

## THE SOUTHWEST IN THE AMERICAN MIND

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In 1995, over 2,000 Americans, largely college students, were asked where they believe the Southwest is located and to identify characteristics of the region, cities or other places which best represent the region, and symbols of the region. The Southwest as defined by this group is very strongly anchored in Arizona and New Mexico. Other southwestern areas, in order of importance, are West Texas (specifically the El Paso area), southern California, southern Nevada, southern Utah, and southern Colorado. The remainders of these five states, plus Arizona and New Mexico, and the southwestern half of Oklahoma, constitute the Southwest. The Southwest is seen primarily as hot, dry, and a desert. Phoenix and Santa Fe are the most representative cities of the region, and the most prominent symbol of the region is the cactus (and specifically the saguaro). *Key Words: Southwest, Perceptual, Regions.*

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The Southwest is a region of the United States that has not received a great deal of attention from geographers as a perceptual region. The only two attempts to define the spatial extent of the Southwest as a perceptual or vernacular region were parts of larger national scale studies. Most other definitions of the Southwest offered by geographers are also parts of larger scale works.

In 1971 Meinig stated "The Southwest is a distinctive place to the American mind but a somewhat blurred place on American maps, which is to say that everyone knows there is a Southwest but there is little agreement as to just where it is" (Meinig 1971, 3). Just how true is Meinig's assertion about the Southwest today? While there is little disagreement about its existence, is there truly so little agreement as to its location? And if so, why? This paper begins with a review of prior definitions of the region, then moves on to offer a new definition based on survey research about the Southwest as a perceptual region.

### **The Southwest as a Perceptual Region**

Only Hale (1971) and Zelinsky (1980) have attempted perceptual definitions that encompass more than any one single region. Hale defined regions at various scales across the United States, while Zelinsky focused on regions (such as the South, the Southwest, and New England) across all of North America. Two other geographers have made significant contributions to the field: Jordan (1978) identified perceptual regions in Texas, while Shortridge studied both perceptual regions in Kansas (Shortridge 1980) and the Midwest (Shortridge 1985). Other contributions include Good's (1981) study of vernacular regions in Arkansas, Lowry and Zonn's (1989) study of the perceptual South, Raitz and Ulack's (1981) study of cognitive maps of Appalachia, and Zdorkowski and Carney's (1985) study of Oklahoma's vernacular regions.

Hale (1971) asked three people from each county and parish in the United States in what region(s) they believed they lived. At the scale of national regions, she forced states into regions in their entirety; thus the Southwest is made up of Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, and Oklahoma (Figure 1). The other perceptual/vernacular offering of the Southwest is Zelinsky's (1980). He mapped the various vernacular regions of all of North America by examining the telephone directories of 276 metropolitan areas in the United States and Canada for locational or regional terms in the names of businesses and organizations. His southwestern region (Figure 1) does not include entire states as does Hale's. Thus this perceptual region based on the use of the term "Southwest(ern)" in the names of businesses and organizations is somewhat different from the perceptual Southwest defined in Hale's study, and is possibly more accurate because of Zelinsky's more focused approach.

### Other Definitions of the Southwest

Perhaps one of the most widely known definitions of the region is Meinig's (1971) *Southwest: Three Peoples in Geographical Change, 1600-1970*. Meinig defines the Southwest primarily as Arizona and New Mexico. Parts of contiguous states are included (e.g., southern Colorado and the El Paso area), and parts of Arizona and New Mexico are excluded (i.e., the Arizona Strip and the Lower Pecos River Valley in southeastern New Mexico). The primary determinant of "Southwestern" is a unique racial/ethnic mix, although the deserts, mountains, and water issues also play a significant role.

