Intellectual Habits
in Understanding the
Operational Environment

by James T. Wilson

Peace cannot be kept by force. It can only be achieved by understanding.

Albert Einstein

Einstein acknowledges the importance of understanding the operational environment. If we do not understand the complex environment in which we operate, then we are likely wasting effort or possibly worsening the condition. The Interagency Conflict Assessment Framework (ICAF) was developed by the U.S. government to provide a better understanding of conflict environments. However, simply knowing the ICAF is insufficient to developing a true appreciation of the conflict environment.

It is imperative that we develop intellectual habits that inform our analysis within the ICAF. The two tasks of the ICAF are conflict diagnosis that segues into planning. The framework emphasizes the first task in order to develop a better understanding. The second task is dependent on the various planning processes of the multiple U.S. government and partner organizations and the desire of the U.S. government elements in the region. Conflict diagnosis is broken into four steps that are graphically depicted in Figure 1.[1]

The first step is to analyze the context of the conflict region. Context consists of factors that do not cause a conflict but create fertile ground for problems to grow. Environmental conditions, poverty, and history of conflict are possible context attributes. Context affects and is affected by each of the other components in the ICAF.[3]

The second step is to examine the identity groups and their societal patterns and institutional

Major J. Tyler Wilson is a U.S. Army Civil Affairs officer, currently assigned to the 83rd Civil Affairs Battalion (Airborne) where he is an operational planner. He has served as a civil affairs team chief, operations chief, and company commander.
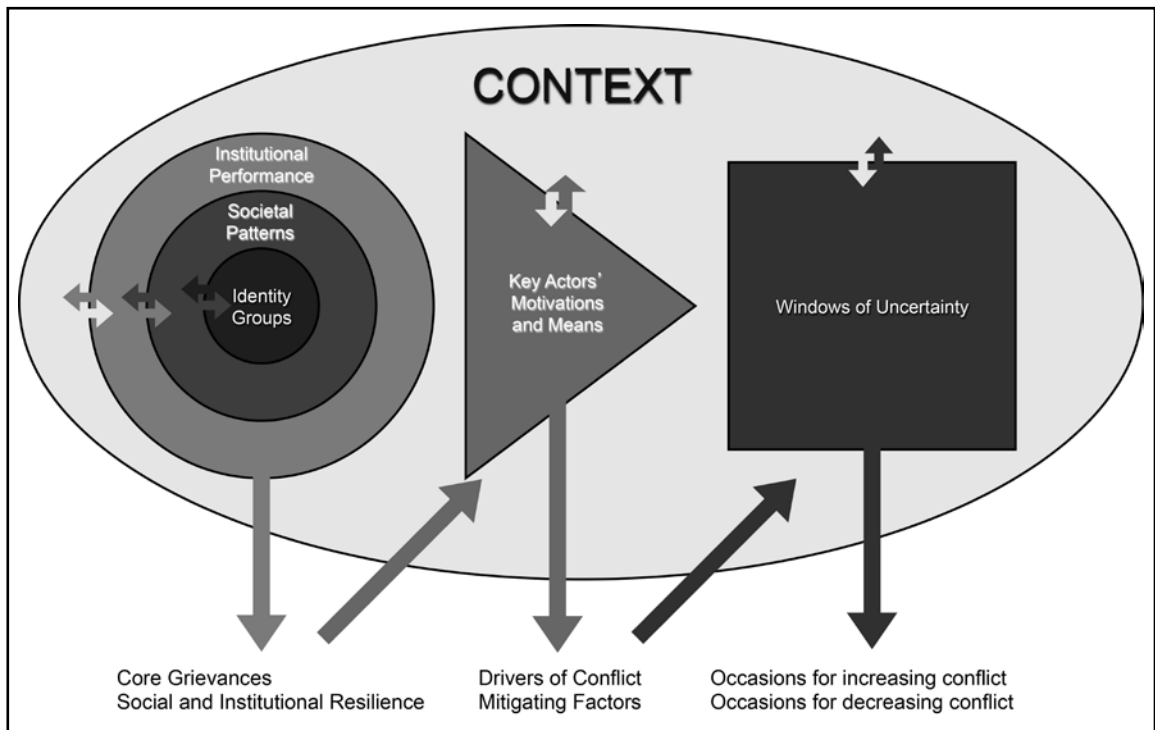
Figure 1. ICAF Conflict Diagnosis[2]

