Causal Layered Analysis Defined

By Sohail Inayatullah

Complexity requires us to examine futures-related issues from many angles and at multiple levels.

Causal Layered Analysis (CLA) is a theory of knowledge and a methodology for creating more-effective policies and strategies. Since its invention in the late 1980s, it has been used successfully with governments, corporations, international think tanks, communities, and cities around the world. It has also been used as the primary research method for dozens of doctoral and master's students around the world.

CLA works at a number of levels, delving deeper than the litany, the headline, or a data level of reality to reach a systemic-level understanding of the causes for the litany. Below that level, CLA goes still further, searching for worldview or stakeholder views on issues. Finally, it unpacks the deepest metaphor levels of reality. Each subsequent level below reveals a deeper cause.

Take quality and safety issues in health care, for example. At the litany level, a problem in the United States is the more than 100,000 deaths per year related to medical mistakes.

If we do not go deeper in understanding causation, almost always the business-as-usual strategy is to focus on the individual: more training for particular doctors. By going deeper, however, we discover that safety issues lie not just with particular doctors making mistakes, but rather with the medical and hospital system as a whole. Long working hours, hospitals poorly designed for a maturing society, and lack of communication among different parts of the health system are among other key issues.

Below the systemic level is the worldview, the deep structure of modern medicine. At this level, the reductionist approach, while brilliant at certain types of problem solving, is less useful for connecting with patients, with seeing the whole. Thus, patients opt for other systems that provide a deeper connection.

Patients thus intuitively move to the deepest level, that of myth and metaphor: "The patient will see you now" or "I am an expert of my body" challenge the modernist view of "the doctor is always right" as organizing metaphors.

CLA broadens our understanding of issues by creating deeper scenarios. We can explore deep myths and new litanies based on the points of view of different stakeholders—nurses, peer-to-peer health networks, future generations, caregivers, etc.—and then see how they construct problems and solutions.

Finally, CLA is used for implementing new strategies to address issues. Does the new strategy ensure systemic changes (incentives and fines)? Does it lead to worldview-cultural change? Is there a new metaphor, a narrative for the new strategy? And, most importantly, does the new vision have a new litany, a new way to ensure that the strategies reinforce the new future and are not chained to the past?

Causal Layered Analysis thus can be used to deepen our understanding of strategy. Mapping reality from the viewpoint of multiple stakeholders enables us to develop more-robust scenarios. It helps us to understand current reality, and, by giving us a tool to dig deeper and more broadly, it allows us to create an alternative future that is robust in its implementation. ❏

About the Author
Sohail Inayatullah is a professor at Tamkang University, University of the Sunshine Coast, Macquarie University, and Metafuture.org. He is also a member of the World Future Society's Global Advisory Council.