Lavender's (1980) *The Southwest* is from a historical perspective and has a spatial definition very similar to Meinig's. Again the focus is on Arizona and New Mexico, with contiguous parts of Texas, Colorado, Utah, Nevada, and California. Lavender's focus seems to be much the same as Meinig's and others': the racial mix and history are the most

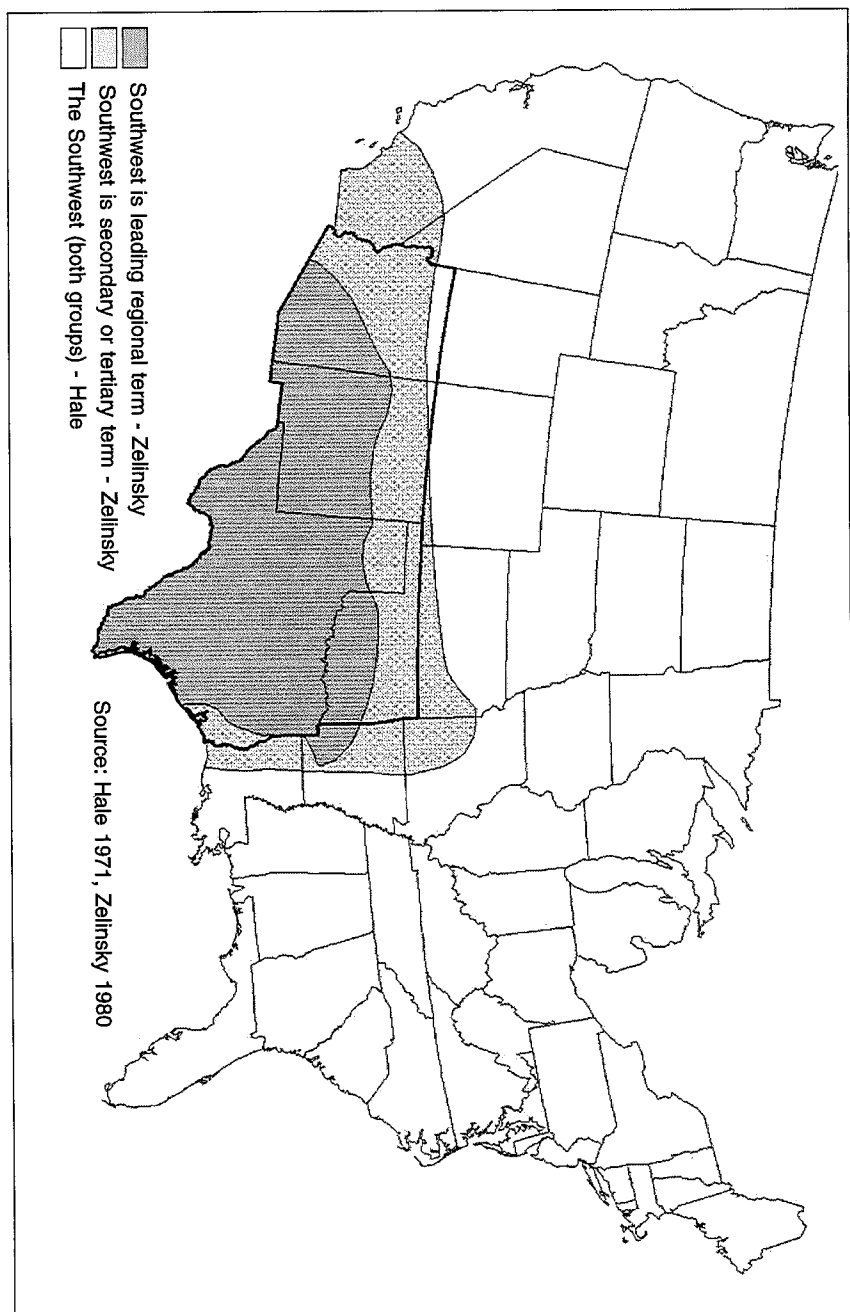


Figure 1. The Vernacular Southwest According to Hale and Zelinsky

important factors. The landscape does not escape attention, but is of secondary importance only.

