Cognitive-Affective Mapping and Digital Peacebuilding

Evan A. Hoffman

Abstract

Ideologies play a fundamental role in the emergence, escalation and resolution of conflict by underpinning divergent narratives and worldviews. These ideologies are often developed and sustained through a combination of interrelated and deeply-held core beliefs, values and emotions which have been acquired over the course of a lifetime and become reinforced through several cognitive processes and biases. Thus, it can be very difficult to alter or change ideologies once they have been formed.

Yet, despite their central importance to conflict resolution, practitioners still need the proper tools to adequately visualise these complex ideologies in individuals and/or groups. Practitioners also have very few examples of ways to work with these divergent ideologies as part of a larger peacebuilding process.

This policy brief presents a technique for visualising ideologies using a new software tool called Valence that enables technology-assisted Cognitive Affective Mapping (CAM). It then offers lessons from a recent online conflict resolution exercise in which multiple stakeholders used this tool in an ongoing water conflict in Canada via a series of facilitated Zoom sessions held in 2020.

Introduction

Picture a situation in which clear-cut logging of some old growth forests on the West Coast of Canada has been ongoing for three months. One small faction of a group of environmentalists that began to protest peacefully has now become very angry and frustrated with its inability to stop the logging using peaceful means. The factionalised group firmly believes that the seriousness of its cause will only get the media attention it deserves if it rachets-up its tactics. The members decide to erect a roadblock on a busy highway believing this may get some new media coverage. The survival of the forest is so important to them that they are willing to be arrested for their actions. In fact, they are even ready to put their lives on the line.

Is a roadblock which has been erected by protestors to slow a logging process a heroic one last stand to fight for the survival of the old-growth forest or a reckless and illegal action which puts public safety at risk? The answer to this question will depend on the particular views and beliefs of those you ask.

In another example, a small and sleepy mid-Western town in the US has some new residents arrive and not everyone is happy about it. About 200 followers of an obscure religious group have set up a new temple in the mountains above town and the followers make frequent trips into town for groceries and other necessities. Their hairstyle and way of dressing in long flowing robes is not what the local townspeople are used to seeing and many instantly fear that they are cultists who are going to start another Jonestown right in their very own backyard. Some townspeople believe the only way to discourage any more of these "weirdos" and "nuts" from coming is to scare them away by sending a very strong message that they are not welcome in these parts. Rumours have begun to swirl of some of the men in town marching up to the temple with their weapons as a show of force. The religious group believes the rest of the townspeople will invade their headquarters so they decide to take up arms to protect themselves.

Is the religious group's move to arm themselves in response to the perceived threat an example of a practical approach to security? Or is it an unintentional signal to the rest of the townsfolk that they are becoming increasingly more militant, paranoid and unhinged so they should be closely monitored by local security forces? Again, the answer depends on the particular views and beliefs of those you ask.

As these two examples illustrate, beliefs, values and emotions are the substance of a worldview.[1] Peace and conflict resolution practitioners (as well as security forces and others) tasked with de-escalating these situations and creating sustainable peace would be remiss in not accounting for these factors. In the best-case scenario, it will make their peacebuilding work more difficult to ignore and, in the worst-case scenario, it will further

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[1] As Docherty (2001:50) notes, many other words such as cosmologies, mindscapes and worlds have been used in exchange with the term worldview.

inflame the situation. Worldviews play an important role in many types of conflicts, and peacebuilding processes need to account for this in order to be efficient and effective.[2]

This policy brief discusses how mapping worldviews using online tools can help with building peace by assisting the parties to become more self-aware of how their own actions contribute to the conflict. Moreover, they may also develop increased empathy toward others. It then introduces Cognitive-Affective Mapping (CAM) as a tool to visualise worldviews. Some of the lessons from a case study in which CAM was used in a water conflict in Canada will be presented. The conclusion contains policy recommendations for peacebuilders, donor agencies and others.

