

Summary – Uses of Social Systems Mapping

Please note – this is a draft in process.

Narrative for Deep Dive (*in process*)

I have been part of the Social Systems Mapping Community of Practice over recent years and a member of the mapping team. I wanted to go beyond my intuitive understanding to more ongoing learning to grow the ability to speak and support social change and discern when we are unintentionally reinforcing the issues or challenges we are struggling with.

My informal roles in the community of practice are: reflection and learning catalyst, witness, and sensemaker.

I will share a little more context related to what motivated me to explore the uses of Social Systems mapping.

I find Monday sessions valuable and a source of continually learning. For sessions rich in content, I took time to transcribe Christine's presentations and I began to put the core content together with the thought of creating a foundational reservoir that would be accessible particularly for new people. Similarly, I was interested in Jim's idea of looking at the uses of Social Systems Mapping through looking at the presentations as a whole creating a fabric and ability to look at similarities, differences, and relationships.

I'm a visual thinker and create mental maps to make sense of my world. I could see how looking at uses across different disciplines and social fields would lead to understanding how social system mapping contributes to a 'new story' in the area of social transformation – this might be the first step in exploring the possibility of mapping all the uses of Social Systems Mapping someday.

There were other motivations as well. In a Deep Dive several months ago, Christine Capra expressed the need to bridge the basic understanding of social system mapping with more emergent work. I saw this project as helping to bridge that gap.

I also saw that members of the community were interested in learning about the value of Social Systems Mapping, finding good examples of this work. Looking at the various uses of Social Systems Maps would contribute to answering questions related to how maps have been used across different disciplines and with in-depth transformational work.

I began the project by listening to over twenty OnRamp presentations and taking notes related to the purpose of the map, field of work, uses of the map, number of map participants, whether the map was public or private (or both), the video link and other information. As I mentioned, Christine created a format on Coda for listing the basic information I collected.

I noticed that although technical skills are needed, the people presenting maps in OnRamp sessions were not always developers or mappers. They were people involved with complexity and systems thinking, social and ecological science, researchers, regenerative designers, consultants working with leadership and organizational culture and learning, process designers, facilitators, community activists and organizers, network catalysts, and network weavers.

What did I learn?

For years, I longed for a paradigm shift – as if it would be a significant moment in time – similar to what many of us imagined when Barack Obama was elected. Through this project and the community of practice I have learned that transformations are happening in the form of small shifts. We can see these shifts through this work on different levels – patterns, structures, practices, spaces and interactions, behaviors, mindsets, and values (see [graphic](#)). The ground is shifting under us – we can sometimes even hear the rumble of these little quakes.

Over recent years, people sometimes asked for an example of a successful social systems map. It was challenging to answer that question. We know from the 'explainer' graphic's last slide that we haven't reached the full potential of Social Systems mapping. And the examples may be closer in proximity of reaching that potential are private client maps. Through use cases, we can share maps with elements of success or innovation, even if the map was not successful overall in achieving the original intent. For example, in the last On Ramp, Christine shared the map of the Transformations Systems Mapping & Analysis Working Group. The map may not have been successful in achieving its purpose, but the map did introduce the dual element feature – on Monday, Christine shared variations of the dual element.

What are some of the things I noticed in looking at the map presentations?

Although the directory view is simple and the easiest view to show people, we sometimes undervalue this view. But the directory view in itself represents a huge leap in how we see ourselves. OnRamp presenters credited a robust directory with its value as an orientation – as a way a network can see itself.

It's easy for some to look at social systems maps as abstract and static, particularly if you are bringing that mindset to this work. In looking at uses, I saw that Social Systems Mapping has been used for critical and timely issues such as those related to delivering food in the Covid-19 in London and for those in the global north to connect with and gather the voices of researchers in the global south to form a common message related to Covid-19 pandemic.

Social System Mapping is critical for long-term projects. One network working actively with a bold vision related to climate change saw that part of their purpose was using social systems mapping to better see and understand themselves differently along with systems thinking they are using to work toward their vision.

There were a number of other observations that I don't have time to share here.

Jim and I identified these various purposes of the maps to make it easy to find presentations related to our interest and needs. Some of the uses were community building, exchanges, learning, skill matches, and knowledge sharing. Some uses were related to self-organizing and idea testing. And some uses were related to orientation, connection, visualizing structure. There were uses related to measurement. And a few maps that included social development goals.

