiks do not fit into the “real world” style of IPDA and won’t be understood by lay judges. For example, Prager’s fifth requirement of running a successful kritik is that the debater explains to the judge the importance of the kritik as a priori.

While it is true that a kritik is an advanced style of argumentation, there is no reason it cannot be used in an IPDA round. IPDA debaters do not limit themselves to running only basic arguments against their opponents. It is not uncommon to hear about fiat, links and brinks, disadvantages, counter plans, and a myriad of other more advanced argument structures.

Bennett (1996) explains that in competition, kritiks have been largely unsuccessful because they can be difficult to explain properly. However, this does not make them unusable. He argues that as long as debaters do not sacrifice clarity in order to mask the issue they are running, kritiks can be understandable and used in round. In fact, Bennett outlines five conditions that should be met before a kritik should be run, one of which is that “the attack should be understandable both in intent and structure” (p. 3).

Essentially, Bennett is arguing along the same lines as the IPDA founders. He is pointing out that an argument must be understood to be run effectively. Therefore, for example, a kritik of statism could easily be run and explained to the lay judge in an IPDA round. This could be done by explaining the significance of state’s rights in both the writings of the founding fathers and the Constitution. So, an action by the federal government that encroaches on state’s rights would become eligible for a statism kritik. As easily as this can be explained in a few lines of text, it can be explained to a lay judge.

The second branch of this argument is that kritiks are too technical and would not fit into a real world argument. However, this seems to be largely untrue. In fact, Bennett argues that often times, debates become too focused on things that will never happen and that kritiks can serve to tie the argument back to the real world. An affirmative advocating a plan that could or would never happen in the real world is just wasting everyone’s time. By running a kritik on this plan, the negative helps remind the judge that there are more important issues that should be focused on (which can still be explained within the scope of the resolution).

On a more practical level, though, opponents of using kritiks in IPDA argue that in an everyday argument, someone will not reject their opponent’s argument based on the language they use. However, again, this researcher would argue that this is largely untrue. Michael Calvin McGee (1999) posits that society divides ourselves into ideographs that we identify with, like Republicans and Democrats. These simple words are used to define large, complex ideas. However, they also divide into subgroups that focus on differences. Essentially, McGee’s theory could be used to point out that in society, people will immediately begin to differentiate from one another based on their membership in one of these groups (p. 427-432).

Jesse Delia's (2008) theory of constructivism also lends understanding to this phenomenon. Constructivism is the idea that as individuals grow, they group experiences into lump sum categories, like short and tall. These words are meant to encompass a variety of meanings. Essentially, as a person begins to build their reality, they attach meaning to words that are based on their personal experience (p. 123).

A third theory, social judgment, attempts to predict how someone will judge a message that contradicts with their own beliefs and how this judgment will affect their own beliefs. This theory predicts that if the person hearing a message contradictory to their own beliefs (like listening to a speech on pro-life when the listener is pro-choice) the listener will likely experience the "boomerang effect" which means that they will shut down to the message and listening to it will actually strengthen their own original beliefs (Littlejohn & Foss, 2008, 71-73).

What this means in terms of the applicability of kritiks in the real world is that it is not uncommon for someone to reject another's argument simply because they use a certain word. These words carry a rich history that is different to each individual, but can have severe consequences in a conversation. It is neither unheard of nor uncommon for someone to reject another's argument simply based on word choice. Therefore, in a debate round, a debater asking a judge to reject an argument based on word use should not be that uncommon either.

An example of this would be if, during the constructive speech, the affirmative referred to women as being less capable of comprehending math than men. The negative would then be put into the realm of running a feminism kritik. The negative would explain to the judge that the affirmative's language is harmful to women, explain the history of the subjugation of women and then express how using language like this in round is not only harmful to the debaters in the round, but women in greater society. If this argument had been made in "real life," or the world outside the debate round, many would say that the person on the receiving end of the "women can't be good at math" argument would be justified in rejecting the rest of the argument based on the ground that the arguer was bigoted against women. Bennett (1996) argues that the kritik is an important tool for debate because it "reminds [debate] participants of the need to examine and consider the implications of values, language and thought processes" (p. 2).

