



Lesson 12

Conflict Assessment Research

Learning Objectives:

At the end of the lesson, participants will be able to:

- Identify the purpose of conflict assessment
- Compare and contrast different types of assessment
- Identify different methods of data collection
- Describe how to design participatory research
- Identify characteristics of conflict-sensitive assessments
- Identify how to identify data quality

This lesson identifies the purpose of conflict assessment and the problems that often accompany conflict assessment processes. This lesson identifies different types of data collection methods and describes how to design participatory research.

*This lesson is adapted from the book *Conflict Assessment and Peacebuilding Planning*.⁴⁸*

1. What causes conflict and violence?

People often believe in “cause-effect” explanations for violence that sound like this: “Bad guys cause conflict. Good guys kill the bad guys.” Often people point fingers at some group of people who they think are simply “evil.” In reality, what one person describes as evil or terror may look differently to another person. Groups that use violence almost always have a complex set of grievances and motivations. Stopping violence is not so much a matter of “killing all the bad guys” if there are grievances and motivations that spur more people to use violence. Conflict assessment attempts to understand the broader factors that influence conflict and violence.

2. What is conflict assessment?

A conflict assessment is a systematic research process to understand a range of factors including context, stakeholders, motivations, and means and timeline that are driving or mitigating conflict.

You can compare doing a conflict assessment to a visit at the eye doctor. The doctor provides corrective lenses to obtain a better vision of a range of characters. In conflict assessment you use different types of lenses to obtain a clearer and more profound understanding of the dynamics of the conflict – although unfortunately – unlike eye glasses, your conflict assessment glasses will never enable you to see perfectly sharp. This lesson includes a variety of conflict analysis “tools” or “lenses” that provide clarity on who, what, why, when, where and how conflict takes place.

WHERE	Where is the conflict taking place?
WHO	Who is driving the conflict and who is supporting peace?
WHY	Why are the key stakeholders motivated to drive conflict or support peace?
WHAT	What are the factors driving and mitigating conflict? What are the threats and vulnerabilities facing civilians?
HOW	How are key stakeholders using power to drive or mitigate conflict? What are their capacities and sources of power?
WHEN	When is conflict likely to get worse or when might the chances for peace improve? When are their “windows of vulnerability” or “windows of opportunity?”

Figure 27: Conflict Assessment Questions

3. What is the key purpose of a conflict assessment?

Conflict assessment is important to human security in several ways.

- a) Conflict assessment is necessary to prevent violence through the development of “conflict prevention” strategies. Conflict Prevention aims to prevent violence from starting by addressing key immediate and long-term factors driving conflict toward violence and mass atrocities. Operational prevention focuses on short-term crisis response, including preventive diplomacy. Structural prevention focuses on long-term efforts to address root causes such as economic, social and political exclusion of some groups.
- b) Conflict assessment improves the success of “peacebuilding” interventions in a conflict aimed at improving human security. Peacebuilding refers to a range of activities at any stage of conflict to prevent, mitigate, or transform conflict.
- c) Conflict assessment improves “conflict sensitivity” to prevent second and third order unintended impacts. Conflict Sensitivity is an approach to programming and policymaking that recognises the potential influence for any type of intervention to cause harm. Conflict-sensitive policies, programmes and projects aim to minimise unintentional negative impacts that may drive conflict and cause further social divisions while maximising positive impacts on the context that mitigate conflict and bridge social divides. Conflict assessment and self-assessment research is central to conflict sensitive policies, programmes and projects in human rights, humanitarian assistance, development and related efforts.

4. There are important differences between intelligence gathering, context assessment and conflict assessment.

Most states conduct both intelligence analysis to identify potential threats and conflict assessment to understand the context where threats develop. Intelligence often identifies individuals and groups that may cause harm to state interests. Conflict assessment is a broader research process. It maps a broader array of both stakeholders driving conflict as well as those mitigating conflict. It also seeks to understand broader social, political, economic and other factors that may be contributing to violence or the threat of violence. Complex environments require research-based assessment to discover and understand the stakeholders and the conflict dynamics. Conflict assessment can increase the effectiveness of interventions and reduce the chance that an intervention will cause harm or be counterproductive.

The chart below compares and contrasts intelligence analysis with conflict assessment. These methods differ regarding their objectives and their levels of secrecy. The security sector has traditionally focused on intelligence to identify information and locations for stakeholders considered to be enemies. Military and police leaders are increasingly identifying a need for better conflict assessment processes.

