
SENSE-MAKING, STORY-TELLING, AND THE UNSPEAKABLE IN R/RELATIONSHIPS

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The “under-appreciated drive for sense-making” takes many forms, and one of the most interesting takes place when we seek advice from others in a challenging situation. To get the help we need, we must make some sort of sense of what is going on – enough for our interlocutors to grasp the essence of the problem. At the same time, however, we may find ourselves with missing pieces: aspects of our situation that do not make sense, and that lie outside of the range of what we can clearly articulate. The best advice, in turn, is that which can speak to and reveal those gaps, reorienting our thinking so that what appeared to be a puzzle takes a new form. This task takes a particularly urgent form when the person is in an exploited or abusive situation. Understanding how people make only partial sense of bad situations is not only an interesting question for the cognitive scientist, but a potentially crucial part of helping people gain the agency they need to escape abusive and damaging partnerships.

To understand how sense-making works in these situations, we drew on a large dataset of posts to the advice-seeking subreddit *r/relationships*, a well-moderated discussion board where people post about challenge they face in dealing with (usually) an intimate partner. Beginning with a set of more than 100,000 posts made between February 2019 and February 2020, we narrow down our corpus using topic modeling to a small subset of 3512 posts dominated by words associated with, on closer examination, emotionally and physically abusive relationships (e.g., “My boyfriend yells and curses at me because I told [*sic*] drop the conversation when he tells me to”; “My Fiancé (21M) hit me (20F) but insists he only pushed me”; “My boyfriend and I fight a lot. We’ve been together 6ish months. The fighting has definitely gotten less often, but now it’s gotten worse.”).

This subsample provides a particularly urgent and clear example of the challenges that people face in sense-making under duress. In many of these cases, the poster is conflicted about their experiences, and can not fit the pieces together in a way that makes sense to them – even though, from the outside, the situation may seem to match stereotypical and classic accounts of an abusive and uncaring partner.

To understand how people report these conditions, we track how they introduce words associated with the abuse in the course of their narrative. A simple hidden Markov model reveals a three-stage “rise and fall” pattern: in the course of recounting their situation, posters gradually introduce more and more words associated with abusive behavior, with a peak coming in the second quarter of their account. Their narrative then turns away from this content, in the third quarter. A final coda returns to abuse-related content, but at a lower rate.

Taken together, these results help us understand how people both report the abuse they are receiving, and also partially retract, or walk back, the implications of what is happening. They provide a new window onto a problem familiar to both clinicians and the “ordinary” person who may find themselves, or a close friend, in a similar situation.

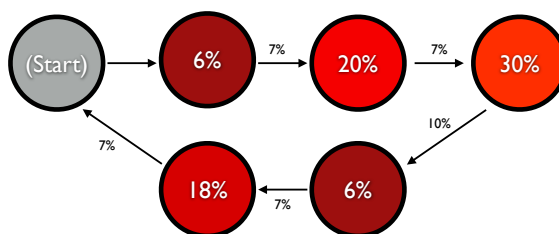


Figure 1: Hidden Markov Model for the narrative scripts of abusive relationships. Node labels describe probability that the word at that point is associated with abuse; arrow labels show transition probabilities; all other transitions are self-loops.