performance in order to identify the core grievances and social and institutional resiliencies. Identity groups are people who identify with each other along common interests. In a conflict environment, these groups may feel their basic human needs are threatened. Societal patterns are how the various groups interact with each other, particularly when there are perceived deprivations and competing interests or when their cooperation can add to peaceful conflict resolution. Institutional performance assesses formal and informal institutions that should be providing for basic human needs, and how they may be improving or worsening a conflict.[4]

In the third step, analysts look at key actors' motivations and means to derive the drivers of conflict and mitigating factors. How do key actors mobilize groups around core grievances or sources of resilience? The drivers of conflict identified in this analysis can be understood as active energy. Core grievances identified in step

two can be understood as potential energy. Core grievances may not actually cause a conflict; however, groups are often willing to act on these core grievances. They become drivers of conflict when key actors are able to mobilize and resource a group to commit violence. Mitigating factors are able to counter core grievances, and sources of resilience actively work to resolve conflict peacefully.[5]

In the final step, analysts look at windows of vulnerability or periods of time in which a conflict may increase or decrease. The ICAF assessment team will use this understanding of time to prioritize the drivers of conflict and mitigating factors identified in step three. Once the conflict diagnosis task is complete, the analysis feeds into either crisis response planning or conflict prevention planning.[6]

The ICAF assessment team will depend on the environment and the circumstances of the conflict. The team will try to determine who is trying to gain a better understanding of what is

occurring in the conflict environment and why. Joint Publication (JP) 3-08, *Interorganizational Planning during Joint Operations*, provides an outline of ICAF for the Department of Defense (DoD) [7] and directs the Ground Combatant Commander to "incorporate, support, and participate in interagency planning processes, such as the . . . Interagency Conflict Assessment Framework (ICAF) to the greatest extent possible."[8]

> **The Interagency Conflict Assessment Framework is a framework intended to provide the U.S. government with a common understanding across the interagency and in collaboration with the host nation.**

The Department of State Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations (CSO) maintains the mission "to engage in conflict prevention, crisis response, and stabilization."[9] Consequently, CSO is the primary agency that oversees the planning and execution of the ICAF. However, the ICAF could be initiated by a DoD element. Furthermore, a DoD representative is regularly involved as a member of the ICAF assessment team. Therefore, members of the DoD must be familiar with the ICAF to provide their perspectives on a conflict environment. Furthermore, DoD personnel may be necessary participants in order to physically access the most volatile regions in a conflict.

