

Social psychology: sense-making in crises



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Contents

Introduction	4
Learning outcomes	5
1 What is sense-making? What is framing?	6
1.1 How framing shapes sense-making	7
1.2 Additive and transformative frame changes	9
2 Sense-making in dynamic action	12
2.1 How the 'Points of View' advert manipulates sense-making	14
2.2 Building blocks of frames: the symbol	17
3 Sense-making in social psychology	18
3.1 The experience of an experiment: Heider and Simmel	18
3.2 Social psychologists making sense of Heider and Simmel	20
3.3 Contrasting frames: the experience versus the academic description	22
Conclusion	25
References	26
Acknowledgements	27
Glossary	27

Introduction

The aim of this free course is to help you understand the fast-changing world around you through the lens of a new form of social psychology: second order sense-making.

By **sense-making**, we mean literally the transformation of our relations to things into human sense. It is, as this free course will show, at the heart of a **social** psychology that is responsive to the specific concerns of the twenty-first century – the fast shift in perspectives; the innovations changing our very ways of life; the permanent **crisis** involving political and social dimensions.

In response to this, you will be introduced to a version of social psychology whose main aim is to make sense of how people themselves in various settings make sense of their world. And what is more, as you will see throughout the course, sense-making is intimately linked to crises. Often this is invisible as we go about our daily business, buried in the hurly-burly of everyday life. Times of crises, however, can rupture our sense-making and open us to uncertainties and anxieties, as well as excitements and opportunities. Aspects of our lives, whether private, cultural or political, can literally cease to make sense. To restore sense requires conscious effort.

In this free course, you will first be introduced to the fundamental idea of sense-making, as well as the concept of framing. You will then apply this perspective to some everyday events. Finally, you will consider a classic social psychological study from the perspective of sense-making.

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Learning outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

- understand social psychology as second order sense-making
- understand the concept of the frame as a sense-making tool
- apply a sense-making perspective on everyday data.

1 What is sense-making? What is framing?

Sense-making is at the heart of social psychology. But if social psychology is about making sense of how people make sense of their world, then what is sense-making?

Sense-making is the transformation of our relation to things into human sense. It is the process through which our relations, actions and experiences gain meaning and become communicable. This section will introduce you to a concept at the heart of the sense-making process: **framing**.

This concept is an important device for sense-making. But, before you look at how framing shapes sense-making, you will begin by asking: 'What is a frame?'

What is a frame?



Figure 1 A framed painting hanging in a gallery-like setting.

Think of a framed picture hanging on a wall (like that shown in Figure 1, for example). In the image you are thinking of, the frame is likely a wooden, metal or plastic structure surrounding the picture. But what is this structure doing? Here, the frame facilitates and shapes sense-making by supplying boundaries. For the sense-making observer, the frame's boundaries distinguish between what is included within the picture and what is not. The frame is not part of the picture, but neither does it belong to the wall. It is a kind of threshold object that helps differentiate the picture from the wall.

While a picture frame is material and quite static, the concept of framing also serves as a useful analogy in more dynamic situations. Think, for example, of how a conversation between two neighbours can be framed. For example, it might start and end with polite rituals like 'Hello, nice weather we've been having ...' and 'Well, it was lovely to chat. I hope you have a nice day.' The conversation takes place in the *time between* these two rituals. In other words, the rituals provide a 'frame'. In this case, the frame is not simply

spatial (like a picture frame) but temporal. It begins with a 'greeting' and ends with a 'parting'.

Conversations can also involve a further layer of contextual framing. For example, what someone says after a greeting can frame the topic to come. Imagine, for example, if one neighbour says, 'By the way, about that cooking pot I borrowed...' This remark frames the interlocutors' expectations of what their conversation will be about – in this case, the borrowed pot.

Frames, then, are not just brute 'things'. Rather, they function as *devices*. More specifically, they function as devices which *limit* and lend *structure* to sense-making, thereby shaping how sense-making is likely to unfold. Once you start thinking of frames like this, you might start finding them everywhere!

Still, an important question remains: is a frame merely something extra and essentially unnecessary (like the decorative frame without which the painting would still be a painting) or of merely conventional importance (like the saying of 'goodbye' which allows us to part ways)? Or is it that framing is actually something fundamental to the activity of sense-making? After all, a decorative frame around some doodle may serve to define the doodle as a work of art – as would, in a wider sense, the institutional frame provided by the presence of an art gallery hosting the doodle!

In the next section you will think more about framing as a device for sense-making.

1.1 How framing shapes sense-making

Now that you have been introduced to the concept of 'the frame', you will explore how framing can shape sense-making. In Activity 1, you will see how frames can help sense-making but also hinder it.

Activity 1 You've been framed!

 Allow around 30 minutes to complete this activity.

Look at the terrified woman in the image below. This close-up image of her facial expression allows you to see that she is terrified, displaying many of the classic facial patterns associated with extreme fear: her mouth is open in a scream, her eyebrows are furrowed, and her eyes are tightly pinched shut. What terrifying scene has she just witnessed?

Now click on the image to reveal a wider frame.

Interactive content is not available in this format.



By clicking on the image, you zoom out from the close-up. As the frame expands, you now see a picture of tennis player Serena Williams – the photograph was actually taken immediately after she defeated her sister in the 2008 US Open Tennis Championships final.