Governments and militaries conduct assessments to understand complex environments. Military assessment tools such as ASCOPE (assesses the Area, Structures, Capabilities, Organisations, People, and Events) and PMESII (assesses the Political, Military, Economic, Social, Infrastructure, and Information) are context assessments, not conflict assessments. Conflict assessment is more specific than context assessment. Advanced research on theories of conflict bring more specific insights on key actors, motivations, positive factors or resiliencies, and insights from local voices that makes conflict assessment a distinct form of research. Many governments have their own conflict assessment frameworks. Most of these are very similar.

The chart here compares and contrasts intelligence and conflict assessment research processes.

Figure 28: Comparison of Intelligence, Context Assessment and Conflict Assessment

Intelligence	Context Assessment	Conflict Assessment
All aim to understand complex environments		
Focus on threats to national security	Focus on understanding the context to achieve security goals	Focus on threats to human security
Emphasis on identifying enemy targets	Emphasis on understanding social, political, economic and environmental context	Emphasis on understanding social, political, economic and environmental root causes to violence
Secretive process and product, with information private and classified	Closed processes and product, information not shared	Open and public process and product, with information shared

5. There are two main types of lenses for conflict assessment.

Conflict assessment is a research process to map out those factors that drive conflict and those that support peace.

Conflict Drivers are people, institutions, or forces that increase divisions and threaten political, economic, security, justice and social factors related to human security. *Factors driving conflict* include a range of lenses to map stakeholders and their means, motivations, and core grievances; to map issues and driving factors; and to identify issues arising from the local context and windows of vulnerability given the historic legacy of the conflict. A conflict driver can be something like a famine, unemployment, easy access to weapons or religious extremism that motivates individuals or groups to engage in conflict. Conflict drivers tap into and mobilise grievances related to the **root causes** of conflict in existing political, economic, and social relations.

Conflict Mitigators are people, institutions, or forces that support political, economic, security, justice and social factors related to human security. *Factors mitigating conflict* include a range of lenses to map stakeholders supporting peace; to identify local traditions, values, and institutions supporting peace, resiliency, and social capital; and to assess possible windows of opportunity. The terms resilience and local capacity for peace refers to the capacity of a system to survive, adapt, absorb or respond to a crisis or severe change. An individual, community and institutional is resilient in as much as they can adapt, be agile, learn quickly and improvise new survival methods in a changed environment.

6. Conflict Assessment is necessary for conflict prevention and peacebuilding programmes to improve human security.

Conflict prevention and peacebuilding have three components:

- a) *Address the immediate drivers of violence* (eg operational efforts such as preventive and crisis diplomacy, intergroup dialogue, media strategies, economic sanctions, observer missions or rapid response forces).

- b) *Transform the structural root causes of violence* (eg economic and political reforms, developing infrastructures to support peace and manage conflict, justice and security sector reform and development.)
- c) *Support mitigating factors that foster resilient responses to conflict* (eg supporting voices of moderate religious actors, women, youth, and other civil society actors) and recognise that cycles of violence can cause widespread societal trauma that decrease a community's resilience.

7. Too often well-meaning efforts to foster peace and security result in unintended and counterproductive impacts.

The gap between intent and impact is a challenge facing all organisations who make assumptions about how they can intervene to support peace and security. These assumptions develop from personal experiences, media narratives, or academic training. Organisations tend to see the problem that their organisation can fix. Rigorous research can test organisational assumptions underlying the design of their projects, programmes, or policies. Theories of Change, introduced later in the next lesson, help to make underlying assumptions more explicit, so they can be tested with research.

8. Different assessment goals, frameworks and research methods lead to different understanding of conflict.

- Different stakeholders use different data collection methods. Governments, including military and police, tend to use large data sets. Civil society organisations conducting conflict assessments tend to use local interviews, local focus groups and town meetings.
- Different stakeholders collect different or even contradictory data. Even groups using the same conflict assessment frameworks can populate the framework with different data leading to different understanding of the drivers and mitigators of conflict.
- Different stakeholders have different levels of acceptance and access to conduct research. Civil society organisations usually have a long-term relationship and trust in the communities where they are conducting research. Government, military and police may not have these relationships to facilitate research.
- Data quality depends on the perception of those being assessed and whether they provide accurate information or information that supports their interests to researchers. People being interviewed may tell a researcher what they think that researcher wants to hear. If they are fearful of the military or police, they may be especially prone to providing information that will not affect their safety. This may mean they are unwilling to provide information if they think either an armed opposition group will retaliate against them or if providing information about a security threat will lead to an attack on their own towns or villages.
- Different security protocols limit access of some researchers. Military and police may be restricted by rules of engagement, force protection, diplomatic security protocols. CSOs may also be restricted by security threats that could impact their researchers. Limits on government-affiliated researchers may be different than the limits on civil society researchers. They each may be able to reach different groups to carry out their research.

9. Shared conflict assessment is essential to civil-military-police coordination

Conflict assessment is essential to designing strategies to achieve human security. A shared understanding of conflict assessment is an important foundation for civil-military-police cooperation. Without a shared understanding, there can be no civil-military-police coordination to support human security.



Figure 29: Shared Assessment and Planning for Coordinated Action

If one unit in a government identifies terrorist groups as the root cause of the problem, they will attempt to kill and contain these groups and send military weapons to support the national government. If another unit in a government identifies government corruption and economic inequality as the root cause

of the problem, they will develop a completely different intervention to hold corrupt governments to account and reform the political system. These interventions may not complement each other. Two units in the same government that hold different assumptions about the root causes of conflict may actually work against each other. The same is also true of civil society, military and police. If they do not share a similar understanding of conflict, they cannot plan or coordinate to support human security.

10. There are six common problems with conflict assessment research in complex environments.

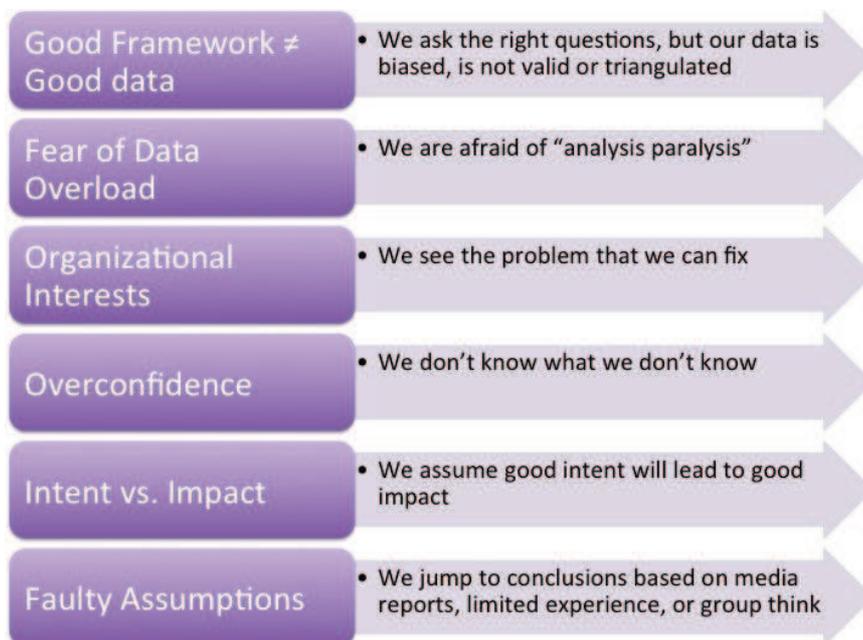


Figure 30: Problems with Conflict Assessment

Framework vs. Data Quality: Conflict assessment frameworks offer helpful set of questions and tools for analysing conflict. While researchers may ask the right questions using these frameworks, the framework alone does not guarantee good data. Early conflict assessment processes emphasised the quality of the framework and not the quality of the data used to answer the questions or tools in a framework. In a rush to action, many groups would simply fill in a conflict assessment framework themselves, without conducting any rigorous, on the ground research. Aid agencies would sit in capital cities and fill out a conflict assessment framework based on their own guesses of what was happening in a far off country. An accurate conflict assessment is not possible with data that lacks validity, triangulation, or that is biased toward a small set of experiences or media reports.

Data Overload: Research shows that when people have too much information or too many choices, they tend to psychologically freeze up and suffer from “analysis paralysis” that makes them unable to make decisions.⁴⁹ Research finds that most business leaders suffer for lack of a way to make sense of the data they have, not necessarily for having too little data.⁵⁰ Groups may analyse a situation so much that the complexity becomes overwhelming, paralyzing them from taking any action. All conflict assessment processes face time and resource constraints, but skimping on conflict assessment wastes time and resources. A conflict assessment framework can help to organise data, to improve decision-makers ability to make sense out of it.