Worldviews and Peacebuilding

All good peacebuilding interventions need to be guided by sound analysis. Analyses of different aspects of the conflict provide important insights which can be used to determine the most effective types of interventions. More precisely, one or more analyses will generate valuable information to determine which specific peacebuilding tools should be used from the "peacebuilding toolbox" and how they should be sequenced. Many different types of analysis are important when planning a peacebuilding intervention and these can include a gender-sensitive conflict analysis,[3] an assessment of power relations,[4] determining what the negotiating positions and interests of the parties are, a stakeholder mapping, analysis of the types and levels of violence[5] and a cognitive affective mapping of the parties' beliefs, values and emotions (their worldviews).

There is a complex interplay between beliefs, values and emotions plus how they can create divergent worldviews supported by accompanying narratives. From a peacebuilding perspective, there are many good reasons to map these elements so that a more nuanced understanding of someone's worldview is obtained.

Some worldviews are oriented towards peace and peaceful ways of being in the world, whereas others are more divisive. These divisive perspectives may, in some cases. lead to more extremist views where the decision to use violence is made, as outlined in this section.

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[2] For more on the cost-effectiveness of peacebuilding see https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/expert-practitioners-key-undertaking-cost-effective-evan-hoffman/ and https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/which-peacebuilding-tool-most-cost-effective-evan-hoffman/

[3] Conciliation Resources has an excellent facilitator's guide for undertaking a gender sensitive conflict analysis. See https://www.c-r.org/learning-hub/gender-sensitive-conflict-analysis-facilitators-guide?mc_cid=5b21755679&mc_eid=82f70a68fa

[4] For some guidelines on assessing power dynamics see https://www.researchgate.net/publication/309232885_The_Mediator's_Handbook_for_Durable_Peace

[5] An analysis of the violence can be undertaken using a model such as Galtung's Violence Triangle which distinguishes between Direct, Structural and Cultural Violence.
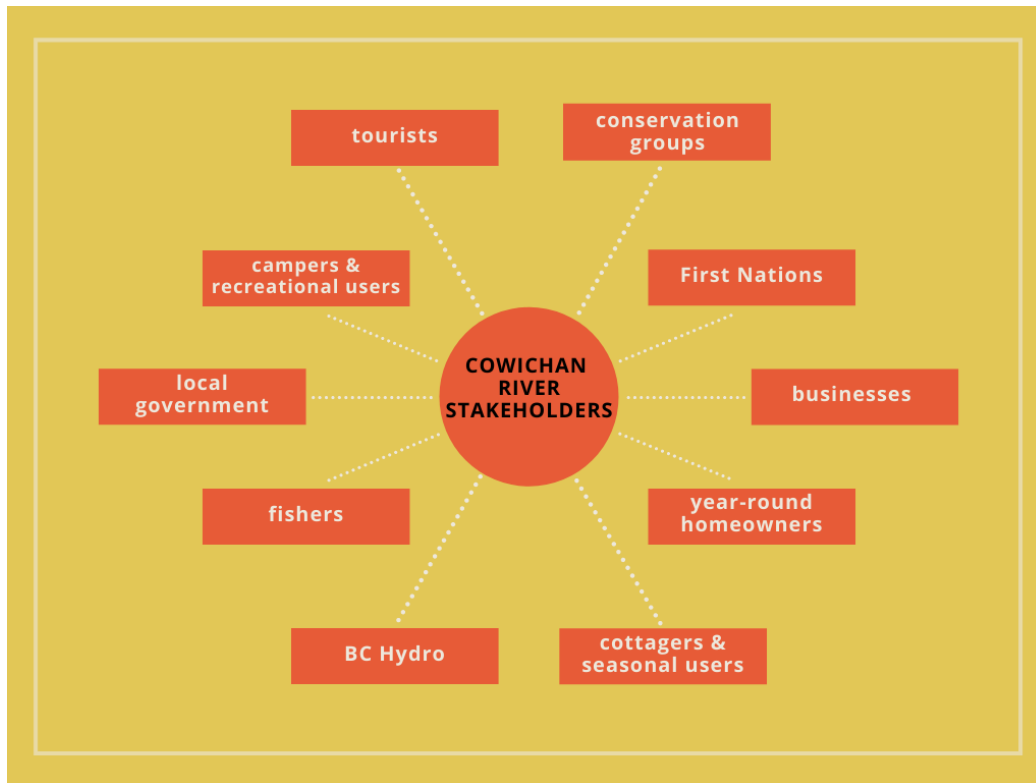
A simplistic mapping of just some of the numerous stakeholders who have a vested interest in water issues in the Cowichan Valley of British Columbia, Canada. This diagram was created using a free online graphic design tool www.canva.com and was useful for the research team to visualise the stakeholders during the planning stage.

