

# Is The Iron Curtain Still Present?

## Characteristic Distance Distortions In Germany



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### Abstract

A study about distance estimations between German cities investigated the organization of mental maps and their specific deviations from reality (Carbon & Leder, 2005). Potential factors for the deviation of mental maps from reality are physical barriers, emotional involvement (see Excursus below), and semantic unity. Distance estimations between cities situated in different former parts of Germany (East or West) were systematically overestimated compared to distances of cities located in the same parts of Germany. This trend was even more pronounced when participants had a negative attitude towards the reunification of Germany. The impact of these results is far reaching, because overestimated distances between both German parts indicate that a *mental wall* continues to exist between East and West, even in young people's minds — fourteen years after the German reunification. Further analyses revealed that participants, although advised to estimate *Air Distances*, based their estimations on *Autobahn* kilometers, probably due to their everyday relevance (Carbon, accepted-2006).

### The rationale

If there is a type of a "mental wall", then there should be systematic overestimations of distances between cities which belong to (former) different parts of Germany.

### The experimental idea

Why should distances crossing this *mental wall* be systematically overestimated? There are at least two prominent explanations for this rationale:

(1) EKMAN & BRATFISCH (1965):

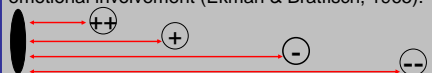
Systematic overestimations of distances between cities suggest that the viewer has low emotional involvement with the city located at further distance

(2) HIRTLE & JONIDES (1985), McNAMARA (1986): Overestimations of distances between cities can be observed when these cities are categorized as belonging to different superstructures/hierarchies.

#### Excursus:

#### Emotional Involvement

Ekman and Bratfisch (1965) identified political and emotional factors for systematic distortions. Cities belonging to different political systems or cities for which participants feel low emotional involvement are usually estimated as being further away than cities within the same political system or with high emotional involvement (Ekman & Bratfisch, 1965).



Although physically the same length, distances will be estimated on the basis of the emotional involvement of the distant city: the lower the emotional involvement the longer the distances will be estimated.

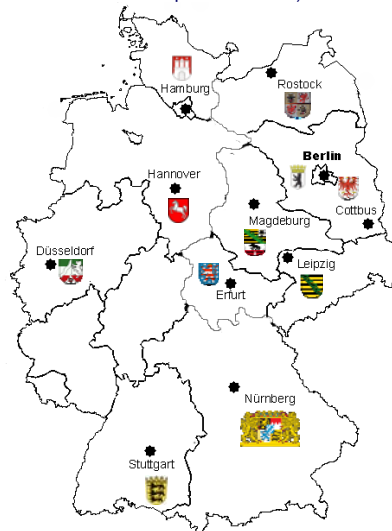
### Method

#### Participants

83 participants (54 female, 32 raised in the former western part of Germany, variety of attitudes toward the German reunification).

#### Material

11 cities in Germany (5 in the former western part, 5 in the former eastern part and Berlin).



#### Procedure

Participants first rated their attitudes towards the German reunification plus their traveling experience within Germany and their geographical knowledge of Germany. Then they estimated all possible 110 distances between the cities (Estimation of the *air distances* = "as the crow flies")

#### Excursus:

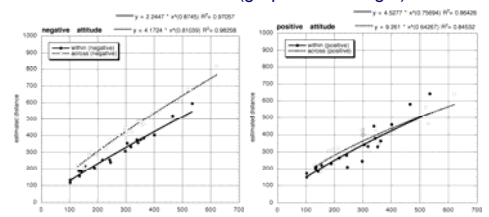
The *Cold War*, starting just after WW II, caused the feeling of the *Iron Curtain* between the western and the eastern hemisphere.



The present work assumes that this former separation leads to a *mental wall* which has continued to exist in people's minds until today. Distances crossing this *mental wall* will, according to this idea, be systematically overestimated.

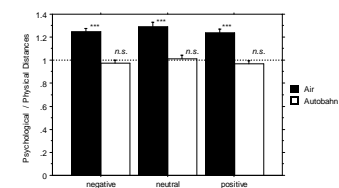
### Results (Mental Wall)

Taken the "social attitude towards German reunification" into account, there were clear effects for a *mental wall* for the group of people who had a negative attitude (graphs on the left): across distances (distances crossing the former iron curtain) were systematically overestimated compared to *within* distances (distances within one of the former parts of Germany). For the group with a positive attitude, there were no such indications (graphs on the right).



### Results (Autobahn)

Although participants had been advised to estimate *air* distances, they actually did not base their estimations on direct distances revealed by strong deviations of the estimated from the actual air distances. A comparison of the estimated distances with *Autobahn* distances showed only insignificant deviations from these.



Thus, it seems highly probable that participants implicitly based their estimations on *Autobahn* distances.

### Results (geogr. knowledge)

The width of the *mental wall* was not influenced by implicit (traveling experience) or explicit knowledge (geographical knowledge) about Germany's geography.

### Conclusions

Distances across the former iron curtain were systematically overestimated, particularly when the attitude towards the German reunification was negative. → There is a *mental wall* between the former eastern and western parts of Germany.

In sum, we cannot understand human cognition in general and *mental walls* in particular without taking the complex interplay of social attitudes and historical facts into account!

### References

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