Another recent treatment of the Southwest is Byrkit's (1992) "Land, Sky, and People: The Southwest Defined." He is primarily concerned with offering a spatial definition of the Southwest by examining the location of some of its more important characteristics (e.g., physiographic features such as high plateaus, canyons, deserts, basins and ranges; the Colorado and Rio Grande drainage systems; and geology and climate). Byrkit, echoing Meinig, begins by stating that although everybody uses the term "Southwest," there is very little agreement on its location on a map. Also included are reviews of Native American, Spanish and Mexican, and Anglo-European histories in this bioregionalist-Southwest, along with a review of "Southwestern" literature. The Southwest, then, according to Byrkit's approach is where all of these areas overlap. This is similar to the Southwest of Meinig and Lavender: Arizona and New Mexico (except the eastern extreme) and parts of adjacent states.

Weber (1994) relates the Southwest of New Mexico, Arizona, and Colorado as the home of Indians and Hispanics, as the desert Southwest with enormous beauty and deep roots, but the Southwest of urban Texas (i.e., Dallas and Houston) as without a past and unendurable. Gibson (1987: 25) states "the Southwest consists of a heartland, Arizona and New Mexico, flanked by the rimlands of California, Texas and Oklahoma." Gastil (1975), like Meinig and others, defined the (Interior) Southwest primarily on the basis of the unique ethnic and cultural mix of the area. Thus his region's spatial dimensions include most of Arizona and New Mexico (except the Arizona Strip and southeastern New Mexico) and parts of contiguous states (like southern Colorado and the El Paso area). Additionally, he excludes the Phoenix-Tucson metropolitan corridor as a nonconforming metropolitan area. Powell (1974: 4) states "[i]ts heartland is Arizona and New Mexico, an area distinguished by a tri-cultural fusion of Indian, Hispano, Anglo, and by an unmistakable

landscape..."

Pilkington (1973) employs four defining criteria: geography, climate, culture, and personal preference. He uses these to define the region as Texas, New Mexico and Arizona, plus parts of Oklahoma, Colorado, Utah, Nevada, and southern California (excluding Los Angeles). Morris (1970) mentions the lack of agreement on a regional definition, and then for his purposes defines the Southwest both culturally (e.g., Native American and Hispanic presence) and physically (e.g., climate and natural vegetation) as Arizona, New Mexico, Oklahoma and Texas, and, where necessary, areas in the bordering states of Kansas, Colorado, Utah, Nevada, and California. Hollon (1961) defines the region as that area of the United States where the South and West overlap, or the lower left-hand quarter of the nation. This is the region below the 40th parallel and west of the 98th meridian, or most of the present states of Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas, Colorado, New Mexico, Utah, Arizona, Nevada, and California. This definition is similar to, but larger than, Byrkit's.

"My Southwest is the semi-arid land from the Pecos of New Mexico-Texas to the Salinas of California ... Its unprecise (sic) boundaries are subject to endless dispute"(Powell 1957: ix), a definition later refined (Powell 1974, see also Powell 1963 for a review of other definitions). Kurtz (1956: 5) states "[t]he American Southwest has been variously identified with Texas, New Mexico and Arizona, California and Nevada, the desert Indian country of these regions, or even with Mormon Utah. It is all these and more." Zierer (1956) defines California and the Southwest as California, Nevada, Utah, and Arizona. This region is defined by both physical (e.g., landforms and climate) and cultural (e.g., settlement) characteristics. Campbell (1955: 8) states "[b]y the Southwest, I mean here West Texas, the western half of Oklahoma, New Mexico, and those parts of Kansas and Colorado which are definitely Southwestern in background and outlook."

Dobie (1952: 14) states "[t]he principal areas of the Southwest are

... Arizona, New Mexico, most of Texas, (and) some of Oklahoma.” Caughey (1951: 175) suggested “[o]ut of this apparent jumble of geographic, political, didactic, and historical fact, a Southwest emerges, which, as I see it, stretches from Central Oklahoma and Texas to southern California. Much of Colorado, Utah, Nevada, and northern California belong.” Major and Pearce (1948: 1) offer “approximately the states of Arkansas, Texas, Oklahoma, New Mexico, and Arizona,” as the location of both the cultural and physical characteristics of the region. Fergusson (1940) defines the Southwest by the presence of Mexicans, Indians, aridity, mountains, and high plains, all of which she says are found in southern Colorado and in Texas to the west of a line drawn from San Antonio to Fort Worth, but principally in the core of the region which is Arizona and New Mexico. In an examination of regions in the southern portion of the United States, Odum (1936: 5) posited that it was “neither possible nor desirable to present a single authentic picture of “the South”... because of the dynamics of the emerging Southwestern Region, comprising Texas, Oklahoma, New Mexico, and Arizona.” Richardson and Rister (1934) define the region as that part of the United States west of the ninety-eighth meridian and south of the northern boundaries of the tier of states from Kansas to California. Again the emphasis is the history of the area, along with the frontier status and the subsequent development of the region.

### Common Ground

Looking at the two vernacular regionalizations (Hale and Zelinsky), there is agreement that parts of Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, and Oklahoma are in the Southwest. The general agreement, among all definitions reviewed above, is that Arizona and New Mexico are in the Southwest. Both states are included in twenty-one of the twenty-two definitions. No other state approaches that rate of inclusion. The El Paso area

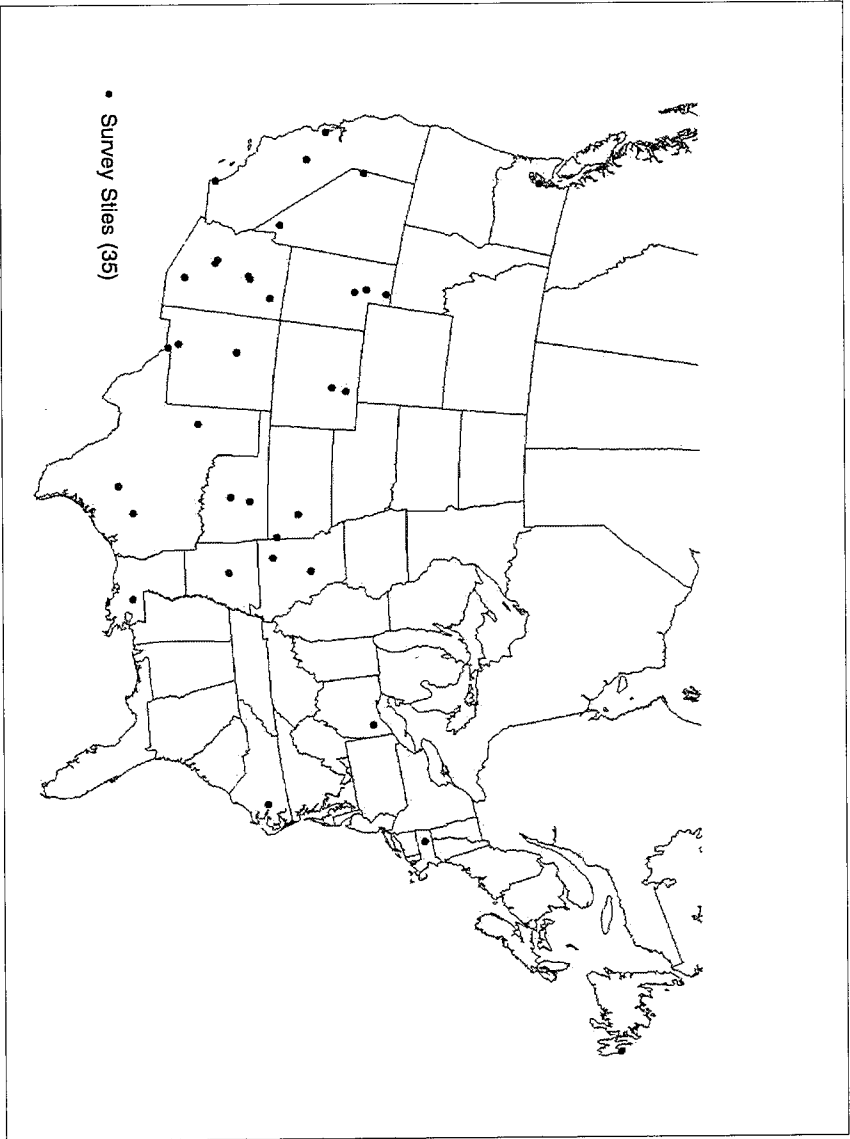


Figure 2. Survey Sites

of Texas, or all of western Texas, is also in the region, as are the southern parts of the tier of states to the north and west of New Mexico and Arizona. Although this includes the Southwest of both Hale and Zelinsky, it looks nothing like either. Characteristically, the region is defined by most as a tricultural mountainous desert area.

### **Finding the Southwest in the American Mind**

In 1995 I conducted a survey, primarily among college students, to determine how Americans define the Southwest in terms of its location and its defining characteristics. The survey instrument consisted of two parts: an outline map of the United States (with two letter state abbreviations included) upon which the respondents were asked to outline that part of the country they defined as the Southwest, and an open-ended questionnaire which, among other things, asked for defining characteristics, cities or other places, and symbols. The majority of the survey sites, of which there were thirty-five, and thus the respondents, came from the southwestern quarter of the United States (Figure 2). College and university students are typically surveyed in such studies primarily because of ease of accessibility and potentially high response rates (Jordan 1978; Raitz and Ulack 1981; Shortridge 1980; Shortridge 1985; Lowry 1988; Lowry and Zonn 1989). The images of the Southwest that follow were constructed from 2,245 questionnaires and 2,039 maps.

### **The Location of the Southwest**

Once the 2,039 maps were analyzed (by calculating inclusion rates for fifty-square-mile cells that covered the country), the United States (US) was divided into four degrees of "Southwesternness." Here the southwestern core is defined as that part of the US that a minimum of at least 75% of the respondents included in the Southwest. Beyond the core is

the transitional area, which is defined here as that area included at a rate of at least 50%, but less than 75%. Beyond the transitional area is the buffer area, which is that area included at a rate of at least 25%, but less than 50%. Finally, the fourth zone is the non-Southwest, which is the remainder of the country (which was included less than 25% of the time).

The resultant perceptual Southwest (Figure 3) is similar to those of Hale and Zelinsky (Figure 1) only in that all are in the southwestern quadrant of the country. This Southwest is very strongly centered on the states of Arizona and New Mexico. These two states, along with the area of Texas south of New Mexico, comprise the totality of the core. In fact, all of Arizona was included by more than 90% of the respondents, as was most of New Mexico (the area with the absolute highest rate of inclusion, 96.7%, is in southeastern Arizona). Only the northeastern corner of New Mexico, which was included by more than 80%, was not included at this rate. In addition, the El Paso area was included by over 80% of the respondents.

The solidity of this core area is evidenced by the rather dramatic drops in rates of inclusion out of the two-state area. While all of Arizona was included at rates of at least 90%, the adjacent parts of California, Nevada and Utah were included at rates of 60 to 69%. Rates in Colorado adjacent to New Mexico are only in the 50-to-59% range to the west and in the 40-to-49% range in the east. The panhandle of Oklahoma, adjacent to New Mexico's rates in the 80-to-89% range are only in the 30-to-39% range. And rates in West Texas adjacent to New Mexico ranged from 60 to 69% in the north and 50 to 59% in the south. Thus, in all directions as one leaves Arizona and New Mexico, one immediately moves out of the core of the Southwest of the American mind.