More precisely, existing core values plus a series of life experiences combined with real or perceived threats can lead to self defence strategies in order to overcome a feeling of insecurity. That is, seeking "psychological shelter" in a group with similar views and beliefs provides a sense of comfort and safety.[6]

There are two very broad approaches to safety:
- defensive and/or offence-based measures
- dynamic engagement

Defensive and/or offence-based safety measures might include:
- locked gates
- fences and barricades
- pre-emptive attack or other uses of violence

Dynamic safety measures might include:
- neighborhood watch programme
- asking neighbors to check on your house while you are away

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[6] Some have speculated that the rapid rise and popularity of conspiracy groups such as QAnon, for example, can be partially attributed to the sense of comfort and power it provides to members in a world that is perceived as foreign and confusing.

These two approaches to safety roughly reflect how we feel about others around us. There are two basic groups of people that we can always place anybody into: "us" and "them."[7] Grouping people in this way has direct implications for how we treat them: people in the "us" group are dynamically engaged with each other, while we may feel the need to protect ourselves from those in the "other" group using defensive and/or offence-based measures.

Right leaning and more conservative ideologies appear to be more appealing to some people because they tend towards the narrative of protecting against perceived threats via strong defensive and offensive measures. Whereas, liberal views about managing threats via acceptance, assistance, aid, dialogue, bridge-building, increasing understanding and greater tolerance do not satisfy the immediate safety needs since these tactics are (often incorrectly) judged as weak and/or ineffective.

The problem with the defensive and/or offence-based measures approach is that it usually only increases psychological distance and separation between people and groups, thus fueling more alienation and distrust.[8] There is also an "in-group mentality" which may then emerge, which provides further psychological comfort. The group firmly locks on to their position and refuses to shift from it.[9] The in-group identity is further strengthened via the adoption of symbols and narratives which bind the group together.[10] As more dualistic thinking is embraced and polarisation deepens, there is less room for cognitive complexity which recognises that multiple views/perceptions/truths can simultaneously exist for different groups. This overly-simplified thinking may be expressed in simple chants and slogans which unite the group while further alienating members of other groups and portraying them as an enemy (such as, Lock her up! Build the wall!). Dehumanising language may be used about members of the other group (for example, calling them snakes, cockroaches or weirdos).

Compounding this is that holding a dialogue with the other group becomes less likely as they are seen as unworthy and distrust between the groups continues to rise. Compelling and influential leaders can further vilify the "other" group. They may provide constant reminders of how bad the threat is and they may even posit that violence may be the only option that will work to solve their safety and security problem by eliminating the threat altogether. As resources are directed towards the means to wage violence, we can say that the group has started to become militarised.[11]

Any new or counter-information which undermines the dominant narrative is disregarded via cognitive biases. Online "echo chambers" further reinforce the narrative.[12] Anger

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[7] For more on this see "I and Thou" by Martin Buber.

[8] The key to good security needs to be a balance between reasonable protective measures while also making attempts to draw more people into the "us" group. That is, always use multiple security measures to provide the best security.

[9] In the negotiation literature this is called a hardening of positions and because of the unwillingness to compromise once this has occurred, it can be very difficult to reach win-win solutions. A number of tactics can still be used, however, to help the stakeholders shift from positions to the deeper, underlying interests.

[10] It is not uncommon to see a manifesto of some sort published as well which outlines the group's hopes, fears and concerns plus goals. These documents can also provide important insights into a group's worldview.

[11] For example, by acquiring arms, digging in or fortifying their location and so on.

