



## Is land cover an important asset for addressing the subjective landscape dimensions?



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### ABSTRACT

This paper explores which physical landscape components relate to subjective landscape dimensions. The ways in which people describe their surrounding cultural landscape was analyzed through an assessment of their representations of it. A special focus was placed on assessing the role of land cover as a means to communicate landscape meanings regarding a specific geographical region. The methodological framework was built on the basis of a questionnaire survey, multivariate statistical analysis and mapping approaches. This research shows that there is a set of physical landscape components that relate to subjective landscape dimensions which can be disclosed through the assessment of social representations. Enhancing and safeguarding those physical landscape components associated with the subjective landscape dimensions are important aspects in both framing and targeting land cover/use policies and decision making. Results also suggest that land cover can be understood as an important asset for describing landscapes as more than 30% of respondents referred to it when asked to represent the case study region of Alentejo in southern Portugal. This might mean that in addition to objective ecological and biological functions, land cover is also an important asset for evaluating subjective landscape dimensions in line with place attachment and landscape identity. Finally, the ways in which the empirical material gathered here can be used to inform policy and planning are explored.

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### Introduction

Landscape has been widely recognized as a multilayered concept embedding both objective and subjective dimensions (Antrop, 2000; Naveh, 2000, 2007; Tveit et al., 2006; Hunziker et al., 2007; Nassauer, 2011). A robust set of studies addresses objective landscape dimensions (e.g. characterizing landscape in terms of land cover patterns, species richness and ecological zones) (Daily and Matson, 2008; Turner and Daily, 2008; Chapin et al., 2010). There is also a considerable body of knowledge on the subjective dimensions (e.g. aesthetic satisfaction derived from a landscape) (Palang and Fry, 2003; Stephenson, 2007; Nijnik et al., 2009; Swanwick, 2009; Ode et al., 2010). But the ways in which these two bodies

of research can be bridged in order to inform policy making has been hampered by focused disciplinary approaches (Bishop and Phillips, 2004; Antonson, 2009; Beunen and Opdam, 2011). Should this handicap be overcome, it is likely that the multiple relationships between people and their surrounding physical and objective landscape settings, as well as the subjective meanings associated with them, might offer valuable knowledge for enhanced planning and management for future landscapes (Opdam et al., 2001; Antrop, 2005; von Haaren and Ott, 2008).

With an overall aim of bridging objective and subjective landscape dimensions in order to inform landscape policy and planning, this paper specifically assesses how a physical landscape component such as land cover can be deployed for addressing subjective landscape dimensions in the cultural landscapes of Europe. This knowledge should prove to be of value for better targeting land cover/use policy-making at multiple levels of governance (Faludi, 2009). In the rural landscapes of Europe the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) is often pointed out as one of the most important drivers of landscape change (EP, 2011). But the impact of spatial planning in Member States, even though primarily dealing with urban growth, transportation and other infrastructures, should also

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not be ignored as an important influence over land cover change. Hence, the focus heretofore has been placed on land cover because, while there are other physical landscape features such as castles or rivers that might be associated with subjective and imaginary landscape dimensions, those cannot readily be linked to land cover/use policy options in a straightforward manner, whereas links with land cover can be established. In order to address this issue, this paper specifically aims at assessing how land cover may contribute to bridge objective and subjective dimensions in cultural landscapes of Europe in such ways which can be made relevant for policy and planning.

Furthermore, while some of the relationships between land cover and a set of ecological and biological processes have been widely addressed in the literature, we argue that the role of land cover as surrogate for the subjective landscape dimensions still needs to be explored. Although land cover data has also been used on social science surveys namely on landscape preferences studies, most of the work developed on landscape preferences have focussed on user based preferences for different land covers in order to assess the ways in which a certain user “likes” one land cover better than another for a specific amenity activity (Dramstad et al., 2006; Tveit et al., 2006; Sayadi et al., 2009; Swanwick, 2009; Carvalho-Ribeiro and Lovett, 2011). But whether or not land cover is also an important asset for addressing other subjective landscape dimensions has yet to be fully explored.

Therefore, one of the contributions of this study is comprehensively to tackle the social dimensions of landscapes. As pointed out by Lorzing (2001) there are at least four layers associating humans and landscape: (i) intervention – the landscape is what we make, (ii) knowledge – landscape as associated with facts we know, (iii) perception – the landscape is what we see (visual landscape), and (iv) interpretation – the landscape which we believe. Throughout this paper the associations between the layer of intervention, which deals primarily with the relationship of peoples’ influence on landscape, by for example changing land cover as a consequence of policy options, and the layers of knowledge, interpretation and perception, associated with landscape’s influence on people, can be comprehensively explored.

Our primary goal is to assess the extent to which people refer to land cover when asked to represent a certain landscape. But a broader and more general aim is to explore the physical landscape components or settings which people are willing to appreciate regarding a specific cultural landscape of Europe. By landscape components and settings we mean aspects such as: specific places (a specific geographical location), landscape features and elements (either natural or manmade such as castles, churches, rivers) as well as land cover types (either single – e.g. broadleaf forest) or its patterns (compositions of land covers – e.g. mosaic of pine, cereal and oak trees). The work was developed by: (1) surveying the ways in which people communicate about their surrounding landscape to others, through an assessment of their representations and (2) exploring the ways in which people’s representations can be mapped and ultimately integrated into policy and decision making.

It follows from the above that a central concept developed here is that of social representation. This is understood as the elaboration of a social object by either the individual or its community for the purpose of behaving and communicating (Moscovici, 1963; Quétier et al., 2010). The concept of representation has been developed within psychology to help explain the many ways humans create and relate to their social worlds. Representations are used to communicate a discursive image (language or code) with a goal to legitimate a discourse (Vepsäläinen and Pitkänen, 2010). Therefore, a representation expresses different ways in which people communicate their interpretations and self-creations. It is thus likely that when people are asked to communicate about a known landscape

they will draw on features that best convey their relations to that specific landscape. So, this study builds upon other studies which relate to the manner in which landscape meaning has drawn on the concept of social representation in order to gain insights into the meanings that specific landscape features have for people by analyzing their descriptions of it (della Dora, 2009; Quétier et al., 2010; Vepsäläinen and Pitkänen, 2010; Buijs et al., 2011). In this context, a set of crucial questions still need to be raised: what are the physical aspects of landscapes which people cherish and ultimately want to communicate about when addressing their surroundings through their everyday lives? What are the landscape components which nowadays are still able to convey coherence and identity for a multitude of new landscape users in the cultural landscapes of Europe?

Throughout this work it was hypothesized that if land cover is a good surrogate for communicating about a specific landscape, then people would refer explicitly to this when asked to represent a certain landscape. Taking this perspective on board, for the initial hypothesis to be confirmed, land cover would have to be relevant enough to set the basis for the construction of people’s representations.

Nevertheless, to explore subjective landscape dimensions through the concept of representation, although holding considerable exploratory potential, introduces a complex and intricate conceptual framework that deserves special methodological attention. It is out of the purpose of this work, to focus on those deep-grounded sociological and psychological concepts underlying the reasons for the representations themselves. Instead, we aim at exploring the more tangible forms of the concept by focusing on the landscape and the way people use landscape physical features, e.g. the land cover, to communicate about a specific geographic region.

Thus it is important to set out the theoretical framework concerning the ways in which people represent the landscape of their surroundings. A huge body of literature points out the importance of identity associated with landscape (Tilley, 2006; Olwig, 2007; Pedrolí et al., 2007). Landscape is described in the UNESCO’s World Heritage designation of Cultural Landscapes “as part of peoples’ collective identity”, and in the European Landscape Convention (ELC) as the “foundation of their identity” (Article 5a).

To our knowledge, there is only a small amount of literature that systematically explores the essential aspects/features of the landscape that enforce collective or individual identity. Nor does there seem to be much research as to what thresholds of landscape change are deemed acceptable until such changes “disconnect” from people. Selman (2012, p. 5) puts this rupture as follows: there will be “erosion of bonds between people and place”. This paucity of literature may be due to the concept of identity as being primarily theorized in the disciplinary domain of social sciences which has been shy on emphasizing space as creator of identity (Proshansky et al., 1983). Although the concept of “spatial identity” was introduced in 1946 by Erickson it has only relatively recently been developed by Proshansky et al. (1983) as the concept of “place identity”. Furthermore, some ambiguity has been created in landscape literature when using the concept of “landscape identity”. Who is the subject of identity? Is it the “landscape” or the “people”? What is the scale at which landscape can foster the formation of identity; local, regional or even European? Sassatelli (2010).

These approaches draw on Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 1981; Ashforth and Mael, 1989), where in a simplistic way, two types of identity might be distinguished. One lies within a group (in-group), stressing what links the members of this specific group make definable and recognizable, and that which extends towards another group (out-group), emphasizing what is different (Tajfel, 1981). Applying this to the landscape scale, what connects the in-group evaluations might be features of the landscape that have a common meaning to (for those that live or use that landscape),

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