Organisational Interests: Most people see the problem they can fix. Development specialists are more likely to see unequal development as driving conflict, while political scientists are more likely to see political power plays doing so. Military forces are more likely to see a military solution to the conflict and so on. People who do not stand to gain any organisational interest in the outcome are more likely to produce an accurate conflict assessment.

Intent vs. Impact: Good intentions do not always lead to good impacts. Conflict assessment is necessary to make sure the logic behind an intervention to improve human security will actually accomplish that goal. Many times, people with good intentions unintentionally cause harm. Module 7 on Civilian Assistance goes into more depth on the “Do No Harm” approach, also known as “conflict sensitivity,” that urges all groups working in complex environments to conduct an extensive conflict assessment so they

can better translate the good intentions of their programmes or efforts and avoid unintended impacts that often occur because people overestimate their understanding of the local context.

Overconfidence: A can-do, eager-to-get-to-work attitude leads people to want to spend less time on research and more time actually doing something to foster change. People tend to be overconfident about what they know and underestimate what they do not know about a conflict. For example, overconfidence that unemployment is driving insurgent recruitment - without verifying this through independent research - can lead to designing programmes that may in fact have little to do with local people joining or supporting insurgents because of their frustration with government corruption or their anger at foreign troops in their country. Researchers should recognise the dangers of overconfidence, and the benefits of humility about what they do not know.

Faulty Assumptions: A misinformed conflict assessment leads to ineffective, wasteful, and even harmful policies and programmes. Government agencies sometimes use “red-teaming”—also known as a “sceptics core”—to address the problem of groupthink and tunnel vision. When gathered to discuss an issue, a designated group identifies and challenges the dominant themes and assumptions. The red team provides different points of view.⁵¹ However, red teaming cannot replace how someone from another culture or another side of a conflict actually thinks. Without having people of diverse backgrounds involved, red teams are an inadequate substitute for people with different life experiences and different perceptions of the conflict.

11. Data Collection Research Methodologies

There are many research methods of collecting data for use in a conflict assessment. *Data* is raw material gathered from primary sources (e.g., interviews, focus groups, and surveys) and secondary sources (e.g., newspapers, blogs, publications) through qualitative (data that is descriptive) and quantitative (data that can be counted) methods.

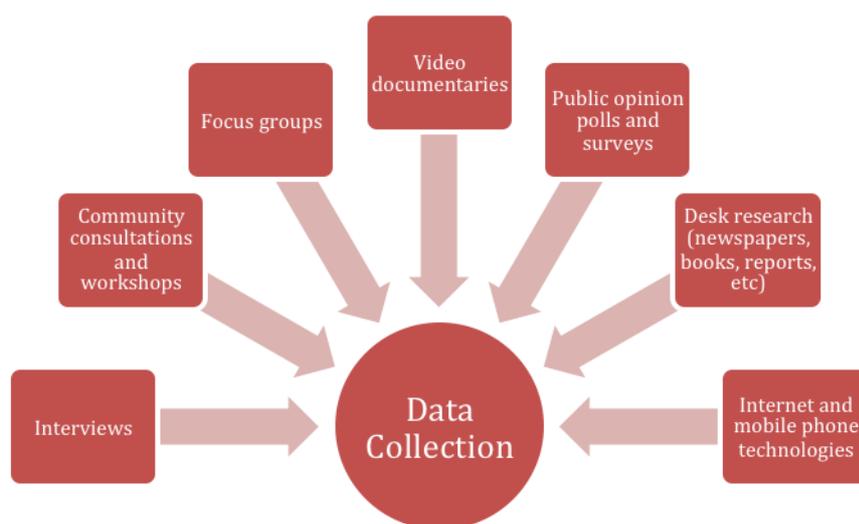


Figure 31: Data Collection Methods

Interviews ask key research questions of a wide range of diverse local stakeholders from different identity groups, including religious, ethnic, class, education, region, sex, language, age, and other identity groups.