Now spend a few minutes noting down your thoughts in response to the following questions.

1. What happened to your sense-making when the expanded frame showed you a bigger picture? In other words, what changed about how you made sense of what you were seeing?

Provide your answer...

Discussion

If this activity worked as we anticipated (and, as explained below, there is no guarantee that it did), then you will have accepted that this was the face of a terrified woman when you first looked at the close-up image. In other words, the sense you made out of what you saw was that this person's face was expressing fear. What probably happened next is that, after seeing the bigger picture, you completely changed your mind about the emotion this face was expressing. The sense you made of what you saw after zooming out was likely that Williams is quite ecstatic, not terrified.

2. Why did this happen to your sense-making? In other words, how did the change of frame shape how you made sense of what this woman was experiencing? Was it simply that more of this picture was included because of the expanded frame?

Provide your answer...

Discussion

You may have noted that part of what happened to produce this change in your sense-making was that you realised this was a picture of the famous tennis champion Serena Williams. Since she is famous, it is possible, of course, that you may have recognised her even in the close-up (if so, this might have made you less vulnerable to accepting that her face was expressing terror).

You were probably aware that, although no details on Williams' face changed, you now understood more of the context thanks to the expanded frame of the bigger picture. This is because, once you enlarge the frame, more of the image becomes visible: her outfit, her tennis racket, the background detail, and the way her clenched fist is raised. All of these details – now included in the frame – combine and influence your sense-making.

You may also have noted that there is a further layer of framing at play – one that exists outside the picture. Did you notice how the textual description of the face as expressing fear also framed what you saw? In other words, we on the course team framed this activity in a way that may have misled you. Perhaps you even felt that it was you who were framed!

This is an important point to reflect on. Whenever you engage in sense-making, you are doing so from a particular point of view that is embedded in a particular context. When looking at the close-up image of Williams, you did not just view a face – you viewed that face under a specific discursive description. So, if you did experience this quite radical change in sense-making (from an expression of terror to one of joy), it is because you accepted the suggestion 'Look at the terrified woman in the image below'. What you saw (your perceptual sense-making) was influenced by what was said (your discursive sense-making). You may have noticed that this

misleading discursive description was a key, though perhaps unnoticed, part of how the initial image was framed.

Context is a complex idea. In Activity 1, you saw how framing functions as a device for shaping sense-making by setting up what counts as 'context'. For example, you saw how expanding the frame changed the sense you made of the expression on the face you were observing.

You may find it helpful here to differentiate between two aspects of sense-making: first-order and **second-order sense-making**. Notice, for example, that in this activity you were making sense of how Serena Williams was making sense in the moment she was pictured. In particular, you were making sense of her emotional or affective sense-making (was she making sense of the world fearfully or joyfully?). This positions you as a second-order sense-maker of Serena's **first-order sense-making**. Once you saw the bigger-picture image of Serena Williams, you made different second-order sense out of *her* first-order emotional sense-making. In other words, you experienced her expression very differently as the frame was changed because you understood more about what she was actually feeling when the photo was taken.

This distinction between first-order and second-order sense-making is not static and fixed, but dynamic. Put simply, a second-order sense-maker occupies the position of a 'subject' in process of making sense of an 'object' who is also a sense-maker. So, in observing the picture of Serena Williams, you acted as a second-order sense-maker and the picture of Serena served as the 'object' you were making sense of. But these positions are not static because your own sense-making can also be the 'object' for some other second-order sense-maker. Also, when a second-order sense-maker 'changes their mind', in the way we hope you did during the last activity, it typically draws their attention to their own sense-making process. You may even have taken a second-order perspective on your own sense-making process (and become an observer of your own way of observing). In this case, your previous sense-making becomes the 'object' of your present sense-making. You 'turn around', as it were, on your own sense-making. Small as this point may seem, it is quite fundamental to becoming a social psychologist.

1.2 Additive and transformative frame changes

Reflecting on evidence from personal experience is the beginning of scientific **theory**. In the previous section you experienced how frames can shape sense-making, so you now have a personal evidence base from which to arrive at a very important theoretical insight. Namely, what you have learned about framing so far points to two types of change relevant to sense-making:

- Additive change – change whereby ever more details are added within the frame of an already existing pattern of sense-making.
- Transformative change – change whereby the pattern of our sense-making itself changes as a new frame arises.

Activity 2 What's in a frame, and what lies beyond it?

 Allow around 20 minutes to complete this activity.

Interactive content is not available in this format.



Look once again at the images of Serena Williams, and reflect on what you experienced when you first clicked the close-up image and saw the bigger picture. Spend 2–3 minutes thinking about why the close-up image was so deceptive compared to the second, wider image. Then write down your thoughts about how your sense-making might have gone through:

1. additive changes
2. a transformative change

Assuming you could identify a transformative change, also note down why you think this transformation happened.

Provide your answer...