Many DoD personnel will look at the ICAF and attempt to understand each of the elements. However, many may not be familiar with the social science theories or understand the logic of causality that inform what is occurring in a conflict environment. Simply following the ICAF process without proper intellectual
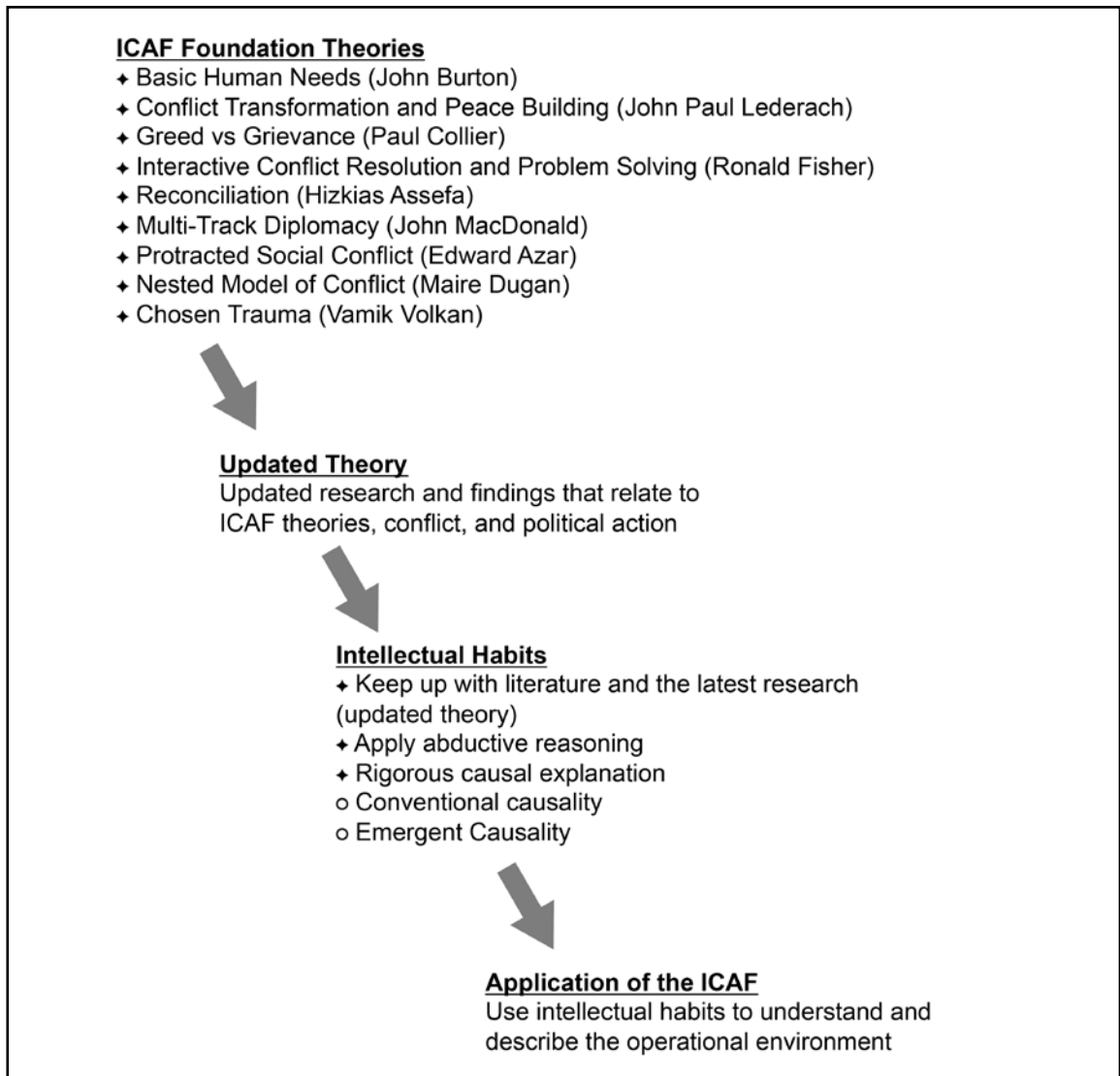
habits will lead to an incomplete or inaccurate understanding of what is occurring.

The ICAF is a framework intended to provide the U.S. government with a common understanding across the interagency and in collaboration with the host nation. This framework is grounded in theory and best practices over time. Fundamentally, it is built on nine social theories:

- John Burton's Basic Human Needs.

- John Paul Lederach's Conflict Transformation and Peace Building.

- Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler's Greed Versus Grievance.

- Ronal Fisher's Interactive Conflict Resolution and Problem Solving.

- Hizkias Assefa's Concept of Reconciliation.

- Edward Azar's Protracted Social Conflict.

- Marie Dugan's Nested Model Of Conflict.

- Vamik Volkan's Chosen Trauma.

