The mental landscape of lives in conflict: policy implications

Summary

The concept of the 'mental landscape' describes the many factors that shape how a person makes sense of events and decisions in life. In this landscape, memories and narratives of incidents and history form the basis of how everyday life is interpreted. Individual emotions, feelings, beliefs, cognitions, as well as the experience of success and disappointment, intermingle with community experiences.

The mental landscape also influences decisions and behaviour, highlighting that both are shaped by context. For policy-makers and practitioners, the concept of the mental landscape offers opportunity to:

- utilise insights from perception surveys for programmes that address the *cause* of the perception
- integrate a new area of investigation for better programme context assessments
- realign expectations between programmes and their constituents.

Mareike Schomerus.
Kitgum, Uganda

The mental landscape of lives in conflict: policy implications

Introduction

Programmes aimed at improving the situation of people who have experienced violent conflict can find themselves facing a peculiar dilemma: people's perceptions and measurable reality can differ. Even when a situation seems to be objectively improving, people do not automatically perceive it as getting better (Shahbaz *et al.* 2017: 11). Perceptions, however, are a person's reality and hence need to be understood as an accurate representation of how a situation is *experienced*. Applying the concept of the mental landscape offers a way to unpack seeming discrepancies and to integrate considerations of perceptions, emotions, behaviour and decision-making into understanding the context in which a programme operates (Amanela *et al.* 2020b).

That programmes need to be context-specific is widely acknowledged. Commonly, context is analysed by looking at political, socio-cultural, environmental and economic factors. With emphasis on these categories, context analysis currently misses a huge part of the human experience. There is as yet limited consideration of the behavioural context in which a programme is implemented, even though culture, history and experience create contextually specific behavioural patterns (Henrich 2020). The concept of the mental landscape thus suggests that humans, with all their complexity, need to be at the centre of context analysis for policy and programmatic decisions.

What is the mental landscape?

The mental landscape, introduced by the Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium, seeks to capture the multiple layers that shape people's individual and communal perceptions, their sense of self and their analysis of why a situation is the way it is. It highlights that these layers influence how people make decisions, act and behave (Amanela *et al.* 2020b). Paying attention to the mental landscape means seeking to recognise the forces that an individual experiences as having influence on their life (Schomerus and Taban 2021a).

The imagery of the landscape expresses that people's sense-making of their situations has many lines, textures, colours and shapes. Depending on outside factors and time, the landscape's appearance can change entirely. Focus can shift and bring certain events, facts or memories into the foreground while others fade away in importance. Within the mental landscape, communal and individual remembrance of events, emotions, cognitions and disappointments shape the contours. Everyday experiences of life, identity, relationships, successes and marginalisation build the base from which a person interprets, makes decisions and translates these into behaviour (Schomerus and Taban 2021b).

Above all, the mental landscape acknowledges the power of people's narratives, identities and experiences – and their impact on how people understand and act (Amanela *et al.* 2020c; 2020d; 2020e). It is an appreciation of the human instinct of sense-making, which describes the never-ending process of piecing together the elements of one's life to create a coherent and ever-evolving narrative.

How the mental landscape can enrich programme design and policies

Treating perceptions as reality
A mental-landscape lens can help explain discrepancies between measurable change and perceptions of such change. Perceptions are usually measured through perception surveys or captured more informally in community engagement activities such as programme focus-group discussions. They can play a peculiar role in development programming: positive perceptions are taken as the sign that something is working, while negative perceptions tend to cause feedback or survey results to be parked while a programme is tweaked in ways that seek to improve these perceptions. However, accepting that perceptions are people's reality can encourage programme design that addresses the causes of a perception and thus supports a more grounded shift in people's experience.

The mental landscape offers a way towards treating perceptions as people's reality and would require programme decision-makers to ask the following questions:

- What are the elements of the mental landscape (histories, experiences and feelings) that shape a perception?

- Can programmes address these elements (such as how people experience being treated, or why they perceive a situation as unsafe), rather than seeking simply to change perceptions?