In short, while there are many arguments that kritiks are not real-world applicable and cannot be explained to a lay judge, with proper breakdown and clarification, there is no reason a kritik cannot be successfully used in the lay atmosphere of IPDA.

Too Different to Work

The third main argument against using kritiks in IPDA is that kritiks are a unique argumentation format that are too different from other types of argumentation to be applied to IPDA. This is based on the idea that kritiks are a

relatively new argument structure, and came about in a radically different format than any other type of argument before them.

However, Shanahan (1993) argues that “the kritik is *not* that new way of debating...” (p. A-4). Shanahan is not alone. Several articles reference the application of kritiks either as very similar or even identical to a disadvantage (Prager, 2002, p. 1; Edwards, 2008, p. 113 & 144; Bennett, 1996). This doesn’t seem like too radical of a notion since kritiks and disadvantages all fall into the category of critiquing some particular aspect of the affirmative case.

For example, Edwards points out the importance of outlining the link in disadvantage structure. While he is against the use of kritiks, he later argues that one of the most important ways to break a kritik is to break the link. He is inadvertently pointing out that both the kritik and the disadvantage must both link to a specific fault of the affirmative somewhere in their case. While Edwards believes that they should link to particular actions within the plan (a disadvantage to that action), the kritik can link to any aspect of the plan, including the language used. When explaining what a kritik is, Prager (2002) even goes as far as to explain the kritik through the framework of a disadvantage. “I admit, the analogy between a kritik and disadvantage is not a perfect one – but there are enough similarities to give the new student some idea of what kritik argumentation is like” (p. 3). Bennett (1996) also argues that “a sound kritik can easily become a disadvantage...” (p. 5).

Disadvantages are typically thought of as a basic form of negative argument construction. As such, there is no open contestation of the use of disadvantages in IPDA. And while kritiks are not the same as disadvantages, there are similar in structure and style. Therefore, looking at a kritik as a branch of disadvantages, the argument that kritiks are too different seems to fall away.

However, as previously stated, kritiks are not disadvantages, and so they may be too different to work in IPDA. So, this researcher posits that another type of analysis be used. Kritiks fall into the umbrella head of meta-arguments. Another type of argument that often gets lumped into this is the issue of Topicality. Topicality asks the judge to take a step back from the debate and look at whether or not the affirmative team is operating within the scope of the resolution. For example, does the resolution posit that bananas are better than oranges, but the affirmative is talking about puppies and kittens?

Similar to the kritik, topicality functions a priori, meaning that it must be evaluated before any other arguments in the round can be addressed. It functions as a type of argument that goes outside the scope of the traditional argument/clash style and becomes something else all-together. It is very similar in function and application as the kritik.

While topicality has been, at times, a controversial argument style, it is also one of the five stock issues of debate. The IPDA constitution even encourages a negative calling topicality if the affirmative has abused his or her right to

define the round. “Affirmative’s are allowed to define resolutions; however, Affirmative interpretations and definitions must leave Negatives fair ground for the debate. If an Affirmative’s case is too lopsided and/or tautological (used to define itself as winning by definition), this opens the door for the Negative to provide an alternate set of definitions” (IPDA Constitution).

So, looking through this lens, a kritik should also be a valid form of argumentation in IPDA. It is similar in structure and format to a Topicality argument, which the IPDA Constitution clearly supports in cases where the affirmative has abused their constructive speech. However, once again, some will argue that kritiks and topicality are too different for this to apply.

Keeping this in mind, perhaps there is another argument structure that is, in some respects, very similar to that of the kritik—the counterplan. Edwards (2008) argues that a *process* counterplan “proposes to do the affirmative plan through a different procedure from the one specified in the plan” (p. 123). This can be directly applied to the structure of a solid kritik.

