

GIS: Geographic Information Systems for the Social Sciences: Investigating Space and Place, by Stevens J. Steinberg and Shiela L. Steinberg. Sage Publications, 2006 [Review]

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Abstract:

The closing decades of the twentieth century witnessed tremendous growth in the application of Geographic Information Systems (GIS) technology in various spatial disciplines. Many social science researchers and practitioners have started realizing the utility of a spatial perspective to help inform their scholarship, but few have found a way to integrate GIS technology into their work. Mostly this is due to the difficulty of using GIS technology without proper training. Few introductory GIS texts are available that would be of interest to social scientists who lack the knowledge to explore the possibilities of GIS applications in their research. This book, written by a sociologist and environmental scientist, is intended for social scientists who want to take advantage of the capabilities of GIS. It is a guide to social science research in a GIS context, rather than a guide to using GIS.

Keywords: book review | GIS | geographic information systems | social science

Article:

GIS Geographic Information Systems for the Social Sciences: Investigating Space and Place. By Steven J. Steinberg and Sheila L. Steinberg. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2006. List of boxes, figures, and tables, preface, glossary, web links, references, and index. xx+252 pp. \$44.95 paper. ISBN: 0-7619-2873-1.

The closing decades of the twentieth century witnessed tremendous growth in the application of Geographic Information Systems (GIS) technology in various spatial disciplines. Many social science researchers and practitioners have started realizing the utility of a spatial perspective to help inform their scholarship, but few have found a way to integrate GIS technology into their work. Mostly this is due to the difficulty of using GIS technology without proper training. Few introductory GIS texts are available that would be of interest to social scientists who lack the

knowledge to explore the possibilities of GIS applications in their research. This book, written by a sociologist and environmental scientist, is intended for social scientists who want to take advantage of the capabilities of GIS. It is a guide to social science research in a GIS context, rather than a guide to using GIS.

The first two chapters provide an introduction to basic GIS concepts. Chapter 3 explores the possibility of incorporating GIS technology into social science research and how that effort can be rewarding by providing additional insights and information that was not readily available without using GIS technology, while Chapter 4 examines research design using GIS. The book works through the steps of conducting research projects, from stating goals to choosing appropriate tools, rather than cataloging analytical features of GIS software. This includes a discussion of traditional GIS topics such as data collection and input, database development, levels of measurement, Modifiable Areal Unit Problem (MAUP), ground truthing, and analysis methods.

Chapter 5 is particularly useful as the authors discuss how GIS can be integrated with qualitative research, including oral history and participant observation. This is relevant to any researcher who is interested in working at the interface between qualitative and quantitative research techniques. Cultural geographers will most likely find this chapter of greatest utility.

Finally, in the last chapter the authors argue that while there is a tremendous potential for using GIS applications in the social sciences, wider use of GIS methods is still limited, apparently because of a lack of interest or knowledge on the part of social scientists. However, the authors did not address barriers that still limit the wider use of GIS methods in social sciences. The book remains grounded within a logical positivist framework, and does not address issues such as feminism, postmodernism, postcolonial views, or many other topics currently found within the broadly defined field of cultural geography. There is also an assumption that GIS is a natural science tool so the book fails to acknowledge previous social science work that has been using GIS for decades.

Although this book is not a substitute for a standard GIS textbook and fails to provide any software instruction, it is an excellent introduction for social scientists interested in exploring the idea of integrating GIS into their research. The book would likely be of most use in research methodology courses. It has an excellent, straightforward writing style with ample examples. Geographers, even those familiar with GIS, will find the authors' research-oriented view of GIS refreshing, though it falls short of where many human geographers are already taking the technology.