The transitional area of the Southwest is found in parts of states adjacent to Arizona and New Mexico. The largest area of transition is in Texas, which also has the highest rates of inclusion. This makes Texas the

third most southwestern state, behind Arizona and New Mexico. After Texas, the highest rates of inclusion are in California, Nevada, Utah, and then Colorado.

The area of buffer includes the remainder of the states of Texas, Nevada, and Utah, and almost all of the remainder of the states of California and Colorado. Again, the highest rates are in Texas, where they fall off to only 40 to 49% at the border with Louisiana and Arkansas (and are less than 10% in adjacent parts of these states). Thus, even East Texas is seen by many to be in the Southwest (or, perhaps, many see the entire state to be so), but see the eastern state line as an abrupt terminus of the Southwest. In northern California and Colorado the rates drop to the 25% threshold, while rates just to the north are well under 10%. In northern Nevada and Utah the rates fall to only 30 to 39%, but also about rates well under 10%. To the east of Colorado, however, in southwestern Kansas, is the only area in a non-Southwest state with inclusion rates of more than 10%. This corner of Kansas has rates as high as 15%. The remainder of the buffer area is found in the southwestern two-thirds of Oklahoma. Most rates in the northeastern third of Oklahoma are greater than 20%, but in the extreme northeastern corner they dip to

Table 1:	Characteristics of the Southwest	Number	%
	1. hot or warm	1494	66.5
	2. dry or arid	1374	61.2
	3. desert	1012	45.1
	4. cacti	322	14.3
	5. Native Americans	298	13.3
	6. mountainous	297	13.2
	7. Hispanics or Latinos	258	11.5
	8. sunny	255	11.4
	9. big, open, or vast	242	10.8
	10. scenic or beautiful	229	10.2

Table 2:	Southwestern Cities	n	%
	1. Phoenix	654	29.1
	2. Santa Fe	430	19.2
	3. Tucson	267	11.9
	4. El Paso	242	10.8
	5. Albuquerque	232	10.3

just under 20%. This makes Oklahoma the least southwestern state in this version of the Southwest. Moving away from the Southwest out of Oklahoma into southeastern Kansas, Missouri, or Arkansas, rates are only 1 to 2%.

This perceptual Southwest, then, is strongly centered on Arizona, New Mexico, and that part of Texas south of New Mexico. After Arizona and New Mexico, other southwestern states, in order of rates of inclusion, are Texas, California, Nevada, Utah, Colorado, and Oklahoma. Beyond these eight states is the non-Southwest.

### What Makes the Southwest Distinctive?

The questionnaire sought to determine what sets the Southwest off as different, and unique, from the remainder of the United States. This was done by soliciting defining characteristics, cities or other places that represent the region, and symbols of the region in a series of open-ended questions.

The first question solicited up to five descriptive characteristics of the region. Even with 2,245 respondents, no extensive list of characteristics of the region emerged. A level of 10% agreement produced only ten (a 5% level of agreement yielded only seventeen characteristics) (Table 1). All ten are included here, although three stand far above the others. Almost two-thirds (66.5%) of the respondents identified the Southwest as either hot or warm, making this the top characteristic. Slightly fewer

Table 3:	Symbols of the Southwest	n	%
	1. cacti	609*	27.1
	2. desert	215	9.6

\*includes 543 cacti and 66 saguaro.

(61.2%) identified the region as dry or arid, and 45.1% identified the region as desert. These three characteristics, a hot, dry, desert, thus define the region. Although it has cultural elements, the Southwest is defined here most often by physical traits.

Respondents were also asked if they felt there were any cities or other places that best represent the Southwest. Again the list is short (Table 2). Only five cities were identified by at least 10% of the respondents. The city most identified with the region is Phoenix (29.1%). This is not surprising as Phoenix is in Arizona, the most southwestern state, and is one of the largest cities in the US, and thus is more widely known. Second to Phoenix is Santa Fe, at 19.2%. Santa Fe is followed by Tucson, El Paso and Albuquerque. The list of cities most representative of the Southwest includes the largest two cities in Arizona, two of the three largest in New Mexico, and El Paso, which is just outside of New Mexico.

