

Does the interviewer commit the fallacy of the straw man?

In this essay I will be analysing an interview of Jordan Peterson by Cathy Newman. The goal of this essay is to elaborate on Peterson's standpoint and to evaluate Newman's response using the fallacy theory laid out in the book 'Argumentation: analysis and evaluation' (Frans H. van Eemeren, 2016) to determine whether Newman commits a fallacy.

There is a strong debate on the idea on why humans structure their societies in a hierarchal system. Some believe that hierarchies are a sociological construct, meaning that these structures were invented by humans and can be controlled by human intervention. The common idea is that people imposed these structures to exert power over others. Peterson attacks this position, claiming that humans arranging themselves into hierarchal structures is an inherent characteristic and uses his controversial example of the lobster to demonstrate this. Near the ending of the interview, Cathy Newman urges Peterson to explain his stance regarding "the lobster".

Peterson explains that the reason he uses lobsters as an example is because humans diverged from lobsters about 350 million years ago with a common ancestor. Lobsters have a similar nervous system to humans which is run on serotonin and is attuned to status (position in the hierarchy). Serotonin is a neurotransmitter that regulates emotions and thus entities with high-status experience more positive emotion than entities with low-status. He further explains, "They [lobsters] have a nervous system attuned to hierarchy. And that nervous system runs on serotonin, just like our nervous system do. The nervous system of the lobster and the human being is so similar that anti-depressants work on lobsters. And it's part of my attempt to demonstrate that the idea of hierarchy has absolutely nothing to do with socio-cultural construction, which it doesn't." (*Jordan Peterson's Channel 4 Interview by Cathy Newmann - Full Transcript*, 2018). To which Newman responds, "Let me get this straight. You're saying that we should organize our societies along the lines of the lobsters?" (*Jordan Peterson's Channel 4 Interview by Cathy Newmann - Full Transcript*, 2018). Newman's response is a purposeful misrepresentation of Peterson's standpoint in an attempt to make it appear ridiculous. In doing so she is violating the standpoint rule 3 (Frans H. van Eemeren, 2016).

Rule 3 states, "A Party's Attack on a Standpoint Must Relate to the Standpoint That Has Indeed Been Advanced by the Other Party" (Frans H. van Eemeren, 2016). One way to violate this rule is to misrepresent the opponents standpoint by either exaggerating it, oversimplifying it, or taking it out of context and then attacking the misrepresented version of the standpoint. This is coined the fallacy of the straw man. The term straw man is used because the antagonist attacking their creation of a fictitious and weaker standpoint of the protagonist is analogous to fighting a man made of straw as it is a ridiculous opponent and easy to defeat.

The premise of Peterson's argument was to demonstrate that the phenomenon of human hierarchies is an inherent human characteristic and specifically not a socio-cultural construct. To attack his standpoint, Newman misrepresents his premise by exaggerating it and expanding it to include him believing that we should go as far as to rearrange our societies along the lines of the lobsters. This is seen as an exaggeration because Peterson did not indicate any preference to modifying how humans structure their societies, let alone structure it along the lines of the lobsters. It is possible to suppose that Newman made an implicit premise explicit, however, this is not possible because in his argument Peterson made his premise explicit by stating, "And it's part of my

attempt to demonstrate that the idea of hierarchy has absolutely nothing to do with socio-cultural construction, which it doesn't." (*Jordan Peterson's Channel 4 Interview by Cathy Newmann - Full Transcript*, 2018). Thus the premise that Newman restated was a purposeful misrepresentation of the intended standpoint. This is made clear when Peterson again restates his intended standpoint, "I'm saying it is inevitable that there will be continuities in the way that animals and human beings organize their structures. [...]".

In this essay I have shown that Cathy Newman commits the fallacy of the straw man in her interview with Jordan Peterson, violating the standpoint rule (Frans H. van Eemeren, 2016). The standpoint brought forward by Peterson was misrepresented by Newman via exaggeration in an attempt to make it appear ridiculous. Newman's restatement of Peterson's premise was a clear misrepresentation as Peterson states his premise explicitly in his argument and Newman's restatement did not reflect the explicit premise.

References

Frans H. van Eemeren, A. F. S. H. (2016). *Argumentation: Analysis and Evaluation* (2 ed.). Routledge.

Jordan Peterson's Channel 4 Interview by Cathy Newmann - Full Transcript. (2018). Retrieved 03/04/22 from <https://scrapsfromtheloft.com/psychology/jordan-petersons-channel-4-interview-cathy-newman-transcript/>