

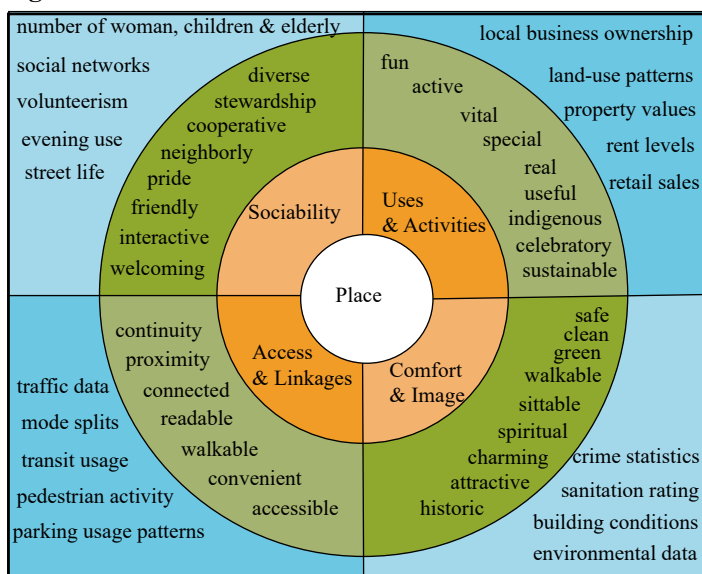


Maximising the Value of Quality Surveys in Geography Fieldwork

It is the nature of people to have attitudes and opinions, and to make judgments. Often such judgements will be based on a wide range of impartial evidence supported by detailed information and data as well as good understanding and rationality. In many cases, however, judgments can be made on the flimsiest of evidence, often leading to stereotyping and misconceptions, e.g. some modern buildings are commonly perceived as landscape ‘eyesores’ by some people, whereas others, who have a background in design, view them as masterpieces.

Geography fieldwork often involves use of these value judgments – you are probably familiar with the wide range of ‘environmental quality’ type of surveys. Often these are used in an attempt to put a numeric value on qualitative aspects of the built or rural landscape (or ‘places’). This type of fieldwork is often used in local neighbourhood surveys, especially those which consider aspects of quality of life. Figure 1 shows an example of a model representing place. What are the options for using quality surveys as a part of primary fieldwork in this context?

Figure 1



Semi-quantitative Scoring Systems and Their Limitations

Quality surveys, in their various forms, are semi-quantitative scoring approaches and can be used in a range of locations and areas (Figure 2), i.e. they try to put numbers on to qualitative opinion surveys. The technique can also be used to help understand both interconnections of places as well as their relationships. This contrasts with a more traditional fieldwork focus based on spatial location (such as land-use surveys) as instead the approach relies more on networks and the linked processes that generate flows between places and spaces. This ability to “peel back” the locational layer means that we begin to see how urban and rural locations function as sets of interactions that flow across networks: some physical and visible, but many subtler, with social, and often invisible components. Remember that these flows can show changes day to day, hour to hour, and even minute to minute. This is all something that has the potential to be investigated, and the quality survey might form a valuable part of the evidence.

So, enquiry work based on places and the study of local neighbourhoods might be largely qualitative (non-numerical) in design. In many respects this type of study is more challenging than the quantitative (“counting” fieldwork) that many of you will be familiar with. Instead, a set of skills developing social and cultural awareness are often required. Qualitative data is often in the form of texts, images, and descriptions of behaviours – actions and practices that are witnessed in the urban or rural landscape. **Quality surveys, in their various forms, may contribute to the evidence base and should not be utilised as the most important or dominant source of data and information.** This is the case whether in a human or physical environment. High quality fieldwork and research will often involve a blend of approaches, recognising the potential usage of each technique as well as its own advantages and disadvantages in terms of data reliability.

Figure 2a various quality (semi-qualitative) scoring, plus their linked secondary data

AREA	Example of customised quality survey	Examples of additional sources of secondary data and information
Environmental	Amount / quality of greenspace Air quality Noise (loudness and type) Habitat quality / biodiversity Garden size and type Surveys of specific environments, e.g. coastal protection, hedgerows, beaches	Routine indicators already developed at local, regional and national level, e.g. biodiversity and specialist reports
Social	Levels of community trust Fear of crime / perception Housing upkeep and condition Housing tenure	Published police crime data Census data (output area level and point data) Local reports highlighting inequality
Economic	High-street shop diversity Shopping quality Routeway / street quality Street furniture and architecture quality Tourist and other services, e.g. toilet quality	Specialist town centre reports Foot-fall surveys and surveys of town centre occupancy Regeneration plans and reports

Improving the quality of the quality survey

So quality surveys allow the user to collect a range of data. In order to improve the reliability of outcomes, there are several precautions that should be considered during both the design and implementation stages:

1. Devise a mix of criteria that together represent a fair way of measuring whatever you are interested in. These could cover a wide range of socio-economic factors e.g. employment, family structure, mobility, health or environmental issues.
2. Some criteria are more important than others and may be weighted to reflect their importance. For example, unemployment rates have a direct bearing on levels of deprivation, and so the ranked position should possibly be doubled or trebled if you are investigating that particular focus.
3. Try to be as objective as possible when devising and scoring criteria. It might help if you (i) work in a group which is mixed in terms of gender and cultural background, and (ii) discuss your scoring differences and the reasons for them. The idea of 'pre-calibrating' the scoring system can improve the quality of the responses. This can be achieved using a series of photographs to use in a group discussion so that images can be matched to criteria, for example, Google Street images to calibrate housing condition and street surveys. This should make the process fairer and therefore generate more reliable outcomes.
4. Give written examples (known as 'descriptors') for the 'polar' values on a scale. Thus, in an assessment of garden quality as part of a residential survey, if your scale is 0-5 you might describe 0 as meaning 'a neglected, overgrown rubbish tip'. If possible, do the same for the intermediate points on your scale (e.g. the descriptor for category 3 gardens might be 'reasonably maintained, not detracting from the overall environmental quality').
5. Get the scale correct – sufficient semantic differentiation to encompass a range of conditions or opinions, but not so wide that it is over complex and people will score in the middle.

Conclusions

Quality surveys have become an important part of geographical fieldwork, but their real usefulness is very much in your hands. If you take a hasty approach and just lift a method from someone else then the resulting data may be limited in terms of its quality and what conclusions can be drawn from the data.

Yet by going through a process of customisation and adaptation should yield dividends. It also demonstrates initiative. The resulting judgment survey will be higher quality and the data carry much more weight when it comes to analysis and discussion of results.

References and Further Reading

Robinson, G (1998) *Methods and Techniques in Human Geography*. Wiley.

Veal, A (2006) *Research Methods for Leisure and Tourism*. Prentice Hall

Holmes, D & Warn, S (2003) *Fieldwork Investigations – a self study guide*. Hodder & Stoughton.

Holmes D, & Farbrother, D (2000) *A-Z Geography Fieldwork*. Geographical Association.

Information on human impact surveys can be found here <http://www.rgs.org/OurWork/Schools/Fieldwork+and+local+learning/Fieldwork+techniques/Human+impact+studies.htm> and an example of a downloadable (pdf) environmental quality survey here https://www.rgs.org/NR/rdonlyres/CC14B3C6-E947-4196-AF6C-1FED7668C568/0/FW_2012Canary_EnvironmentalQualitySurvey.pdf