Discussion

1. You might have noted that, on one level, in the wider picture (i.e. the zoomed-out frame), you simply see more of the context. For example, you see Serena Williams' body as well as her face, and you see some things in the foreground and background. You see the raised left fist, the tennis racket firmly gripped by the right hand, the sports clothing and the signage on the arena behind her. All of these details add more information about the sporting context that were missing from the close-up. In other words, quite a lot of real context had been deliberately removed from the close-up picture compared to the wider picture; indeed, practically everything except the facial expression itself. This missing context, then, was added back in when the frame was expanded.
2. You may also have noticed that these additional details do not just accumulate in an additive way to the impression you form. Rather, at a certain point, it is likely that the whole pattern of your sense-making was completely transformed. Although we cannot know for sure, we think you probably experienced a small example of transformative change when you realised the woman in the picture was joyful, not terrified. That is, as the frame zoomed out, you did not simply experience more information added to an unchanging core. To the contrary, we would predict that what you experienced went through a change of frame in which the very pattern of your sense-making shifted. The observed facial expression shifted from a terror or fear pattern to a joy pattern.
3. A large part of this transformation likely arose when you realised the actual context of this facial expression (i.e. that it was part of a tennis match). You may not have realised that it was Serena Williams from the first image you saw. And even if you still didn't recognise her after seeing the bigger picture, at least you could grasp that she is a tennis player.

But you may also have noted that it is not just that important contextual information was *removed* from the close-up (and added back in by the big picture). Rather, a key manipulation was actually something added to the close-up (and something false). This key manipulation was, of course, the discursive description 'look at the terrified woman in the image below'. Together, these features of the bigger picture that had been *removed* in the close-up, and this deceptive feature that was *added* to it, are likely to have been key to the transformation of your sense-making. Essentially, in the close-up, the facial expression alone had been actively abstracted from the wider field of activity in which it had actually been embedded. This focus made the face *less* comprehensible and made it easier to manipulate your sense-making by adding a new context (by subtle discursive suggestion).

You'll learn more about such transformative shifts in the pattern of sense-making throughout this course. As you will see, even the second-order sense-making of scientists can go through such transformations (sometimes called a '**paradigm shift**').

Activities 1 and 2 were designed to teach you, through your own experience, some important points about sense-making. In summary, these include the ideas that:

- we are second-order sense-makers who try to make sense of other sense-makers
- we always make sense *from* a perspective or point of view
- any perspective provides a limited frame for sense-making, and there are always different frames with different perspectives to be found
- a different perspective may simply add new information to some information we already had, leaving this original information more or less the same; but a new frame may completely *transform* the meaning of the original information
- perspectives can change dynamically over time.

In the next section, you will develop these ideas in a more complex example by considering moving, rather than still, images. Introducing this temporal dimension will help you grasp how, in everyday life, the frames for our sense-making are dynamic and ever-changing. Thus, the process of making sense is always provisional because it is ever ongoing.

2 Sense-making in dynamic action

Section 1 ended by pointing out that, in ordinary life, the process of framing is never static because sense-making frames may at any time change. Next, you will complete some activities involving moving images. This section is based on a 1986 advert for *The Guardian* newspaper entitled 'Points of View'. As you will see, the advert takes advantage of the fact that dynamic frames shape sense-making by manipulating the viewer's *perspective*, or 'point of view', on objects and events.

As with Section 1, the activities in this section will guide you in developing theoretical insights. You will also be introduced to the concept of symbolism: in Section 2.2, you will explore how changing (or downright manipulating) a frame is possible because frames draw on culturally shared symbolic resources for communication.

Activity 3 Frames are core to sense-making

 Allow around 30 minutes to complete this activity.

Task 1

Watch the 'Points of View' advert. Try to focus on how and why your perception of what happens in the advert changes as you watch it. In other words, pay attention to any transformative changes in your sense-making.

View at: [youtube: _SsccRkLLzU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SsccRkLLzU)



Video 1 The Guardian 'Points of View' advert.

Task 2

Now that you have watched the advert, spend some time noting down some of your reflections on the video. You will analyse the advert in more detail in the next activity, so focus on your immediate thoughts for now. You can use the following questions to prompt your thinking.

1. How would you describe the event you were shown in the video? In other words, what would your definition of the situation you saw unfold be?

Provide your answer...

Discussion

The video shows one man rescuing another from beneath a falling pile of bricks. This is the event, and we would define it as something like: 'Thanks to quick reactions and bravery, one man rescues another from being hit by falling bricks on a street'.

2. Did your understanding of what was going on in this scene (i.e. your definition of the situation) change? If so, at what points during the video did you notice these changes?

Provide your answer...

Discussion

We on the course team would answer: 'Yes, our understanding of what was going on changed.' When we see the first man (who turns out to be the rescuer), we are not sure what he is doing. He appears to be in a hurry, and there is a hint that he might be fleeing from something unseen. Perhaps he has been up to no good?

Then, from the second camera angle, we can see that this first man is running directly towards and reaching out to grab at a second, smartly dressed man (who he eventually rescues). Here, we get a more definite impression that the first man is up to no good – it seems as if he is about to steal the second man's briefcase.

It is only in the third and final scene, which shows yet a further camera angle, that we see the full story, and the event turns out to be an act of rescue.

3. Do you think you were engaging in second-order sense-making (i.e. sense-making about how the characters in the video were making sense) as you watch the video? In which case, can you describe this? Was your changing definition of the situation part of this sense-making?

Provide your answer...

Discussion

Our answer to this on the course team is 'yes': as we watched the video, we felt that we were engaging in second-order sense-making. For example, in the first part of the video, we thought that the first man was escaping from some undefined situation. We attributed these intentions of escape *to* him.

