Drawing the Lived City: A Phenomenological Study of Mental Mapping

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1 Introduction

Mental mapping is traditionally conceptualised as a goal-oriented process serving navigation. In this study, I re-frame mental maps as multi-layered cognitive representations in which spatial knowledge serves as a base, annotated by perceptual and experiential layers, such as multi-sensory perception, embodiment, time, emotions, mobility habits, social bonds, and biographical memory. Drawing on phenomenological perspectives on lived experience and research on urban perception (Lynch, 1960), mental maps are understood as structures through which individuals emotionally engage with, and construct meaning from their urban environment.

The central research question is: *How do individuals, specifically a small sample (N=15) of residents of Ljubljana, construct mental maps of their city by internalising lived urban experience?*

2 Method

During my mobility semester at the University of Ljubljana, I carried out an exploratory qualitative study with fifteen residents of Ljubljana, recruited through snowball sampling and selected to reflect variation in length of stay, age, gender, and mobility habits. Each participant was asked to draw a map of a personally meaningful part of the city, with no requirement for cartographic accuracy. This drawing task served only as an elicitation tool for a subsequent micro-phenomenological interview (Petitmengin, 2006), which explored: cognitive strategies for mental map construction and externalization, the role of lived experience in shaping the map and the meanings attributed to depicted places. The deliverable of this phase is a set of fifteen interview recordings, which constitute the primary data for the present analysis.

Analysis of the interview transcripts will follow the approach used by Oblak et al. (2022), inspired by constructivist grounded theory. Coding will proceed in two phases: initial line-by-line identification of meaningful segments, followed by the development of inter-subject experiential categories and a finalised codebook, where each category is described with representative quotes and examples of how it appeared across interviews. Interpretative validity will be ensured by consensual validation: asking participants whether the codebook accurately reflects their lived experience.

3 Expected results

Based on the interviews conducted, the following anticipated findings can be outlined:

- Drawn maps predominantly feature places that are most frequently visited or associated with significant memories.
- Personal identity and everyday practices are reflected in the way participant construct their representation of the city.
- Structural elements of the city (landmarks, districts, etc.) make the city easier to remember and represent, thereby extending Lynch's (1960) theory of legibility.
- Long-term residents demonstrate stronger emotional attachment to specific places compared to newly arrived individuals.

4 Discussion

This study does not aim for generalisable findings. With a small, diverse sample, the goal is to demonstrate how differently individuals inhabit and represent a city based on their specific perceptions and lived experience. These insights may have practical relevance for migration and well-being research.

References

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