<https://www.dropbox.com/s/6l7kjtqqnw8jn2s/Shifting%20Systems%20PM.png?dl=0>

There's a lot of interesting things, looking at relationships between maps – common uses, experiments pushing the edges of social systems mapping, structures and patterns revealed. In some respects there's no end to what they can contribute to our work.

Other Observations

Social Systems mapping has been used for more inclusivity – including two different maps to give voice or recognition to researchers and leaders in the global south.

There are experiments in which Social Systems mapping is used in process design, in creating a space and interactions with mapping that shows the flow of money related to learning how to move money in wise ways.

Some network consultants use mapping to create a baseline in building new networks, visualizing connections and assets to inform planning and strategies.

Use Cases Directions for the Future:

- Sensemaking and connections between maps that develop into articles or sessions that tell a powerful story – how maps such as the ones Edem Ossai and Louise Clark have created help overcome hierarchy related to knowledge – giving voice to expertise and knowledge of the global south. Seek out CoP for people who may want to write an article.
- Perhaps a map isn't successful overall, but was significant as experiments pushing the edges of our work. We could give more visibility to these experiments.
- Dialogue possibility: Clarity around map purpose, uses, and values in the early development of social systems maps.
- Create an outline for OnRamp Session Presentations that guides the presenter and gives us the information needed for documenting use cases.
- Include the possibility of using use cases to map a "[new story](#)"
- Are there stages of development that maps and their communities go through? Are there multiple paths, some that are fruitful and others prone to obstacles? What do the

mappers have to say about that? Jim is working on this.

- Jim Best has been a liaison and thought partner on this project, looking for other patterns in map use types. A provisional emergence of [four tiers of uses](#) might be further developed or refined in the future. The support for the tiers is here:
 - Jim's [use case type and frequency spreadsheet](#).
 - Jim's [coding notes on Mary's table of use cases](#).

A brief, Uses of Social System Mapping, was initiated on 7/14/22. Below are highlights from the brief and more current thoughts..

The tension or Potential

Members of the community and on-ramp participants often want to know what maps are used for. We also saw this in the responses in the Community of Practice survey question related to 'what people want to get from the community'. People expressed wanting to understand more about the value of social systems maps, how people use social systems maps, and the scope of mapping. They wanted to learn how to make maps more participative and useful. And they wanted to understand how people are using mapping as part of transforming systems.

Hypothesis

My idea was that if we captured and made available with more detail the instances of mapping shown in on-ramp sessions, we could better answer questions related to how maps have been used across different disciplines and in-depth transformational work. Seeing the various uses would also, in the future, broaden our horizons and bring these uses together to form Social Systems Mapping contributions to a 'new story'.

My actions to test hypothesis:

1. Review on-ramp presentations and complete a worksheet with notes about the initiative, community, or network: area of social change; map views, how map was used; distinct value of mapping; 'livingness' of map (phases of mapping or iterations)
2. Summarize uses and make this accessible — continue to add new info received through on-ramps or conversations with members of the community.
3. Suggest next steps or iterations

Review & Observations

Presentations from the on-ramp presentations were reviewed. Twenty-six database fields were [documented](#) on Coda.

The presenters were from across the United States and from Africa, Germany, England, Scotland, Portugal and their fields of work are noted below.

- People involved with complexity science, systems thinking, social and ecological science, think tanks.
- Researchers, scientists, authors
- Regenerative designers, those involved with regenerative projects and permaculture.
- Consultants working with leadership, organizational culture and learning, and evaluation.
- Process designers, meeting designers, facilitators
- Community activists, organizers, and involvement in community engagement
- Network instigators and catalysts, network practitioner and coordinators, network weavers
- Developers; mappers

Areas of work related to maps:

- Education and learning
- Testing of new ideas, self-organizing, collective action
- Complexity, systems thinking, Human Systems Dynamics
- Elimination of greenhouse gasses, sustainability, climate change, ecosystem changes
- Social Development Goals
- Food security, food provision, social gastronomy
- Regenerative projects
- Economic ecosystems
- Socio-economic impacts of pandemic
- Social issues related to children's health