



MIND MAPPING AND CAUSAL MAPPING

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📖 Mind Mapping and Causal Mapping: Two Sides of the Same Coin?

I recently had a great chat with Liam Hughes from [Biggerplate](#), the global home of mind mapping. It got me thinking about how mind mapping and causal mapping are both about **making connections visible** — but they do it in quite different ways, for different purposes.

If you're a mind mapper, you already know the power of visualising relationships. So what's this "causal mapping" thing all about, and how does it compare?

💛 What They Have in Common

Both approaches are about taking complex, interconnected information and making it visible:

- **Visualising connections:** Both turn abstract relationships into concrete diagrams with boxes and lines.
- **Managing complexity:** Both help you see the big picture.
- **Externalising thinking:** Both get ideas out of your head (or others' heads) and onto a surface where you can work with them.

In essence, if you're comfortable with mind mapping, you already understand the core intuition behind causal mapping.

🔍 Where They Differ

Mind mapping is also about thinking while you map. That is a creative element which isn't present so much in causal mapping, though you *could* use it like that if you wanted. In causal mapping, especially when you are doing it manually, the creative part of the task is more about creating a causal theory: what are the main factors, how can they best be named, what additional systemisation (if any) like tags should I apply. It's a kind of creative theory-building. But it is not as free as mind mapping as it primarily depends on pre-existing evidence.

Mind Mapping: Creative and Flexible

Mind maps are brilliant for:

- **Brainstorming:** Capturing ideas as they flow, radiating out from a central concept.
- **Personal organisation:** Planning projects, taking notes, structuring your thoughts.
- **Learning and creativity:** Making connections that spark new insights.

Mind maps are wonderfully flexible. You can structure them however makes sense to you. They're personal thinking tools.

Causal Mapping: Evidence-Based and Systematic

Causal maps are mostly specialised for:

- **Analysing narratives:** Systematically extracting what people believe causes or influences what, from interview transcripts, reports, or survey responses. So you usually don't just create a map "in empty space": **you load up a text** such as an interview, highlight any causal claims, and that creates links in your map.
- **Working with multiple sources:** Combining views from dozens or hundreds of different people or documents.
- **Tracing influence paths:** Every arrow represents a claimed directional influence ("X influences Y"), not just "these things are related."
- **Maintaining evidence trails:** Every link traces back to the exact quote that justified it — crucial for rigorous research.

Causal maps are less flexible but more disciplined. They're mostly designed to turn large volumes of qualitative data into a queryable database of causal beliefs. Of course, you can use it just to make a map of just one page of text if you want, but that is not what most people use it for.

Causal mapping isn't new, there were [articles on in in 1976](#) and since then it has been used in disciplines from biology to marketing.

Overlapping Use Cases

There are definitely spots where both approaches shine:

- **Project planning:** Mind maps help brainstorm what might happen; causal maps can systematically capture stakeholder views about what will cause what, or did cause what.
- **Problem analysis:** Mind maps explore possible factors; causal maps analyse what people or reports actually say about causes and effects.

- **Knowledge management:** Both help structure and retain complex information.

You might even use both: mind map to explore, then causal map to rigorously analyse stakeholder input.

Different (But Overlapping) Audiences

Mind Mappers

Mind mappers are often:

- Students and educators
- Business professionals
- Creative thinkers
- Anyone wanting to organise their thinking

Mind mapping is universal—anyone can benefit from visualising their ideas.

Causal Mappers

Causal mapping serves a more specialised niche:

- **Students:** Using causal mapping as part of a seminar paper or thesis, to create or test a causal theory based on texts.
- **Evaluators:** Verifying whether programmes work as intended (Theory of Change evaluation).
- **Researchers:** Analysing large volumes of interview data systematically.
- **Policymakers:** Understanding stakeholder perceptions to identify intervention points.

These users need rigorous, transparent, evidence-based analysis of what people believe causes what in complex social systems.

Interested in exploring causal mapping further? Check out the [Causal Map app](#) or dive into the theory in the [causal mapping Garden of Ideas](#).