Our understanding of conflict and political action has evolved since the creation of the ICAF. We make observations in a conflict environment or any environment and apply abductive reasoning based on our understanding of political action in order to interpret what is occurring. As the theories on which the ICAF are based continue to grow and evolve, so will our assessment of a conflict. While the foundational ICAF theories provide a baseline understanding of the framework, understanding the latest social science research will inform abductive reasoning to better understand a conflict.

The complexities of the operational environment demand that we evaluate conflict dynamics through conventional and emergent causality. ICAF assessment teams must apply

ICAF Foundation Theories
+ Basic Human Needs (John Burton)
+ Conflict Transformation and Peace Building (John Paul Lederach)
+ Greed vs Grievance (Paul Collier)
+ Interactive Conflict Resolution and Problem Solving (Ronald Fisher)
+ Reconciliation (Hizkias Assefa)
+ Multi-Track Diplomacy (John MacDonald)
+ Protracted Social Conflict (Edward Azar)
+ Nested Model of Conflict (Maire Dugan)
+ Chosen Trauma (Vamik Volkan)

Updated Theory
Updated research and findings that relate to
ICAF theories, conflict, and political action

Intellectual Habits
+ Keep up with literature and the latest research
(updated theory)
+ Apply abductive reasoning
+ Rigorous causal explanation
o Conventional causality
o Emergent Causality

Application of the ICAF
Use intellectual habits to understand and
describe the operational environment

Figure 2. Model of Intellectual Habit and the ICAF

intellectual habits in order to best understand what is occurring. This process is shown in Figure 2.

In his theory of conflict transformation and peace building, John Paul Lederach outlines five aspects to building sustainable peace:

- Address conflict in a "middle out" approach by leveraging mid-level leaders.

- Employ a sub-system strategy that looks below the surface of an issue to determine what systemic problems exist.

- Emphasize reconciliation in the peace building process.

- Look for innovative approaches that address the roots of a conflict.

- Coordinate—it is a central component to peace building.[10]

Since the creation of the ICAF, Lederach has updated his understanding of conflict and peace building. In his book *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building*

Peace, he discusses the need to use imagination and an understanding of "a canvas of human relationships" to create social change that will move destructive conflict to productive peace.[11] Lederach points to the difficulty in using his theory on conflict transformation and peace building in real world applications. His theories portray a continuously more complex understanding of the environment. Lederach acknowledges that his understanding of conflict and peace building continues to evolve. He describes "the nature of ideas and learning as an indefinite, constantly evolving process."[12]

Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler developed the theory of greed versus grievance. Since then, Collier has expanded his study of how economic conditions can explain conflict.[13] He notes that the bottom billion people in the world live below the poverty line. He explores how the type of government and economic resources correlate as pre-conditions for conflict. He finds that perverse foreign aid incentives lead to corrupt democratic practices in the poorest countries of the world. He also finds that the corrupt democratic practices often lead to internal violence.

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The updated works by Lederach and Collier demonstrate how our understanding of political action evolves over time. As research and new understandings emerge, we find new explanations for conflict. Professors, students, and practitioners continue to conduct additional research that expands and enriches the original understanding. In extreme cases, their research may even render the older theories incorrect.

We use abductive reasoning and our understanding of political action to explain causes of a conflict. Abductive reasoning best describes the reasoning method used to determine causality of action in a conflict. Abduction reasoning draws a conclusion based on probabilities of explanation.[14]

Charles Peirce introduced the idea of abductive reasoning. He stated that all lines of reasoning must have a rule (x), a result (y), and a case (z).[15] In deductive reasoning, if the lawn gets wet when it rains (x), and the lawn is wet (y), then one could say it rained (z). In inductive reasoning the lawn is wet (y), and you know that it just rained (z), then you could say the lawn will always get wet when it rains. Abductive reasoning would determine that it is probable that the lawn is wet because it just rained (y). There are other possibilities why the lawn is wet, but based on what is known of the circumstances, it makes the most sense to use the explanation of it just rained.[16]

Abductive reasoning provides the most probable explanation for conditions we observe. An outcome from political action is detected. A cause is then attributed to this action based on our understanding. We use abductive reasoning to explain the outcome using our understanding of possible theories.[17] Familiarity with conflict and political theories provides an academic foundation from which to apply abductive reasoning in order to explain the outcome of violence. Conflict is complex, so there are often multiple causal mechanisms at play. Only through familiarity with the latest research and an understanding of political action can we apply the diagnostic process with any certainty.