[12] For example, for more on how social media helps fuel QAnon see https://toda.org/global-outlook/qanon-

caused by perceived injustice or past humiliation is used as fuel to justify both the righteousness of the cause and the use of violence. Group dissenters and others with opposing views may be removed or controlled through a series of tactics such as discrediting them, threatening them and so on.[13] In other words, the moderates do not have a place in the group. This leaves less room for new opinions or views as the core group becomes further hardened and groupthink taints their decision-making processes leading to risky and/or bad decisions.[14] This culminates in the adoption of extremist views and actions.[15]

The overarching task of the peacebuilder in these types of situations is to help people shift from extremist worldviews to more moderate ones.[16] The starting point, as noted earlier, is to be able to visualise and have a framework to talk about worldviews.

Shifting Worldviews Helps with Building Peace

Good peacebuilding interventions need to be grounded in a clear Theory of Change (ToC).[17] The ToC of Cognitive Affective Mapping (CAM) is that if people in conflict map their worldview and share it with others, they will become more self-aware of how their own actions contribute to the conflict and they will develop increased empathy toward others. This will lead to measurable changes that reduce conflict levels.[18]

A ToC should lend itself to measurable indicators so degrees of change can be tracked. Based on the ToC for CAM outlined above, we want to measure the following four indicators:

1. Perceptions about the conflict
2. Self-awareness
3. Awareness of others
4. Empathy toward others

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and-mass-digital-radicalisation-peacebuilding-and-the-american-insurgency.html

[13] From this perspective it is clear to see how ideas themselves become a threat to established power systems and it is not uncommon for some governments to censor information or cut electronic communication channels such as Facebook and Twitter in times of crisis to help curb the spread of ideas which would undermine them. Other examples of slowing or stopping the spread of challenging ideas are the assassination of Jamal Ahmad Khashoggi by the Saudi government and the silencing of Russian opposition activist Alexei Navalny.

[14] For more on Group Think and ways to counter it see the work of Irving Janis.

[15] One approach to breaking down extremist views is to search for the humanity in others. See https://www.beyondintractability.org/essay/humanization-extremists

[16] It should be noted that the US military has experimented with this approach in different conflicts including in the Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan wars. The use of controversial Human Terrain Teams, for example, and other tactics have been employed in the past under the guise of counter-insurgency operations.

[17] For a helpful look at some common theories of change see OECD (2012).

[18] Note, this assumes that people are open and honest with their self-assessment of their ideologies (maybe someone is not self-aware of being racist for example or refuses to admit it). It also assumes that the stakeholders in the exercise are sufficiently 'close' enough to the conflict to actually impact the overall conflict dynamics.

The question remains, however, of how to visualise and better understand worldviews? As noted earlier, a new software tool called Valence enables technology-assisted [Cognitive Affective Mapping](#) (CAM) that can be used for this purpose.[19]

What is CAM?

Valence is a relatively new technology tool to map ideas as data points. Valence enables Cognitive Affective Mapping of the content of belief systems by treating ideas as units of data that can be calculated and factored by their relationship to other ideas. Valence and their work with CAM are part of the Ideological Conflict Project (ICP) at the University of Waterloo in Ontario, Canada. They define the technology as follows:

> [CAMs] depict the content of belief systems in a way that reflects how brains function, where the activation of one concept leads to the activation of another according to a characteristic pattern. Cognitive maps have already been in use for some time to [represent] beliefs as sets of connected concepts, allowing one to recognize distinct patterns in decision making. Cognitive-affective maps are different in that they depict the emotions attached to each concept, and the importance of emotion in determining how concepts are connected.[20]

For example, the CAM platform uses green **ovals** to represent emotionally positive (pleasurable) concepts; red **hexagons** represent emotionally negative (painful) concepts; yellow **rectangles** represent concepts that are emotionally neutral; and a purple oval inside a purple hexagon indicates ambivalence. Users can adjust the types of lines (dashed or solid) to depict connections between units on the map. Solid lines represent coherent or mutually supportive relations, whereas dashed lines represent relations between concepts that are incoherent or opposed. Moreover, the thickness of the lines connecting the concepts can be used to show the strength of the connection between the ideas with a heavy line indicating a stronger connection than a thinner one. Additionally, people will cluster different groups of ideas together in different ways, perhaps by placing two very close to each other on the screen to show the closeness of the concepts in their view. In this sense, they are a bit like fingerprints; each CAM is a unique reflection of the inner world of the person that created it. The platform can map simple or complex conflict. Each CAM will vary depending on the person creating it.