In the second scene, our view of his sense-making changed – we thought of the first man as having the intention of robbing the second man. Also, we noticed that the second man clearly appeared to be surprised and perhaps scared of the first man running towards him. Here, therefore, we also made certain assumptions about how this second man was feeling and thinking. At this point, from the perspective of our second-order sense-making, the scene involved a man with criminal intent and a scared victim.

However, the sense we made of this event changed completely in the third scene. Here, we attributed only good intentions to the first man – he intended to save the second man. In fact, we made sense of the first man as being quite quick thinking and brave. The second man was probably still scared but, as soon as the bricks fell, we think he would have been enormously grateful. We didn't know quite what to make of the bystander's thoughts or feelings. Perhaps she was trying to make sense of the situation as we were.

Clearly, the 'Points of View' advert is designed to be deceptive to make a point about the dangers of reaching premature conclusions about people's motives. It achieves this

deception by offering different camera angles. Much like the images of Serena Williams that you saw in Activity 1, these camera angles offer a limited frame to the viewer. Thus, as each frame changes, so too does the sense-making of the observer. In the next activity in the next section, you will go into greater depth about how these sense-making effects are created.

2.1 How the ‘Points of View’ advert manipulates sense-making

Activity 3 gave you another opportunity to see how framing shapes sense-making. The next activity will take you into more detail about how that manipulation is achieved and why this matters for sense-making. You will continue to learn experientially about *how* the transformative changes in your sense-making took place. The ‘Points of View’ advert was, of course, cleverly arranged into three related scenes, each with a voiceover. In Activity 4, you will watch these three scenes in isolation and analyse each of them separately.

Activity 4 Going into more detail about how an event changes in meaning

 Allow around 45 minutes to complete this activity.

Scene 1

Watch the first scene of the ‘Points of View’ advert from 00:00 to 00:08, then answer the following questions. You only need to note down a few sentences for each question.

1. What did you see and hear in this scene, and from which perspective?
2. What did you think was happening in the scene (i.e. what was your definition of the situation) the first time you watched it?
3. What cues prompted the impression you first formed about the nature of the event?

View at: [youtube: SsccRkLLzU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SsccRkLLzU)



Video 2 The Guardian ‘Points of View’ advert (Watch from 00:00 to 00:08).

Provide your answer...

Discussion

1. Scene 1 starts from a perspective at street level and looks towards a woman who is standing in a doorway with her arms folded. She is looking straight ahead, and across your line of sight as the observer. A man dressed in casual clothes with a closely shaven head then appears from around a corner at a junction on the road that is directly in your line of sight. He appears alarmed. At

the same time, a car enters the scene from the same direction. The man quickly turns and runs along the pavement in the direction of the woman, who turns her head to the right towards the man. The soundtrack accompanying this scene is a man's voice saying: 'An *event* seen from one *point of view* gives one *impression*'.

2. As we, the course team, watched the video, we got the impression that something problematic was happening. For example, we wondered whether the man was escaping from the people in the car. So, implicitly, we were defining the situation as an 'escape'.
3. A few cues led us to form our impression. We noticed that the man was moving with urgency. We also noted that the car appeared from the same direction that the man was running *from*, and that the people inside the car were looking at him. We also noted the man's appearance. In particular, his combat-style boots and trousers, and his closely shaven head all influenced our thinking.

Scene 2

Now watch the second scene from 00:10 to 00:17. As before, make some notes addressing the following questions:

1. What did you see and hear in this scene, and from which perspective?
2. What did you think was happening in the scene (i.e. what was your definition of the situation) the first time you watched it?
3. What cues prompted the impression you first formed about the nature of the event?

View at: [youtube: _SccRkLLzU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SccRkLLzU)



Video 3 The Guardian 'Points of View' advert (Watch from 00:10 to 00:17).

Provide your answer...

Discussion

1. Scene 2 is from the perspective of an observer positioned behind the first man. As the scene begins, we see him running past the woman. As the camera pans right, this perspective reveals that he is running towards a second man, who is smartly dressed and holding a briefcase. This second man is walking away from our position as the observer, so we see the first man approaching him from behind. As the first man catches up, the second man turns in alarm, lifting his briefcase as if to defend himself. The first man, in turn, lifts his arms as if to grapple with him. The voiceover says: 'Seen from another *point of view*, it gives quite a different *impression*'. It is important that this scene follows the first and shows more 'things' and activities from a different perspective.
2. At first, we were not sure what was happening, although we could see the first man's clothing more clearly, which reinforced the observations we made about

the first scene. As the first man approached the second man and reached out for the briefcase, we felt certain that we were witnessing a robbery.

3. We noted several cues here. First, the first man was running towards the second, and he appeared to reach out for the second man's briefcase. We also took the second man's defensive posture as a cue that he was under attack. The briefcase and formal attire of the second man also led us to think he could potentially be a target for a robbery.

Scene 3

Watch the third and final scene from 00:17 to 00:25. Once again, note down your answers to the following questions.

1. What did you see and hear in this scene, and from which perspective?
2. What did you think was happening in the scene (i.e. what was your definition of the situation) the first time you watched it?
3. What cues prompted the impression you first formed about the nature of the event?

View at: [youtube: SsccRkLLzU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SsccRkLLzU)



Video 4 The Guardian 'Points of View' advert (Watch from 00:17 to 00:25).

Provide your answer...

Discussion

1. The third perspective is filmed from higher up and faces the direction the first man was running from. From this point of view, the observer can see that the second man was just about to walk under a dangerous swinging platform loaded with a pile of bricks that was about to fall onto him. The voiceover in this scene says: 'But it's only when you get the whole picture you can fully understand what's going on'.
2. We observed that the first man was, in fact, running to save the second man from serious harm by pushing him to safety beyond the falling bricks and rubble. We came to define the situation as a 'life-saving event'.
3. This scene shows the falling bricks and how they were endangering the second man. The main cue was the observable behaviour itself – the first man did indeed grapple with the second man with the briefcase, but only in order to push him to safety.

2.2 Building blocks of frames: the symbol

The activities so far in this course have helped you to begin to develop some useful theoretical concepts that are grounded in the data of your experience. Here, key theoretical concepts include:

- the frame is a device for shaping sense-making
- the distinction between first-order and second-order sense-making
- the importance of the 'definition of a situation' (i.e. the description under which an action or event is understood)
- the theory of two types of change: additive change based on adding details framed within an existing pattern of sense-making, and transformative change of that frame
- the role of contexts or fields and perspectives in framing definitions of any situation.

One final useful concept is **symbolism**. A symbol is anything that implies a meaning. There are many different symbolic systems, like traffic signs (where a red traffic light symbol means 'stop') or the technical language of mathematics (where the symbol '+' means 'addition'). Put simply, the mind is functioning symbolically when one aspect of our experience (which functions as 'the symbol') is referred to another aspect of our experience (which functions as 'the meaning' of the symbol). What counts as the symbol and what as the meaning can vary and is not fixed in advance.

You saw in Activities 3 and 4 how practically all the details in the images and videos functioned symbolically to 'cue' the overall sense you made of them. For example, the short hair and combat trousers of the rescuer in the 'Points of View' advert functioned as symbols to cue certain, perhaps stereotypical, meanings which, by the end, proved deceptive. The briefcase of the man who was saved also served to convey meaning.

The fact that your sense-making can easily be lured into forming impressions that might prove false certainly does not mean that symbolism is inherently flawed. It means that sense-making, thanks to the symbolism upon which most of it depends, is a complex, fluid and fallible process. You must learn to take care of it because you cannot do without it; it is the very basis both of your personal and of your shared sense of reality. Actually, until it does prove misleading, you typically fail even to notice this pervasive symbolism. Most of the time, it works in the background to enhance your sensitivity to an otherwise unpredictable future within a distant environment.

3 Sense-making in social psychology

So far in this course, you have started to become familiar with the concept of sense-making. In this section, you will start to think about why this concept is important to social psychology itself.

Social psychology sets out to understand how people make sense of the world – this is why, in this course, you will understand social psychology as second-order sense-making. But, of course, the people who practise social psychology are themselves sense-makers. This insight suggests that social psychologists and the scientific theories and **methods** they use to frame their research cannot ‘escape’ from sense-making. For this reason, a crucial task for anyone practising social psychology today is to ensure that the tools and approaches they use provide adequate frames for understanding what they are studying. In this section, you will experience Fritz Heider and Marianne Simmel’s 1944 study, ‘An Experimental Study of Apparent Behavior’, and will examine how this classic social-psychological experiment has been made sense of by psychologists.

3.1 The experience of an experiment: Heider and Simmel

In Activity 5, you will have a chance to experience what Heider and Simmel’s study was like for those participating in it. In the original study, the participants were asked to watch a stimulus material – a simple animation – and were given the instruction to ‘write down what happened’. In the next activity, you will watch the original animation and answer that same question.

Activity 5 The experience of an experiment

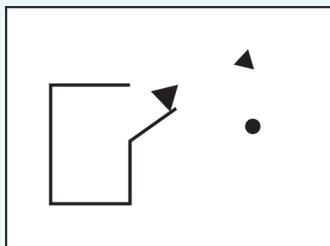
 Allow around 30 minutes to complete this activity.

Task 1

Watch the original stimulus video that Heider and Simmel showed to the participants. We recommend that you watch the video twice. You will then be asked to write down what happened.

Video content is not available in this format.

Video 5 Stimulus animation used in Heider and Simmel’s ‘An Experimental Study of Apparent Behavior’ (1944).



Now that you have watched the stimulus material used in the experiment, follow the instruction that Heider and Simmel (1944, p. 245) gave to their participants in 1944: 'Write down what happened in the picture'.

Try and write down what happened as succinctly as possible. Make sure you save your answer to this as you will review it later in Activities 6 and 7.

Provide your answer...

Discussion

Of course, we cannot be sure what exactly your response has been and what your interpretation is regarding what was happening in the animated stimulus. Who exactly are the 'characters' represented by the triangles and the circle? Are 'they' humans or animals? What motives do they have? There is clearly room for interpretation, as the video is rather rudimentary.

However, we would venture to guess that you did not simply write 'two triangles and a circle moving about'. Instead, these shapes represented animate beings. That is, you are likely to have described a story unfolding among characters that seem to have motivations and purpose.

Task 2

You will now reflect on an aspect of the video which Heider and Simmel (1944) did not think about in their study: the participants' *experience* of the stimulus. Briefly describe how you felt as you watched the video. In other words, what was your experience as you watched it?