Furthermore, it is not enough to simply be familiar with a culture or the basic context of a conflict. There are forces affecting action that are not immediately evident, and the assessment team must be aware of them to look for their existence. Ian Shapiro provides three examples of action where the actors do not realize how

their action is influenced by different factors. The first example is a wedding ceremony between a man and a woman in the contemporary U.S. The second example is a worker who is unemployed, and thus gratefully agrees to a job in which he receives half the minimum wage. The final example is a battered wife who chooses to return to her spouse knowing that she will face more abuse in the future.[18]

In Shapiro's first example, the couple is committing themselves to each other in marriage. This is an act of love and affection, but it is also the reproduction of social structure of the nuclear family. The couple may not be fully aware of the external pressure they feel to perform a wedding ceremony or why those pressures exist. To the couple, they are acting in a manner consistent with the feelings they have for each other, and they are likely unaware of these external pressures placed on them.[19]

In the second example, the unemployed worker is taking a job unaware of all of the forces affecting him. He may blame himself for losing his last job, or he may blame the poor economic conditions for lack of other job opportunities. He likely does not analytically examine the causal mechanisms shaping his situation. He takes the job because he is happy to gain employment.[20]

The final example combines the forces of the first two examples. The wife may not understand all of the forces that push her back to her abusive husband. Furthermore, she may have a psychological syndrome that causes her to interpret her husband's abusive behavior as affection. In this interpretation, "she may be inadvertently reproducing an exploitative relationship."[21]

Each of these examples highlights the importance of an external observer to be intellectually aware of the latest theories in social science. Interviews with the actors would not draw the forces affecting action in each situation. The combatants in a conflict will not understand the subtle detail of why the conflict is occurring but will have personal experiences that convey their internal interpretation of the events. The actors' interpretations are not wrong, they are just incomplete and do not provide the best understanding of the environment.

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A conflict environment is complex. There are multiple open systems that interact with each other over time. Systems affect each other and the canvas of human connections in unforeseen ways.[22] Furthermore, there are actions unknown to the actors themselves, resulting in seemingly irrational behavior. There are multiple causal mechanisms that affect behavior.

In order to fully examine possible causal mechanisms at work in a conflict, a rigorous model of causal explanation is necessary. Craig Parsons's four causal logics of structure, institution, ideation, and psychology are comprehensive and internally coherent. They cover all possible conventional explanations of causality, and each is distinct from the others. Structural causality is the material landscape within which people must navigate. The actors within a structural explanation make rational decisions based on their environment. Conversely, institutional causality is the product of man-made rules and norms that result in an unintended consequence. The outcome is the result of a rational actor making decisions within an institutional environment. Ideational causality can be understood as a cultural,

religious, or other similar understanding driving the actions of people. Finally, psychological causality is the hard-wired irrational action people take.[23]

Understanding structural, institutional, ideational, and psychological causal logic would inform a more thorough understanding of the operational environment. What are the structures at play in the conflict? What are the secondary, unintended consequences of institutional action taking place within the conflict? What ideational factors are creating conditions that contribute to the conflict? What psychological factors are affecting the actors involved in the conflict? Each has some role in a conflict, and understanding the theories at play would allow a thorough understanding of how they aggravate or mitigate the conflict.