The diagram below illustrates a CAM centred on the concept of "water" which has been placed in the centre of the diagram. We know it is a neutral concept because it is in a yellow rectangle. Industry/Development is believed to be negative force impacting the water as indicated by the red hexagon and dashed line, whereas Conservation and Recreation are considered to be positives since they are in green ovals.

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[19] Ideological analysis can be performed in many different ways and four broad approaches to collecting data for ideological analysis can include behavioral inference, textual analysis, inquiry (questioning, interviews) and neuroscientific methods (Maynard, 2017).

[20] https://www.ideologicalconflict.org/research-tools/cognitive-affective-mapping/
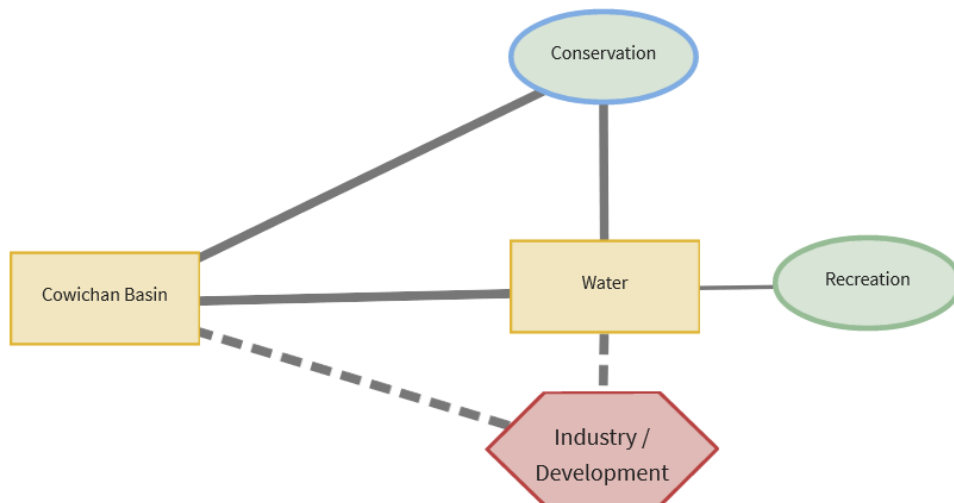
A simple CAM with water as the central concept

As illustrated by this simple CAM, "CAMs provide a quickly understandable holistic appreciation for what might be called a belief system's 'topology'—that is, of its gross structure and of the relationships among its macro components... [CAMs] provide an immediate gestalt of the whole system and of the simultaneous interactions between, and relationships among, its parts. This kind of appreciation is very difficult to communicate in words."[21]

Importantly, a person constructing a CAM must have some information about a subject's beliefs and emotions.[22] After that, the process for creating a CAM is to first login to the Valence Mapping Tool.[23] This can be done at home and in private or as part of an online group session in Zoom where users can see each other's work and share their screens with one another in real-time.

The mapper may be presented with a blank mapping screen or the screen may be pre-loaded with some initial core concepts that the individual doing the mapping can then reposition on the screen using their mouse. The mapper can also create new linkages between concepts or add more concepts to the initial ones.[24] Over time, more concepts can be added to the screen and more linkages can be added, as well, showing different types of connections between concepts resulting in a much more complete and more complex snapshot of someone's worldview, as illustrated below.