Provide your answer...

Discussion

Some of us on the course team felt rather moved by the animated sequence, and this may be how you felt too. You may have perceived some threat or a sense of bullying coming from the larger triangle – and then some relief when it was finally outwitted. This simple animation therefore did not just evoke a story; it had the power to evoke feelings in us too. Or, rather, because this animation evoked a story, it could also evoke some affective response to this story.

In the original study, Heider and Simmel found that 33 out of their 34 participants described the animated sequence 'in terms of animated beings' (1944, p. 246); that is, they all perceived the geometric shapes and their physical movements in the video as representing something sentient and purposeful. In fact, 19 of the participants reported a 'connected story'. The following quote is a response from a participant that Heider and Simmel described as a 'common interpretation':

Then the two men have a fight, and the girl starts to go into the room to get out of the way and hesitates and finally goes in. She apparently does not want to be with the first man. The first man follows her into the room after having left the second in a rather weakened condition leaning on the wall outside the room. The girl gets

worried and races from one corner to the other in the far part of the room. Man number one, after being rather silent for a while, makes several approaches at her; but she gets to the corner across from the door, just as man number two is trying to open it.

(Heider and Simmel, 1944, p. 247)

It is certainly interesting that two triangles and a circle moving about can lead to such shared sense-making. In fact, they can even lead to us having *feelings* about the triangles and the circle! How do we make sense of these responses?

3.2 Social psychologists making sense of Heider and Simmel

Heider and Simmel's work was immediately recognised for its important findings, and it is still considered a classic study in social psychology today. As a result, it continues to be discussed in both academic and non-academic circles alike. But what exactly does it teach us? Interestingly, the multitude of social-psychological voices presenting, introducing and examining this study seem to say something very similar about it.

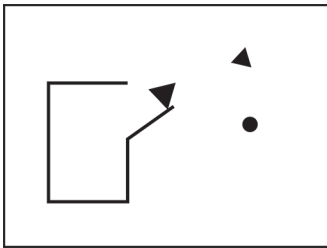


Figure 2 Still image of the animated stimulus material used in Heider and Simmel's (1944) study

In the next activity, you will explore the common frame that social psychologists use to make sense of Heider and Simmel's study, and you will examine it in light of your own experiences.

Activity 6 How is the Heider and Simmel study commonly made sense of?

 Allow around 30 minutes to complete this activity.

Task 1

Read the following quotes, which succinctly summarise Heider and Simmel's study. The first summary is from a standard social psychology textbook by experts Michael Hogg and Graham Vaughan. The second summary is a response to the question: 'According to social psychology experts, what was the Heider and Simmel (1944) study about?', generated by Microsoft Copilot, the generative artificial intelligence (AI) program.

Summary 1

The search for causes does seem to pervade human thought, and indeed it can be difficult to explain or comment on something without using causal language. Heider and Simmel (1944) demonstrated this in an ingenious experiment in which people who were asked to describe the movement of abstract geometric figures described them as if they were humans with intentions to act in certain ways.

(Hogg and Vaughan, 2008, p. 81)

Summary 2

Fritz Heider and Marianne Simmel's 1944 study 'An Experimental Study of Apparent Behavior' showed that people spontaneously attribute intentions and emotions to simple moving shapes. When participants watched animated triangles and a circle, they described them as chasing, fighting, or comforting – revealing our innate tendency to impose social meaning on abstract motion.

(Microsoft, 2025)

What was your first reaction to reading an expert account and an AI-generated summary of expert accounts of the study? How did the common frame represented by these quotes match up with your own experience of watching the stimulus?

Below, you can read your initial response to the stimulus from Heider and Simmel's study that you wrote in Activity 5. Look again at this response and then answer the poll question that follows by choosing your answer and selecting 'Submit Vote'. Once you have submitted your answer, you will also be able to anonymously see how other learners on this course have responded to this question.

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Discussion

Of course, we do not know what your answer may have been here. However, we on the course team felt that these descriptions, common among social psychology experts, somehow feel odd. This is because the accounts given by the experts frame Heider and Simmel's study quite differently from what we experienced 'participating' in it. For us, this provokes a kind of sense-making **crisis** – on one hand, we have our 'experiential frame' and, on the other hand, there is the 'expert frame', and the two are at odds.

Task 2

In order to understand the difference between your own 'experiential frame' and the 'expert frame', you will now contrast the two. Read, once again, both your initial response along with the two summaries, and compare and contrast how you made sense in your summary of the common sense-making that developed among social

psychologists. Try to note at least one crucial difference. You may use the following questions to prompt your thoughts:

1. How is the stimulus material described in each summary?
2. Do these descriptions match your own account?

Provide your answer...

Discussion

It is obvious that the video showed two triangles and a circle moving around. However, social psychologists tend to describe it as though these were *only* triangles and circles – that is, mere ‘abstract geometric figures’ (Hogg and Vaughan, 2008, p. 81). Because of this framing, there is a disjuncture between the original ‘abstract geometric’ stimulus and the response given by 33 out of the 34 participants who viewed the stimulus in terms of it being a story involving animated beings. For this reason, the social meaning (or story) is framed as being imposed on abstract motion.