Including behavioural mechanisms in context analysis
Human behavioural patterns are context-specific, so examining behavioural mechanisms needs to be a component of context analysis. This requires integrating behavioural research into all context analyses to avoid designing programmes that are rendered unsuitable in a mental landscape that might cause people to engage in different ways than intended. Considering context-specific behavioural mechanisms is particularly crucial for programmes that aim to support behaviour change (as most programmes do). Treating behavioural mechanisms as context can be done in several ways, requiring very different levels of effort.

- Context analysis needs to include qualitative analysis of existing narratives that might shape behaviour.

- Multi-method behavioural research (including experimental research) is considered essential, particularly for programmes that seek to work at the local level (e.g. Amanela *et al.* 2020a).

- When a programme seeks to target people, they are usually categorised using demographic markers or identities (such as rural/urban, male/female, young/old). A behavioural lens segments people along behavioural patterns (such as propensity to engage in a programme, or to engage in community consultation), which aligns targeting with behavioural analysis.

- A behavioural lens on context introduces behavioural concepts into programme planning, such as understanding how people assess time horizons and benefits, what mental shortcuts they use to understand a situation, or what biases they might have. It offers a way to assess whether, in a programme that pursues behaviour change, a proposed nudge will have the desired effect.

Supporting people, not superhumans

If a programme's outcomes are not as effective as hoped, if perceptions differ from what a programme implementer considers the reality, or if constituents are disengaged, programme implementers might make an implicit judgement. This judgement suggests that the disappointing results represent something of a community attitude problem – in other words, that people need to apply themselves more for a programme to work and targets to be met.

Yet, the cause here, rather than representing a communal attitude problem, could be a flaw in programme design. Programmes that ignore the mental landscape might unwittingly expect their constituents to be superhuman. They ask people not only to overcome hardship, hurt and marginalisation, but also actively to counter human behavioural mechanisms that can shape decision-making away from the most beneficial outcome. Such programmes might ignore that the experience of violence could significantly alter people's ability to deal with uncertainty, that it requires them to manage their emotions and cognitions differently (and, for example, very sparingly spend their hope for improvement on a programme that might disappoint), and that past experience might have altered how they see the world around them. Without considering these mechanisms, even programmes designed to be supportive, fair and effective might have limited, or even unintended, effects.

Author: Mareike Schomerus

References

Amanela, S., Flora Ayee, T., Buell, S., Escande, A., Quinlan, T., Rigterink, A.S., Schomerus, M., Sharp, S. and Swanson, S. (2020a) 'The mental landscape of post-conflict life in northern Uganda Part 2: research on behaviour and post-conflict life in northern Uganda: the research design'. London: Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium.

——— (2020b) 'The mental landscape of post-conflict life in northern Uganda Part 3: defining the mental landscape'. London: Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium.

——— (2020c) 'The mental landscape of post-conflict life in northern Uganda Part 4: rethinking collaboration and good behaviour'. London: Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium.

——— (2020d) 'The mental landscape of post-conflict life in northern Uganda Part 5: rethinking inclusion and fairness'. London: Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium.

——— (2020e) 'The mental landscape of post-conflict life in northern Uganda Part 6: rethinking idleness, risk-taking and agency'. London: Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium.

Henrich, Joseph (2020) *The Weirdest People in the World: How the West Became Psychologically Peculiar and Particularly Prosperous*. New York, NY: (Penguin (Farrar, Straus and Giroux).

Schomerus, M. and Taban, C. (2021a) 'How information and individuality intersect for South Sudanese refugees in Uganda'. London: Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium.

——— (2021b) 'Rapid change and standstill: peace-making, Covid-19 and rumours in South Sudan'. London: Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium.

Shahbaz, B., Suleri, A., Ali, M., Khan, H., Sturge, G., Mallett, M. and Hagen-Zanker, J. (2017) 'Tracking change in livelihoods, service delivery and governance: evidence from a 2012–2015 panel survey in Pakistan'. London: Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium.