

The Ideological Conflict Project
at the University of Waterloo

Research Report on the Cowichan Basin CAM Exercise



The Ideological Conflict Project is funded by an Insight Grant of the Social Sciences and Humanities
Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), 2018-2021

Research Purpose

During the Fall of 2020, researchers from the [Ideological Conflict Project](#) (ICP) at the University of Waterloo ran a series of facilitated online sessions with participants living in the Cowichan Valley of British Columbia to test the potential of Cognitive Affective Mapping (CAM) in helping to resolve ongoing water-related conflicts occurring in the region.¹

The Cowichan Valley was chosen as a location close to many of the researchers on the team, to which some had personal ties and familiarity with local issues. The goal of the sessions was to explore ways of using CAM, and the newly developed CAM software, Valence, to facilitate dialogue over controversial issues. As the exercises attracted a diverse range of participants that were difficult to divide into two clearly opposed sides, we opted to deviate from the original intention of conducting a simulated mediation or negotiation; offering instead more of a seminar in the use of the method and software to enhance self-understanding and empathy for opposing views.

The exercise was divided into 3 sessions of 1.5 scheduled hours each, all conducted over Zoom. Session 1 provided an overview of the CAM method and instruction in the use of Valence, followed by a brief, open-ended discussion soliciting participants' views on the causes of conflict in the Cowichan Valley. In session 2, participants used Valence to draw CAMs of their own views on the issues at stake. Session 3 was devoted to discussion of the CAMs participants produced in the previous session and what could be learned from them, along with an exercise where participants were asked to use Valence to draw a hypothetical CAM of a view opposed to their own. Session 1 was attended by 11 participants, and 6 participants remained for each of sessions 2 and 3.

This brief report outlines some of the main insights and findings from this exercise.

What did we learn about conflict in the Cowichan Basin?

Participants identified six key-conflict areas in the Cowichan Basin. Climate change was identified as an overarching threat that exacerbated most other identified areas.

- 1. Changing perspectives and attitudes:** Public attitudes generally assume water abundance in the Cowichan Basin.
- 2. Changing behaviors:** Promoting sustainable enjoyment of the Cowichan River (recreationally) and managing the volume of people floating down and swimming in the Cowichan River (e.g., sunscreen, toilet access, litter, public consumption of alcohol).
- 3. Establishing rights:** Indigenous water rights and unresolved land claims.
- 4. Meeting food security needs:** First Nations are finding it challenging to meet their fishing needs.
- 5. Addressing the negative economic impacts:** Property values are declining due to changing water levels, possibly caused by the weir.

¹ The researchers were Thomas Homer-Dixon, Steven Mock, Evan Hoffman, and Hanna Ross.

6. **Ensuring water for everyone:** Maintaining access to clean water for all users. Access is affected by the following issues:

- Rapid growth, development, and rezoning
- Sediment introduction from landfilling, increasing algae growth
- Recreational, industrial, and commercial usages
- Management of the upper basin (private land history is limiting)
- Old growth logging and logging of younger forests
- Apportionment of water between different user groups

Participants had mixed views on “recreation” in the Cowichan Basin with 3 people marking it in green (suggesting a positive feeling toward it), 2 in red (suggesting a negative feeling toward it) and one person not including it on their CAM (suggesting it wasn’t important enough to be included on their map).

It was unexpected that no one explicitly labelled the tubers as a major source of conflict in their CAM even though they were mentioned in the intake survey and the first zoom session. Rather, there seemed to be a sense of tolerance for them despite some frustrations with the pollution caused based on a few of the comments made during the sessions.

This is clearly a rich and complex conflict with several layers and numerous stakeholders. Luckily, many people are working towards making positive changes and there are existing mechanisms to foster cooperation and hold dialogues. That said, there is always room for creating even greater levels of understanding between stakeholders and fostering more cooperation on the management of the Cowichan Basin as long as it isn’t seen as redundant and/or working at cross-purposes with other initiatives. Some of the survey results reinforce this notion. This could be the aim of future ICP activities in the region.

CAM and conflict resolutions insights

We were unable to complete a conflict resolution exercise because all of the participants were from similar stakeholder groups with shared beliefs and worldviews. As a result, we were unable to assess the utility of CAM in that context. But as a tool used with members of a single stakeholder group, CAM was able to offer useful insights about the internal group dynamics.

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, in this sense, for self-understanding and dialogue, and further applications in that regard are worth exploring. It would be good to work on exploring CAMs in a personal coaching and/or self-development context. From a conflict resolution perspective, there is potential in doing CAMs on an individual basis with

community leaders, politicians, decision-makers and others with the power to create changes to the conflict dynamics.

CAM methodology insights

Even though our participants were ultimately from mostly the same stakeholder group as noted earlier, there was remarkable diversity and variance in the CAMs produced.

People approached the technology in different ways; some throwing down concepts first, some creating narratives; some were compartmentalized, others 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.”

This raises the question as to whether the structural properties of the CAM can be correlated to different ideological orientations and cognitive styles: for example, the extent to which people's worldviews are based on a principle of dense interconnectivity, which leads to a proliferation of links across the whole of the CAM, or oppositional tensions, which leads to clusters of nodes. If so, according to what metrics are these differences to be assessed: number of nodes, number of links, proportion of links to nodes, ratio between positive, negative and neutral valences, ratio of solid to dashed links, degree of modularity (crossing lines, hubs and spokes)?

One interesting finding was that the CAMs participants drew of their purported “opposition” appeared to have more red nodes to green ones as opposed to their own. It is revealing of the ways people tend to frame the average emotional valence of themselves vs. their opponents who they view as angry.

Next steps: ICP involvement in the Cowichan Basin

While our recruitment efforts were successful using local newspaper ads, Facebook ads, and direct outreach to personal contacts and key people, we need to recruit participants with different worldviews who use or benefit from the watershed but are not water-centric, perhaps through targeted advertising aimed at different user groups.

Cowichan Tribes representation is considered crucial to the validity of our research and the legitimacy of our involvement in regional issues, not just by us but by many of the other stakeholders we hoped to engage. Some people mentioned they would not participate without the presence and support of the Cowichan Tribes. We would like to continue seeking out participation from the Cowichan Tribes for future exercises.

Future CAM exercises in the Cowichan Basin should also be conducted with property developers and representatives from the forest industry as they were perceived as major stakeholders creating negative impacts. Better representation from all involved stakeholders would allow us to test the usefulness of CAMs for community conflict resolution.

However, we should also consider the use of CAMs in resolving one or more local small-scale 2-party disputes over very specific issues related to the watershed; for example, 2 neighbours disagreeing over the placement of a well. During Phase 2 of our work, we will offer free mediation/conflict resolution services and fold the use of CAMs into that process. Moreover, we will run individual CAM sessions with community leaders, politicians, decision-makers and others with the power to create changes to the conflict dynamics.

Lastly, we will aim to work in cooperation with existing water management and governance initiatives in the Cowichan Basin. There are established collaborative water and watershed sustainability efforts in the Cowichan/Koksilah watersheds with the Cowichan Watershed Board. The Board is co-chaired with Cowichan Tribes and the Cowichan Valley Regional District.

Contact Us

For more info about this project, please contact us at cowichanriverresearch@gmail.com