

Mental Maps

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Definition: Mental maps, or cognitive maps as they are often known, refer to individuals' conceptualizations of spatial knowledge. They can refer to either the psychological organization of one's perceptions of his environment or the physical representation of this knowledge on paper in the form of an actual map. Insight into the formation of people's mental maps can be gained through an understanding of the ways different features may be simplified or distorted in their construction.

Much of the classic work done on exploring the development and retention of cognitive images was conducted by geographer Kevin Lynch in the 1960s and 70s. After identifying recurring traits and tendencies with which people routinely characterize their environments, Lynch outlined the following five simple elements common among mental maps.

Paths: The channels along which people travel. Examples include streets, trails, and transit lines.

Edges: Other lines that are significant, but not necessarily traveled along. Often, these separate large areas. Examples might include political boundaries or coastlines.

Districts: Relatively homogenous areas or places of reference that are too large to denote with a point. The best example is a neighborhood, but others include universities, parks, or shopping centers.

Nodes: Points of strategic location. Nodes are places of more significant focus for travelers, such as intersections of important paths.

Landmarks: Important points of reference that are significant for the occurrence of a unique feature. These may include distinctive buildings or landforms.

Many of these elements are dependent on scale. Landmarks might be understood as districts, or vice versa between individuals who conceptualize the features in different ways. Moreover, certain liner features, such as busy streets could be identified as edges or paths, as they are perceived differently among individuals from different backgrounds.

Similarly, mental maps can reveal insights into people's perceptions of places based on the occurrence of distortion. Often, this is as a result of incomplete knowledge; our own understanding of places becomes less comprehensive as distance from our normal surroundings (i.e. residence) increases. However, distorted features can also reveal much about our biases, experiences, and personalities. In realizing the subjective nature of this process, we can build on our collective understanding of how different groups of people use and conceptualize space.

References/Sources:

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