Community consultations and workshops ask diverse groups to participate in both generating and sorting data into categories for the conflict assessment, monitoring, and evaluation frameworks. These community workshops can take various cultural models. For example, in Central Asia, community *shuras* or *jirgas* are a familiar way of organising discussions at the local level. Some groups use these traditional forums as their community consultations or focus groups.⁵² In the United States, a methodology called Listening Projects⁵³ uses trained facilitators to ask open-ended questions that help people in communities express their fears, hopes, needs, and solutions. Such workshops are effective ways to gather information for a conflict assessment, while at the same time they can also serve as a first step to transforming difficult relationships. As participants begin to better understand their own and other’s points of view

through the discussions, they may open their minds to new ideas and possibilities that may make them more likely to find common ground with opponents.

Focus groups can include people from the same region or cultural group (women, youth) to help generate, sort, and prioritise data into categories. Data from focus groups can help shape questions for larger surveys and polls. After collecting survey and polling data, focus groups can help interpret this data as well. But the effectiveness of focus groups is highly dependent on the culture of their participants. People of some cultures feel safe to share different points of view in a focus group. Other cultural groups may feel a certain pressure to conform and prefer not to share their dissent within the group. This is especially common in places with active violence, where people may be silent and too traumatised to talk. In some regions where identity conflicts play an important role, narrowing the focus even further and having a so-called “identity caucus focus group” may be helpful so that members who may feel impeded to speak freely in a mixed setting are encouraged to express themselves. For example, in a focus group that includes men and women, a separate women’s caucus may help women share more freely their insights into conflict. Or in a women’s focus group that includes representatives of ethnic majorities and minorities, it may make sense to have a minority caucus group. Rapidly changing events impact how focus groups respond. On the day before a marketplace bombing, a group of elders may feel hopeful and positive about the future. On the day after a bombing, another similar group of elders may share different perspectives.

Video documentaries can be helpful research methods for documenting a range of diverse opinions and perspectives. They can create a mirror or self-portrait of a conflict-affected region, helping researchers, local people, and donors listen to diverse points of view. Videos can be shown later to the same focus group to reflect on changes over time, or to invite them to build on their analytical discussion. Or the video can be taken to new focus groups to invite them to respond or to feel empowered and comfortable to take part in a difficult conversation. Researchers can show a video to large audiences to invite them to reflect on the conflict-affected context. A facilitator can ask large groups of people to reflect on whether the video is an accurate mirror or portrait of their context, or whether something is missing in the analysis. Videos then serve as a way of checking on the accuracy and reliability of the data.

Opinion polls and surveys ask a limited number of exact questions to large numbers of people to develop quantitative data. Pilot testing carefully formulated questions with focus groups can help ensure that the survey questions do not contain any biases.

Desk research can find conflict assessments carried out by other organisations in a conflict-affected region. Many different groups carry out conflict assessments without ever knowing about other researcher’s efforts. International and local universities, NGOs, and think tanks publish conflict assessment reports or research that contains data that support conflict assessments.

Internet and mobile phone technologies allow individuals to write SMS text messages, tweets, and blogs that provide eyewitness accounts and analysis of conflicts. New technologies allow data sources to come from satellites, computer-generated information collection, or crowdsourcing when people use their mobile phones or the Internet to share their perspectives on conflict. Mobile phone technologies allow researchers to conduct surveys more easily and cheaply with populations that may otherwise be difficult to reach. Mobile phones allow individuals to share their photos and videos that illustrate their account of conflict dynamics. These technologies also allow people to make visual geographic maps of where crowds are gathering, where attacks have happened or where violence is happening, and where humanitarian crises are unfolding.

For example, FrontlineSMS collects and shares reports on incidents of conflict collected from people who text message information. Kenyans used a crowdsourcing technology called Ushahidi during the 2008 electoral violence to gather data from citizens who texted information on where violence was occurring from their mobile phones to a central location. Ushahidi⁵⁴ now works in many other places using geospatial mapping to inform early warning and conflict assessment. This type of data can help to indicate if violence is spreading.

12. Data quality impacts the quality of conflict assessments.

The research process for conducting a conflict assessment requires a methodology that is reliable, accurate, and triangulated.

Reliable: Data is reliable if it comes from dependable, respected sources. Data is most reliable when it comes from a primary source (directly accessing the source on location) and the researcher identifies all information as coming from primary, secondary, or tertiary sources. Data is least reliable when it relies on secondary or tertiary sources (more than one or two degrees of separation from the source or source material) and researchers fail to identify the source's reliability.