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[21] Homer-Dixon, Thomas, Manjana Milkoreit, Steven J. Mock, Tobias Schröder, and Paul Thagard. "The Conceptual Structure of Social Disputes: Cognitive-Affective Maps as a Tool for Conflict Analysis and Resolution." SAGE Open, (January 2014). https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244014526210.
[22] Ibid.
[23] See https://valence.cascadeinstitute.org/
[24] The core concepts would need to be loaded in advance by one of the session's facilitators.
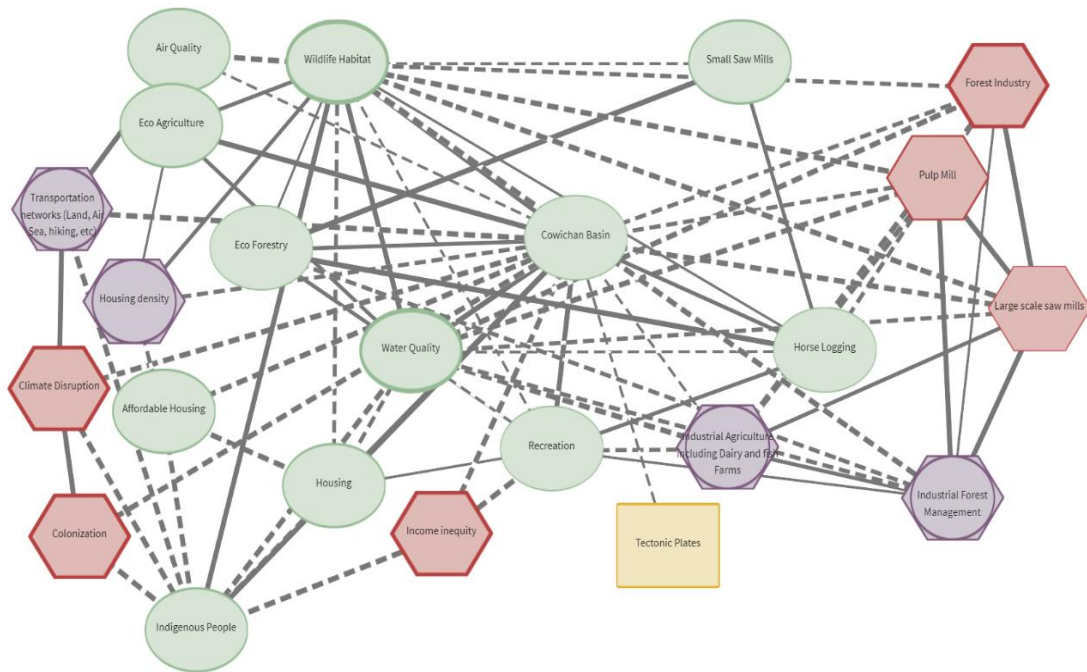
A much more complex CAM of water issues in the Cowichan Basin

Strengths and Weaknesses of Using Tech-Assisted Cognitive Affective Mapping

As with any conflict resolution tool from the larger "peacebuilding toolbox" there are a number of strengths and weaknesses associated with creating CAMs online, as outlined below.

Doing CAM online using a meeting tool like Zoom for the sessions can connect people from *across vast geographic spaces* (this reduces travel costs thus helping with inclusivity and cost-effectiveness) and the fact that no one ever meets in the same physical space also means that there is a greater degree of safety created in the sense that it is impossible for physical violence to occur between two or more participants. Moreover, not only can participants from across an entire country or a whole region work together on their CAMs in real-time, a global facilitation team can log into the sessions from different parts of the world. This means it is relatively easy for an expert from Asia, for example, to join the participants doing a mapping session in a small West Africa nation. These are unique strengths of CAM and they make it an important tool to use in highly-charged environments where the threat of physical violence is a real possibility.

Doing CAM online is very *flexible.* Sessions can be run with one stakeholder group, in a personal development setting via one-on-one coaching, with influential local leaders who can shift the conflict dynamics or with two or more stakeholders with opposing positions. Moreover, for conflicts with many stakeholder groups they can all meet online. In other

words, you could have groups of 50, 100 or even 200 people meeting online simultaneously to do CAMs. Traditional peacebuilding work in a face-to-face setting can be limited by the capacity of the meeting venue or training hall. Doing CAMs in an online setting eliminates the constraints imposed by physical room size and seating capacities.

CAM is *scalable*. CAMs could be created during an in-person session using flipchart paper and colored markers; one of the advantages of doing them online is that the digital canvas can be expanded. In a paper version of CAM, it is possible to run out of paper or there is need to write everything very small so it can all be included on the page. With online CAMs a huge amount of detail can be included in the maps. It is possible to zoom in and out to get a sense of both the bigger picture and the finer details.