Take the previous example of the statism kritik. If the affirmative team supports the federal government taking a certain action, and the negative team runs a statism kritik explaining how the affirmative language abuses the powers of the federal government and takes away the rights of the states, the negative could easily then apply a counterplan that does the affirmative plan, but through a state agency. In this respect, some kritiks and counterplans seem to go hand in hand. While counterplans are not as widely accepted in IPDA, they are still considered a viable style of argumentation.

Thus, when considering the argument that kritiks are too different to be applied to IPDA, this researcher must disagree. Kritiks borrow structure formats from other styles of argumentation, namely the disadvantage, the topicality call, and the counterplan, that are all used and accepted styles in IPDA. Therefore, how can kritiks be so drastically different that they do not belong in IPDA? The answer is that they aren’t.

Anti-Kritik Bias in IPDA Formal Publications

As Ducote and Puckett (2009) point out, there has been a bias against meta-arguments and meta-debate within the IPDA community. As an organization, IPDA tends to shy away from any style of argumentation that is overly-technical. Eldridge (2008), in a brief summary of IPDA, argues that IPDA was born when “debaters began to get fed up with very technical and rapid-fire debate” (p. 7). As a relatively new form of argumentation, the kritik is often viewed as highly technical (as can also be seen in the three above arguments against using kritiks in IPDA).

Looking at the formal publication put out by IPDA annually, the Journal of the International Public Debate Association, each issue since the journal began publication has included this theme of either fearing or avoiding either technical debate or kritiks themselves (Cirlin, 2007, p. 12; Eldridge, 2008, p. 7; Duerringer, 2008, p.16; Ducote & Puckett, 2009, p.65-69; Key, 2010, p.10-11).

While kritiks have been a highly contested argument structure since they first appeared in the early 1990s, IPDA publications seem to have a specific fear of using them and their supposedly highly technical delivery style.

From personal research and conversations, this researcher believes that many of these complaints arise from simple lack of understanding of the kritik and its use. As previously quoted, Bennett reminds debaters that a kritik must be understandable and explainable to be used correctly. Thus, if debaters can find a way to take technical jargon and explain it to the lay judge, there is no reason to avoid complex argument structures.

Drake (2008) seems to encourage IPDA debaters to stop shying away from the technical on the basis of not knowing how to break it down. He argues that “We should call logical fallacies by name. Sure, we may have to explain them, but so what? It will only take a moment...It is okay for us to construct a syllogism, to use an enthymeme, and to call out a logical fallacy” (p. 4). Drake seems to be encouraging IPDA debaters to break out of the mold that lay judges will not understand technical arguments as long as the debater does a good job explaining it, echoing the comments by Bennett.

However, Drake seems to be only one voice in a sea of dissent against the place of both kritiks and technical arguments in IPDA. Until IPDA debaters learn to break down complex forms of debate, they will be forever doomed to repeat simple argumentation styles that leave both the judges and debaters lacking complex debate understanding.

Conclusion

While kritiks themselves are a highly contested argument structure, their use seems to be especially discouraged in the International Public Debate Association debate format. Of all the arguments against using kritiks in IPDA, three main arguments arise, (1) Kritiks require running standards, which are not allowed in IPDA; (2) kritiks do not fit into the “real world” style of IPDA and won’t be understood by lay judges; and (3) kritiks are a unique argumentation format that are too different from other types of argumentation to be applied to IPDA.

However, upon careful analysis of each of these arguments, a pattern of fallacies becomes apparent, as does a fear of the technical and a documented bias against running kritiks in IPDA. Many of these arguments only hold water in the realms of rumors, lack of understanding, and, at times, simple laziness.

This researcher believes that kritiks could have very successful application in IPDA as long as debaters remember to make their arguments logical and to thoroughly explain them to the adjudicator. By avoiding certain types of arguments based solely on their complexity, IPDA becomes a debate format that remains stagnant instead of growing and evolving. Careful research and application could lead IPDA to become a format of debate that embraces meta-arguments, complex logic and rhetoric, and even the dreaded kritik.

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