This creates a disjuncture because the 33 participants who saw the shapes as animate beings (and maybe you saw them this way too) presumably felt they did not ‘attribute’, ‘project’ or ‘impose’ anything. Instead, it was the video itself that evoked their response – very much like a Disney animation would do these days.

3.3 Contrasting frames: the experience versus the academic description

Having experienced the Heider and Simmel (1944) experiment for yourself in Activity 5, and then having found out about how it is commonly understood in Activity 6, you have encountered two sense-making frames. The first frame is your own, based on your experience of watching the stimulus from the study. The other frame is that of the many experts who have subsequently written about or reported on this experiment – who, of course, give no sign of having participated in it in any sense.

Those participating in the experiment report a story and maybe affective responses to this story that are being *evoked* or *caused* in them by the video material. Social psychologists, in turn, learn from the study that humans cannot help but *attribute* or *impose* meanings onto the world: it is as though our minds played a trick on us. Social psychologists, then, seem to say: ‘there are simply some moving triangles in front of us but we cannot help but see them fighting!’

These two frames very conspicuously do not match. We have a crisis. Who is right? How do we decide?

Activity 7 Contrasting two frames

 Allow around 30 minutes to complete this activity.

In this activity, you will see your response to the Heider and Simmel stimulus from Activity 5 alongside the expert summary and the AI-generated ‘summary of expert

summaries' you read in Activity 6, where you examined the differences between these summaries and your experience. This time, your task is to consider which of these two frames is right and which one is wrong.

Spend around 5 minutes simply reflecting on the two frames. Then answer the poll question that follows by choosing your answer and selecting 'Submit Vote'. Once you have submitted your answer, you will be able to anonymously see how other learners on this course have responded.

Summary 1

The search for causes does seem to pervade human thought, and indeed it can be difficult to explain or comment on something without using causal language. Heider and Simmel (1944) demonstrated this in an ingenious experiment in which people who were asked to describe the movement of abstract geometric figures described them as if they were humans with intentions to act in certain ways.

(Hogg and Vaughan, 2008, p. 81)

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Fritz Heider and Marianne Simmel's 1944 study 'An Experimental Study of Apparent Behavior' showed that people spontaneously attribute intentions and emotions to simple moving shapes. When participants watched animated triangles and a circle, they described them as chasing, fighting, or comforting – revealing our innate tendency to impose social meaning on abstract motion.

(Microsoft, 2025)

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Discussion

In this case, we on the course team are firmly of the opinion that the participants (including you and us) are right and the experts wrong! Why? Because the experts seem to miss out one crucially important part of the study that we think the participants are all aware of: it is not just that the shapes in the animation move about; rather, the movement of the triangles and the circle *is coordinated*. That is, it is not the forms of the objects (i.e. the triangles and the circle) that tell a story – it is their movement with respect to each other that does!

Obviously, participants did not recognise an object, say, a 'bully' because what they saw was a big triangle. They recognised the shape as a 'bully' because its movement in relation to the other two shapes was not random or haphazard but communicated a relationship. Interestingly, therefore, it is the kind of affective and perceptual sense-making of participants that appears more adequate, whereas the sense-making of experts seems to be misguided. Heider and Simmel's study shows very clearly how dangerous it can be to neglect participants' experiences when approaching social psychological phenomena.

In this section, you have developed and examined two frames to understand Heider and Simmel's classic 1944 study. First, you participated in the experiment and therefore developed, spontaneously, an experiential frame. Then, you considered the typical social psychological understandings of this classic study, examining what you might call the common 'expert' frame. Finally, you compared and contrasted these two frames, noting rather important differences.

The discrepancy between these frames, in turn, brought about a crisis in your sense-making. Which frame is right? Where does meaning reside? Is it simply in the mind and something that we impose onto otherwise meaningless objects like geometric shapes? Or is meaning somehow something we sense out there in the world?

Meaning, however, is neither in the eye of the beholder nor simply 'out there'. Consider what Heider wrote about the stimulus in his autobiography: 'As I planned the action of the film, I thought of the small triangle and the circle as a pair of lovers or friends and I thought of the big triangle as a bully who intruded on them' (Heider, 1983, p. 148). In other words, when participants in this study perceived the coordinated movements of two triangles and a circle as acting out a story, what they perceived was a communicative act: the geometrical figures are meaningful in themselves because they were arranged to communicate that meaning by their creator Heider. Moreover, this was a successful communicative act because what the animation showed was not simply 'the movement of abstract geometric figures' (Hogg and Vaughan, 2008, p. 81). This 'movement' was not random or haphazard, but was arranged exactly so that you as a viewer would make sense of it as a story and, hence, that it would evoke feelings.

What Heider and Simmel (1944) teach us, therefore, is not really how many social psychologists understood it: that we somehow arbitrarily attribute meaning to an essentially meaningless world. Rather, it teaches us that we are connected through culturally shared symbols within a shared world. Those symbols can be used as meaningful elements to make sense and tell stories. Made sense of this way, Heider and Simmel (1944) were early forerunners of the message of this short course!

Conclusion

This free course introduced you to a social psychology developed for a twenty-first century where grounds, it feels, are continuously shifting. Social, political, technological change is permanent and so is the requirement that we make sense of these ever-transforming situations. Social psychology, as introduced in this free course, is the science of making sense in a disciplined and systematic way of the various practices by which we in our everyday lives make sense of the world around us – as well as ourselves in the ever-transforming situations.