Accurate: Data is accurate if it can be gathered repeatedly with the same results. Data is most accurate if the research methodology clearly identifies the data providers (interviewers, pollsters, and collectors) and they can be reached for queries. Data is least accurate if no information is available about the data providers. Accuracy also relates to the sampling frame. At best, researchers are transparent, clear, and logical about whom they choose to interview in the sampling frame. At worst, researchers interview only a small sample and are not explicit about reasons for choosing that group. The quality of a conflict assessment relates to the diversity and accuracy of the sources of the information. Do the researchers or participants completing a conflict assessment speak the local languages? Do they read local daily newspapers? Do they spend time with diverse stakeholders from within the context to learn more about their perspectives?

Triangulation: Researchers triangulate data by comparing data from three or more reliable sources. Researchers fact-check data by comparing it to other data sources and then having it peer reviewed by internal and external reviewers. Ideally, data from quantitative sources can provide a numerical scale on how large numbers of people think about some aspect of the conflict. Qualitative sources can examine how smaller numbers of people provide their own, more personal perspectives about conflict.

Triangulation of data sources increases the quality of the conflict assessment. Conflict assessment can easily become an exercise in futility if relatively uninformed participants with a limited range of opinions and experiences use these exercises to make decisions about programming. Too often, conflict assessments include a single person's opinion as evidence that ultimately guides policy or programmes.

13. Conflict assessment can never be completely accurate or objective:

The parable of the five blind people and the elephant holds true for conflict assessment. Each blind man describes the elephant differently. The one holding the trunk, the tail, the leg, or the side of the elephant describe it as a water hose, a rope, a tree, or a wall, respectively. In the same way, five different conflict assessment teams could all research the same conflict and easily come up with five different conclusions.

Contradictions are inevitable. People on different sides of a conflict have different perceptions of what is driving the conflict or what is supporting peace. A conflict assessment process aims to capture not the one truth about the conflict, but rather to map and describe all the different perceptions of diverse stakeholders.

In conflict-affected contexts, people differ in their perceptions of what is driving a conflict. There is not one truth but rather many different truths for different stakeholders. No one is without bias, although some perspectives are more biased than others. Identifying key issues where disagreement persists can be an important part of conflict assessment. These issues may be important for learning more about the experiences, values, and beliefs that lead groups to hold to different perspectives. Identifying common ground and points of difference is also an important step in developing the curriculum for a dialogue or setting out the issues for a formal negotiation. In this case, triangulated data should support the different perceptions to determine each one's validity or coherency.

14. The identity of the group collecting the data impacts the quality of the data.

In many cultures, people tell data collectors what they think the researchers want to hear. Respondents may do this to be polite, to ensure that aid money continues coming to their community regardless of whether it is resulting in effective programmes or not, or because they fear for their safety or position if they explain their true feelings about what is driving the local conflict. Many donors still use a model of outsider teams of experts who go into a community to interview local people. This model does not fully consider the possibility that locals will not provide accurate and complete information to outsiders. Given that local people perceive that many donor countries and outsiders have their own political and economic interests in a conflict, the probability that local people will not give accurate information is high. Outside assessment teams regularly collect distorted data that in turn leads to programmes and policies that are not effective in preventing, managing, reducing or transforming violent conflict.

Second, data distortion also comes through translation. Conflict assessment questions themselves may be politically charged or offensive to interviewees. A translator may misinterpret the question, or may not be able to fully translate a response to a question. The translator may even come from a particular ethnic or ideological group and intentionally misinterpret a response so as to shape the data.

15. People tend to hear and see what they expect or want to believe.

People's worldviews shape and filter the world that they see. Research on conflict is particularly challenging, as people with an interest in a conflict tend to filter data to fit into their current worldview. Everyone participating in a conflict assessment is subjective—including researchers and research subjects. No one person or group can conduct an accurate conflict assessment. These expert outsider teams often fail to conduct a self-assessment of their own biases shaped by what they have read in media reports about the conflict and their own political assumptions and perceptions of their interests in the conflict. Without a clear self-assessment, researchers are often blind to their own biases and are more likely to hear what they want to hear. Assessment teams on tight budgets and with tight timelines may look for shortcuts to quickly articulate a concise statement of what they see as key drivers of a local conflict. By necessity, conflict assessment is a process involving a wide variety of diverse voices and perspectives. At every step of conflict assessment and planning, an important question to keep in mind is “Whose perspectives are shaping the discussion?”

