🌻 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.

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