

What are mental models and why are they important to us?

Mental models are operating systems for humans. They comprise the instructions by which we run our lives. Our mental models are highly complex and run with a constant web of interactions between our personal operating systems and those of our communities and cultures of which we are a part. All the time, day in and day out, our lives go on in accord with our personal set of mental models intermixed with the social and cultural mental in which we are immersed. These mental models operate primarily in the background of our lives to regulate not only what we do but how we decide who we are and how we feel about it all. Our mental models set parameters for our expectations of what can, should happen, and who we each are in relation to different situations.

To get a sense of this, let's consider other operating systems we rely on that are much more simple than our own mental model operating systems: those of our mobile phones. Do you have a smartphone? There's a good chance today that you do. When we use our phones we don't give any thought to the programmed set of instructions, the operating system, that tells the phone hardware to do the things we want the phone to do. We just take for granted that our phones will work – will connect us to other people via voice, video or text, keep our appointments on a calendar and remind us of them, search the internet, and more. Our phones just work, ...until they don't.

We people also go along through our everyday lives not paying much if any attention to how or why we are doing what we do, until something in our lives isn't working. Despite the surface similarities, there are big differences though. When our phones aren't working well, the phone company--Apple or Android, or Windows --installs an upgrade to the phone's operating system and periodically reminds us to clean out the junk we have stored but no longer need. But what about us? What happens when our operating systems no longer serve us well? Can our mental models be upgraded? Do you even think about upgrading your mental models?

The good news is we can change our mental models, and for most of us our mental models have changed in numerous ways over time. If our mental models are not overly rigid, we may adapt them to accommodate different situations, even everyday situations such as work time vs family/friends time. Think about it. Do you apply the same rules and expectations to people at work as we do to family members and vis versa. If you're not sure, think how odd it would be if you tried to apply the same rules for interacting with a two-year-old to your boss. We also make changes to our mental models when we learn, replacing some of the operating instructions with new ones.

Not only do we modify our personal mental models, our cultural or social mental models change too, sometimes intentionally and other times because events make our mental models obsolete and force change. Think back to when you were a young teenager, just beginning to "figure out" the world and what your place in it would be. What experiences have stayed with you? What were your beliefs then? What did you value highly? Do you still hold to those beliefs? Those values? What rules did you live by then? What's the same for you and what's changed? What did you imagine your life would be? What resources did you have available to you? What did you think would be possible?

This is the stuff of mental models, all running within and around us all the time.

If I continue to believe as I have always believed, I will continue to act as I have always acted.

If I continue to act as I have always acted, I will continue to get what I have always gotten.

John D. Adams

How do we get the mental models we have? How do these networks of instructions that we operate by come about?

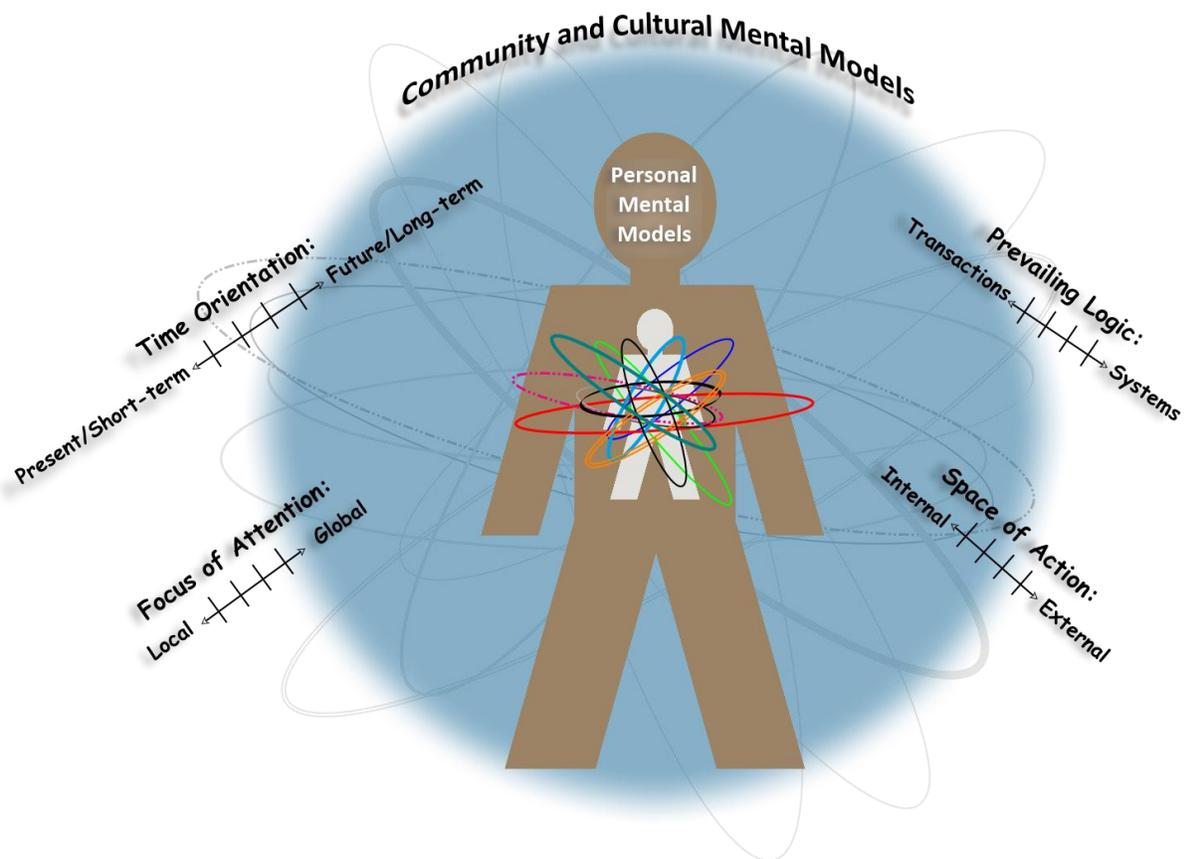
How We Construct Mental Models (personal and societal)

- **Beliefs + Experiences + Values** \triangleright **Rules**
- **Imagination + Current Reality + Available Resources** \triangleright **Possibilities**
- **Rules + Possibilities** = **Operating Instructions for Thinking, Feeling, Acting**

These Operating Instructions for thinking, feeling, and acting run our complex, interacting personal and societal Mental Models.

 1998, 2019. Linda Morris Kelley. This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

Visualizing the complexity of our mental models



 1998, 2019. Linda Morris Kelley. This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.