We also know that complexity prevents us from achieving complete understanding of the operational environment. There will always be a gap between what we know and reality. Connolly borrows an understanding of emergence from complexity: "…emergent causality—the dicey process by which new entities and processes periodically surge into being—is irreducible to efficient causality."[24] Emergent causalities are those actions that are greater than the sum of their parts, and they could not be predicted. An action occurs that was not foreseen and throws other systems into disequilibrium. It can show traces of the systems that it touches, but its action is "irreducible to its precursors."[25]

A natural disaster such as a tsunami or earthquake and the effect it has on groups in conflict could best be understood as emergent causality. The action will have traces of each system before the disaster, but the event is too complex to be understood with conventional causality. Furthermore, the result of events after a natural disaster will not be evident for some time.

This rigorous causal explanation model with a familiarization of academic research and social sciences allows us to apply abductive reasoning in order to better understand a conflict environment. This understanding is necessary when conducting an ICAF assessment and will result in a more accurate product. It will shape U.S. government and host nation response to a conflict in a more effective strategy. Task one of the ICAF is conflict diagnosis, and task two offers a segue into planning. This model of intellectual habit will inform the diagnosis during task one, and it will shape possible courses of action during task two.

Military professionals may be members of an ICAF assessment team, and they will plan and execute action in a conflict environment. Using intellectual habits is critical to understanding the operational environment and taking action that will most likely achieve U.S. government objectives. This model has demonstrated how to achieve maximum understanding and recognize that a gap in knowledge will always exist.

It is important to understanding the theories that underpin the ICAF in order to appreciate each step of the framework. This familiarization will provide a better understanding of the operational environment. Social science is a growing field of study, and continuous research adds to our understanding of political action. Familiarity with the latest understanding of political action enables us to apply abductive reasoning and a rigorous causation model in order to inform and enrich our understanding of a conflict. This increased understanding could be of critical importance when looking at the U.S. government strategy for reducing conflict in the region. Failure to appreciate the complexity of the environment or understand the action that is taking place may cause us to act in a manner that is incongruous with U.S. government interests. *IAJ*

Notes

1   "Interagency Conflict Assessment Framework (ICAF)," Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations, Department of State, <http://www.state.gov /documents /organization/187786.pdf>, accessed on December 2, 2011, pp. 6–7.

2   Ibid., p. 7.

3   Ibid.

4   Ibid., pp. 8–9.

5   Ibid., pp. 10–12

6   Ibid., p. 13.

7   Joint Publication (JP) 3-08, *Interorganizational Planning During Joint Operations*, Joint Staff, Government Printing Office, Washington, June 24, 2011, pp. H-1–H-10.

8   Ibid., p. II-10.

9   "Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations," Department of State, <http://www.state.gov /j/ cso/>, accessed on May 1, 2012.

10   John Paul Lederach, *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies*, United Institute of Peace Press, Washington, 2010, pp. 151–152.

11   John Paul Lederach, *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace*, Oxford University Press, New York, Kindle Edition, 2005, pp. 34–125.

12   Lederach, *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace*, pp. 110–111.

13   Paul Collier, *The Bottom Billion*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2007, pp. 5–6; Paul Collier, *Wars, Guns, and Votes*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2009, pp. 17–20.

14   Andrea Franco, "A Simple Definition of Deductive, Inductive, and Abductive Reasoning," The Wise Ignorant: A Blog of Ideas, December 13, 2011, <http://thewiseignorant.com/a-simple-definition-of-deductive-inductive-and-abductive-reasoning>, accessed on May 9, 2012.

15   Ibid.

16   Michael Cox, "Advancing the Diagnostic Analysis of Environmental Problems," *International Journal of the Commons*, Vol. 5, No. 2, August 2011, <http://www .thecommonsjournal.org/index.php/ijc/rt/ printerFriendly/273/218>, accessed on April 30, 2012, pp. 2–3.

17   Ibid., pp. 3–4.

18   Ian Shapiro, *The Flight from Reality in the Human Sciences*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2005, p. 32.

19   Ibid.

20   Ibid.

21   Ibid.

22   William E. Connolly, *A World of Becoming*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC, 2011, p. 42.

23   Craig Parsons, *How to Map Arguments in Political Science*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2007, pp. 92–162.

24   Connolly, p. 44.

25 Connolly, p. 82.