People desire *cognitive consistency* or a steady, predictable understanding of the world. Second, when people perceive something that is inconsistent with their past experiences or beliefs, they seek to hide or deny it from existence. Contradictions or new information that goes against one's current worldview is stressful. If individuals perceive the world in a way that is incongruent with their worldview, they experience *cognitive dissonance*; they have anxiety and discomfort about a new experience or idea that does not fit with their current understanding.

People maintain cognitive consistency and avoid cognitive dissonance in two ways:

a. Filter the world

People filter their experiences with the world in a way that only retains the information consistent with their current way of viewing a complex environment. People reinforce pre-existing views of what the conflict is about based on personal experience or professional expertise. Humans selectively perceive information by either discarding dissonant information or distorting it to fit into current understandings. For example, conflict assessment teams may discard information suggesting that their own identity group is driving conflict. A person from the conflict may discard or distort information that appears to show positive qualities of an adversary. A person from the conflict may repress memories of growing up peacefully beside their adversary. People may see only the bad things others do and disregard the good.

b. Shape the world

People actively shape a complex environment in the way they expect and want it to be. People jump to conclusions about what is best to do in a conflict based on the programmes or resources already available or what one's own organisation would like to do. People create their own sense of reality by *projecting* their current beliefs and values onto the world. People may project their biases and stereotypes of other groups onto others. For example, researchers may project untrustworthiness on illiterate people, depending on their biases. People in conflict may project untrustworthiness onto their adversaries. The more distrustful people are of others, the less likely an adversary is to actually attempt building trust. In conflict, the psychological process of projection may become a self-fulfilling prophecy as groups labelled as “terrorists” become more committed to using violent strategies if others exclude them from political processes.

Another factor to consider is groupthink, which happens as people within a group start to reinforce each other's' points of view. Researchers may start to think alike, reinforce false assumptions, and fail to see alternatives. Group members may minimise conflict with each other by not asking critical questions about a dominant point of view, by permitting “mind guards” to censor anyone who veers from unanimity, or by promoting self-censoring of views that deviate from the group consensus. In groupthink, people become overly optimistic with a sense of invulnerability and an inherent belief in their morality. Foreign policy analysts detail how groupthink is responsible for failure to predict major international crises because policymakers were too likeminded and failed to ask critical questions of each other's' assumptions.⁵⁵

All of these psychological processes are at work in each person on a research team, in the organisations they work for, and in all research subjects. Skilled researchers recognise the psychological tendencies and seek out dissonant information that can challenge their own perceptions.

16. Research Ethics

Research processes are an intervention that changes conflict dynamics. While the final outcome of any conflict assessment will never be perfect, the discussion and learning that happen in the research process can either produce better intergroup understanding or it can bring harms by fuelling further conflict. Some basic ethics of research processes include the following:

Participation: Invite people to participate in owning and shaping research about the environment where they live. Every conflict has people who bridge different communities. These insiders are often best placed to help design the research process so that it accurately gathers information from all sides of the conflict. Outsiders may inadvertently bias the design of the research process itself and entirely miss the diversity of perspectives necessary for understanding the context. A research team's choice of location and interview subjects creates perceptions about the fairness of the process as well as the political interests behind those carrying out the research.

Accountability: How are researchers and their organisations accountable to local people in sharing their assessment? Researchers should be aware of elements of power and coercion in collecting data. Who will benefit from the research? What are possible political and economic interests in the outcome of the research? Those who participate in an assessment process may do so because of their hope that it will bring financial or political rewards to their community.

Confidentiality: People participating in an assessment want to know what happens with the information they provide. Assessment teams should provide an explanation of what happens with the information. Will the community see a public version of the assessment? Will the assessment team decide on which communities receive funds for programmes? Will the assessment team give information to the military or armed forces that may decide to use the information to target individuals in the community?

Transparency: Identify researcher's obligations to subjects including transparency of the goals, methods and motives of the research, the benefits to subjects, the ability of subjects to voice their perspectives themselves, and recognition of potential harms that may come about through the research process. Interviewees want to know who is carrying out a conflict assessment and what interests lay behind the process. All research projects involving human subjects require an ethic of transparency.

Sensitivity to Trauma: Research questions can re-traumatise people or increase the conflict. Asking questions of people experiencing trauma or having lived through traumatic experiences is delicate, if not dangerous. Victims can feel re-victimised if researchers attempt to evoke an emotional response by asking questions about how they feel about a tragic experience. Research questions can raise sensitivities and even increase local conflict. If outsiders come into a community asking about ethnic divisions, inequality, or gender relations, they may change the way local people view their own problems and issues. Assessments can change the relationships between groups of people. If planned and managed as an intervention itself, conflict assessment can be a valuable part of a larger peacebuilding effort. But if assessment teams are not aware of the sensitivity of their questions, they can do harm to local people without ever understanding or knowing what they have done.

The Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma advises researchers to ask questions like "What did you see?" and "Who was there?" rather than "How do you feel?" Questions asking for facts are less likely to cause harm and more likely to elicit an accurate story about what happened. The Dart Center suggests journalists always asking a series of self-assessment questions before interviewing victims: Is it necessary to immediately interview those who have suffered a traumatic event? Is there a value of intruding on people when they are grieving, disoriented, shocked, and frightened that makes the interview worthwhile to prevent future violence? If I were chronicling events directly affecting my family, would I alter the wording of my question in any way? Is it necessary to include graphic descriptions or images in the research? Could any of the research prove harmful to any of the people involved? ⁵⁶ Their recommendations also include:

- Be sensitive to the emotions and trauma of people providing information.
- Plan security measures to ensure the safety and anonymity of people talking to researchers,
- Ensure confidentiality of data. Protect their anonymity and safety.

REVIEW

This lesson identified research methods and principles to improve the quality of conflict assessments. It includes ethical guidance on conducting conflict research and detailed the dangers and traps that organisations conducting conflict assessment can weaken the credibility of the research.

Citations

⁴⁸ Lisa Schirch, *Conflict Assessment and Peacebuilding Planning: Toward a Participatory Approach to Human Security*, (Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2014).

⁴⁹ Barry Schwartz, *The Paradox of Choice: Why Less Is More* (New York City: Harper Perennial, 2005).

⁵⁰ Kathleen Sutcliffe and Klaus Weber, "The High Cost of Accuracy," *Harvard Business Review* 81 (2003), 74–82.

⁵¹ "Red Team Handbook." Vol. 5, no. 15. U.S. Army: University of Foreign Military and Cultural Studies, April 2011.

⁵² Duncan Hiscock and Teresa Dumasy, *From Conflict Analysis to Peacebuilding Impact: Lessons Learned from People's Peacemaking Perspectives*. (London: Conciliation Resources and SaferWorld, March 2012), 17.

⁵³ See The Listening Project website at <http://www.listeningproject.info>, accessed January 2016.

⁵⁴ See Ushahidi website at <https://www.ushahidi.com>, accessed January 2016.

⁵⁵ Irving L. Janis, *Groupthink: Psychological Studies of Policy Decisions and Fiascoes* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1983).

⁵⁶ Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma, "Self-Study Unit 2: Covering Terrorism"

http://www.dartcenter.org/training/selfstudy/2_terrorism/05.php

Lesson 12

Learning Exercises

Anchor

10 minutes

Anchor the content in this lesson with an open question. Participants can share in groups of two or three people their response to this question:

- Where do you get information to inform your opinions about what is fuelling conflict or violence?
- Have you ever researched the factors driving conflict or violence?
- What is an example of a research methodology that led you to feel confident that you knew the most important factors driving conflict or violence?

Add

20 minutes

Present the PowerPoint slides or ask participants to discuss the lesson readings in a small group.

Apply

25 minutes

The goal of this exercise is to practice designing a research methodology to carry out conflict assessment. Create “mixed research teams” with one person from each stakeholder team. Each team should design a research methodology plan to identify the three most significant drivers of violence. How will you gather data? How will you interpret data? Have each research team present their plan to the other mixed teams.

After 20 minutes of team discussion, each team shares their strategy with the other teams. The facilitator asks the entire group for their observations. Ask the group to vote for which research team’s methodology they think would achieve the highest quality data.

See the “Scenario-based Learning” section in the [Handbook on Human Security: A Civil-Military-Police Curriculum](#) for explanation of the scenarios and teams.

Away

5 minutes

To end the lesson, the trainer can ask participants to divide into groups of 2 or 3 people. Participants can share with each other their reflections on this lesson.

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