CAM maps are easily shareable and this is a unique strength of them. The output from an online CAM session is a digital image such as the ones shared earlier in this policy brief. Because they are digital, hundreds if not thousands of them could be stored on a flash drive – something that would be next to impossible if the CAMs were created using flipchart paper and markers. This might be particularly useful for researchers looking to do large-n studies searching for trends occurring across multiple CAMs. Moreover, because the CAMs are in digital format they can be almost instantly shared with people on the other side of the planet via email. This means that a local peacebuilder using CAMs in a remote part of the world could email them to other peacebuilders in some other part of the world to assist with analysing them. In this manner, the local peacebuilding process would benefit from being able to tap into a global knowledge and expertise pool because the CAMs are in a digital format.

In terms of some of the shortcomings, doing CAMs online with the Valance Mapping Tool assumes all participants have a stable Wi-Fi connection and good computer with mic and camera enabled plus some minimal computer skills. For this reason, it may not be a good fit with some peacebuilding applications in developing nations and rural areas with limited internet access.

Doing CAMs online may create a digital footprint which, in some highly-charged environments, may create a security threat for the participants. Digital security needs should be assessed along with ways to allow people to participate anonymously.

Finally, a digital CAM provides only a snapshot of someone's worldview at the point in time that they made it. Worldviews are dynamic and evolving, so to help overcome this issue consider doing two or more CAMs at different points in time.

Lessons from The Cowichan Basin Case Study

During 2020, researchers from the ICP conducted a series of two-hour zoom meetings over the course of three Saturday mornings with people living in the Cowichan Valley region of British Columbia Canada.[25]

Each of the three sessions had a specific aim, as follows:

Session 1: Welcome and land acknowledgement, intros, ground rules, icebreaker activity, identify and discuss the conflict issues, pre-intervention survey + intro to CAMs and CAM software.[26]

Session 2: Mapping session. Map yourself first + others (your "opponent").

Continue working on CAMs on your own in between sessions 2 and 3.

Session 3: Group sharing of CAMs and debrief/lessons learned.

The Cowichan River flows from Cowichan Lake east to Cowichan Bay where it drains into the Pacific Ocean. Photo: Evan Hoffman

The aim of these sessions was to test the effectiveness of CAM as a tool in conflict resolution. A number of lessons were generated from this exercise, as outlined in this section.

In terms of our process, participants met in a Zoom meeting where they were guided by the facilitators to use the Valence Mapping Tool on their own computers to complete their own CAMs and one for their "opponents". Some core concepts were pre-loaded onto the screen.

Generally, the exercise was a success as outlined below:

> Statements by the participants as well as survey results indicated that participants gained valuable insights into their own thinking plus how others may shape their beliefs and worldviews. It was not that people were necessarily surprised by their individual results or the results of others in the group. But there was pride in showing one's CAM and explaining it to the rest of the group, to talk about it and listen to other people's stories. It became a useful focal point,

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[25] The researchers were Thomas Homer-Dixon, Steven Mock, Evan Hoffman and Hanna Ross.
[26] The CAM software we used was the Valance Mapping Tool. See https://valence.cascadeinstitute.org/

in this sense, for self-understanding and dialogue, and further applications in that regard are worth exploring.[27]

The Cowichan Basin exercise offers seven lessons on using CAM that may provide helpful guidance for practitioners

1. Consider the number and length of sessions (several shorter ones versus one or two longer ones): Zoom fatigue, losing momentum between sessions, and having enough airtime for everyone are all important considerations when planning the number and length of sessions.

2. Consider the number of participants: We had 16 people on the first session and six on subsequent ones. Ideally, aim for groups of no more than 8-10 maximum. One way around this for larger groups that we considered is to run concurrent side sessions. But this comes at a cost as large group learning potential is lost if some people have been sent to separate breakout rooms.

3. Hold an initial information session before the first mapping session. Our first session had a number of aims, as follows:

   • determine local conflict indicators (allows us to establish baseline and become familiar with the conflict dynamics)[28]
   • build capacity via training delivery on some essentials of conflict resolution (inform and educate participants)
   • encourage the early identification of interests and the range of perspectives on the major conflict issues
   • build trust and deepen relationships between participants
   • orient the participants to the terms and methodology (raises awareness plus builds a shared vocabulary/understanding)
   • obtain consent to go forward to the Intervention/Mapping Session

4. Use pre- and post-intervention surveys to monitor changes to the conflict indicators from the ToC.[29]

5. Consider alternative platforms. We used Zoom for a number of reasons (simplicity, familiarity, security, etc.) but other platforms may be just as good or better. We have looked at the possibility of using the Kumospace video chat application to meet online and the possibility it offers for more natural conversations to occur in the online space.