You therefore completed a number of activities which helped you understand the everyday sense-making occurring around you. You learned about the concepts of the frame and the symbol which are the essentials of sense-making. And you also saw how the perspective of sense-making can be applied to a classic study in social psychology.

This OpenLearn course is an adapted extract from the Open University course [D360 Social psychology for the 21st century](#). You can find out more about The Open University courses and qualifications, tuition fees and funding options by visiting our [online prospectus](#).

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Microsoft (2025) AI-generated by Copilot with prompt 'According to social psychology experts, what was the Heider and Simmel (1944) study about', 14 October.

Acknowledgements

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Glossary

crisis

A situation that is perceived to be out of equilibrium or on the verge of being out of control such that, without appropriate intervention, a disaster or system collapse will take place.

first-order sense-making

A term used to designate the 'non-specialist' sense-making of ordinary people. (See also: second-order sense-making.)

framing

A concept widely used in the social sciences and humanities to indicate how a phenomenon can be made to 'show up' quite differently depending upon how it is contextualised or presented.

method

A method is any technical support for sense-making which enhances it by making it more methodical. Methods can enhance both empirical observation (e.g. using a brain scanner to observe brain activity) or theory (e.g. using inferential statistics to aid inductive reasoning and explanatory inference). Methodology is a theoretical reflection on method.

paradigm

A concept from philosopher and historian of science Thomas Kuhn, who argued that a science is born when it achieves the status of a 'paradigm'. Paradigms have two aspects, exemplary scientific discoveries ('exemplars') around which crystallise a 'disciplinary matrix' (including institutional arrangements like professorial chairs, journals, textbooks, conferences, etc.). In the course of its development, a given science might also go through a 'paradigm shift' (as when Newtonian physics was transformed by Einsteinian physics).

second-order sense-making

Sense-making about sense-making (as undertaken in the discipline of social psychology, among other disciplines). (See also: first-order sense-making; sense-making.)

sense-making

The set of processes (emotional, perceptual, cognitive and discursive) through which our encounters with others, things and self gain, lose and regain meaning as we live our lives. The word 'sense' stems from the old Indo-European root 'sent', meaning to strive, go, perceive or have direction, suggesting mentality in general. This meaning continues in the Latin sentire (to feel). The fact that we find this root in 'sensation' and 'sentence' shows that it spans both sensory perception and the semantic 'meaning' of discursive language (crudely, both seeing and saying, hearing and listening). The word 'making' indicates the active and constructive basis of our sense of reality. Our sense of reality is not just given but made, and that making is always enacted or tied to what we do. (See also: first-order sense-making; second-order sense-making.)

social

The meaning of 'the social' is complex because it includes everything from the dyad of a parent/infant interaction, or a group of football supporters to a nation-state within world society. All are social settings shaping experience and conduct, and so all are relevant to social psychology. The word 'social' has two obvious and related meanings. First, it means time spent with others. We say we socialise when we meet others, and 'being social' in this sense is a kind of activity undertaken with others. Second, it relates to society and its various organisations (social services, social security, social justice, etc.). Here, the social is a kind of environment, or system, framing our activity: that is, the concrete situation under which we live. The two meanings are related and ultimately inseparable. This is because society as the system under which we live is designed to mould our relations with others and our manner of living. The way we 'socialise' and spend time together is shaped by 'society' in the sense of organised structures like 'the family', 'school', 'the workplace', 'leisure facilities', 'municipalities', 'governments', 'states', and so on. The whole point of these organisations is to lend clear shape and purpose to our relationships. Hence, in the family we might relate as daughter to mother, whilst in the school we relate as pupil to teacher. Society, in this sense, lends order to the activities of its members, but at the same time, its order arises because of the activities of those members.

symbolism

In this course, the term 'symbol' is used in a broad and common-sense way to refer to a fundamental feature of mentality and sociality: that one component (or set of components) of experience can function as a 'symbol' with a 'meaning' that has

reference to another component (or set of components) of experience. This definition is influenced by the philosopher A.N. Whitehead. If seeing smoke means 'fire' for a given person at a given time, then in that instance, smoke is the symbol and fire is the meaning. Any aspect of experience can serve as a symbol or as meaning. So, for someone who, at a given moment, sees a fire and thinks of climate change, then 'fire' is the symbol and 'climate change' is the meaning. Humans have invented a set of tools called 'language' which includes words (like 'fire', 'smoke', 'climate change'). Words are specially designed to serve as symbols in language, but words can also be meanings. In most languages today, the words used are quite arbitrary spoken sounds or written squiggles that have acquired meaning through convention. The word 'symbol' is arbitrary in this sense, and different theoretical traditions use different words (like 'signifier'). This, as usual, can lead to confused sense-making. That is why we draw your attention to how we have defined the word symbol. What a structural linguist would call a 'signifier' and its 'signified', we are calling a 'symbol' and its 'meaning', because we find it a simpler way of expressing this quite profound issue.

theory

Systematic speculation grounded in logical, rational and intuitive sense-making. Theories can be pitched at different levels, from a theory of why George Floyd was murdered, to a theory of how any type of cause is attributed to any kind of event, to a 'grand theory of everything'.