6. Interestingly, we learned that different people approached the online mapping in very different ways. That is, more precisely:

   People approached the technology in different ways: some throwing down concepts first, some creating narratives; some were compartmentalised, others

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[27] Ideological Conflict Project (ICP). 2021. Research Report on the Cowichan Basin CAM Exercise.

[28] The rationale for taking this approach to having the stakeholders define local peace indicators was based on the work of the Everyday Peace Indicators project. See https://www.everydaypeaceindicators.org/

[29] As noted earlier, we used four broad indicators (Perceptions about the conflict, Self-awareness, Awareness of others, Empathy toward others) to help us determine if our efforts were impacting the conflict dynamics but every conflict situation will have its own unique indicators which are reflective of the local conflict dynamics.

hyper-connected. As Evan put it, "[a CAM] is a bit like a Rorschach chart and people project their inner world into the blank mapping canvas. Thus, each CAM will end up being as unique as the person who created it. And in that sense, they are a bit like fingerprints. This can make it hard to do cross-analysis."[30]

7. Another interesting finding from the Cowichan Basin exercise was that "...the CAMs that participants drew of their purported 'opposition' appeared to have more red nodes to green ones as opposed to their own."[31] This would suggest that participants perceived their opponents to be angrier than they were themselves.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Ideologies play a fundamental role in the emergence, escalation and resolution of conflict by underpinning divergent narratives and worldviews. These ideologies are often developed and sustained through a combination of interrelated and deeply-held core beliefs, values and emotions which have been acquired over the course of a lifetime and are reinforced through several cognitive processes and biases. Thus, it can be very difficult to alter or change ideologies once they have been formed.

CAMs offer a unique and powerful way for groups and individuals to explore their worldviews. There is much potential in producing CAMs online using the Valence Mapping Tool as part of a digital peacebuilding process. Peacebuilders should consider using CAMs as both a direct intervention tool with the stakeholders themselves and as a planning tool to help guide and inform their overall peacebuilding efforts.

Moreover, donors should support these innovative digital peacebuilding efforts because of their potential in creating positive changes to the conflict dynamics and their success in doing so can be easily measured using local indicators which have been developed by the stakeholders as part of the CAM process.

Mediators may consider ways to embed CAM within the formal mediation process. There is great potential to use CAMs to help break stalemates when the parties' positions are "worlds apart". Further research should be conducted on this.

Lastly, security officials should familiarise themselves with the concept of worldviewing and how to use this concept for predicting the emergence of violent confrontations (such as the two examples introduced at the start of this brief) and gaining a better understanding of the ideas driving extremist views and actions.

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[30] Ideological Conflict Project (ICP). 2021. Research Report on the Cowichan Basin CAM Exercise.
[31] Ibid.

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The Author

Evan Hoffman holds a PhD in Political Science from the University of Canterbury (New Zealand). His research focused on international mediation and sustainable peace agreements. He also completed a Master's degree in Post-war Recovery Studies at the University of York, UK in 2001 and an undergraduate degree in psychology at Carleton University, Ottawa in 1999. In 2001 he earned a Certificate in Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) from CIIAN. Evan has published numerous articles on the themes of conflict prevention and resolution, peacebuilding, and mediation. He has provided consulting services to Global Affairs Canada (GAC), the Carter Center, the UN, the EU, the Ottawa Police Service, St. Lawrence College (Cornwall), the Vietnamese Ministry of Justice and others on these topics. Over the last fifteen years, he's conducted workshops and trainings with hundreds of community leaders, university students, police officers, and government officials from around the world. His books include *The Mediator's Handbook for Durable Peace* (CIIAN, 2010) and *International Mediation in a Fragile World*, co-edited with David Carment (Routledge, 2017).

Linked In https://www.linkedin.com/in/drevanhoffman
Twitter www.twitter.com/drevanhoffman
Email: Evanhoffman72@hotmail.com

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