Finally, the respondents were asked if there was anything they feel stands as a symbol of the Southwest. Only one item was identified by at least 10% of the respondents. Cacti were listed by 27.1%. This response is a combination of 24.2% general "cacti" responses, and 3% specific "saguaro" responses. No other specific type of cactus was listed. Only about 10% of respondents listed the desert as a symbol (9.6%), placing it a distant second (Table 3).

The Southwest, then, is characterized here primarily by its physical characteristics. The most important are that it is a hot, dry, desert. It is also characterized by cacti, which are seen as its primary symbol, by both vast, wide-open spaces and mountains (basin and range), by the

sun, and by scenic beauty. Only two cultural traits characterize the region, the presence of Native Americans and the presence of Hispanics. Phoenix stands as the representative city of the region, followed by Santa Fe, Tucson, El Paso, and Albuquerque.

## Discussion

The Southwest has not previously been defined by simply asking Americans where they believe it to exist and what makes it stand apart from the remainder of the country. Results here indicate that Americans define the Southwest as an eight-state region centered on Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas south of New Mexico. There is rather strong agreement that this is the core of the region. Beyond this core there are sharp drop-offs into California, Nevada, Utah, Colorado, and Oklahoma. Only into Texas does the Southwest fall away at a relatively gradual pace. This, along with extreme West Texas' inclusion in the core, makes Texas the third most southwestern state. The remainder the Southwest is found in Texas, in parts of California, Nevada, Utah, and Colorado that are adjacent to the core, and in Oklahoma.

This eight-state region is characterized primarily as hot, dry, desert. It is a region embodied in the cities of Phoenix, Santa Fe, Tucson, El Paso, and Albuquerque. The cactus is its symbol. However, only the saguaro, which in the US grows only in the Sonoran Desert of southern Arizona, was mentioned by name.

How well does this Southwest (Figure 3) compare with those of Hale and Zelinsky (Figure 1), or Meinig, Lavender, and Byrkit? With both previous perceptual definitions of the region (i.e., Hale and Zelinsky) there are areas of agreement, but overall the regions are spatially very different. Hale (1971) includes all of the states of Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, and Oklahoma in the region. All parts of these states except eastern Oklahoma are included to one degree or another in the Southwest as

defined by this study. Hale, however, completely excludes California, Nevada, Utah, and Colorado, each of which is seen here as more southwestern than Oklahoma. Hale's region is simply smaller and more eastward, and she did not address characteristics.

Zelinsky (1980) did not force entire states into regions as did Hale. His Southwest, in which "Southwest(ern)" is the primary regional term employed by businesses and organizations, is smaller than is Hale's Southwest, and excludes much of Arizona! His region, in which the term is the secondary or tertiary regional term, is much larger, but remains greatly dissimilar to the Southwest identified here. It stretches even farther eastward than does Hale's and excludes a large portion of northern Arizona from the region. As was the case with Hale, Zelinsky addressed only the location of the region, not its defining characteristics.

Meinig's (1971) and Lavender's (1980) Southwests are similar to one another in that they are strongly focused on Arizona and New Mexico and contiguous parts of neighboring states (with the exception of the Arizona Strip north of the Grand Canyon and the Pecos Valley in southeastern New Mexico). These spatial definitions resemble the core and transitional area of Figure 3 (except that the Arizona Strip and Pecos Valley are not excluded). Byrkit's Southwest is similar to Meinig's and Lavender's except that he excludes eastern New Mexico from the region. This gives Byrkit a better fit the Southwest of this study than either Hale or Zelinsky, but not quite as good a fit as Meinig or Lavender.

In terms of characteristics, Meinig focuses on cultural and social history, with an emphasis on the tricultural development of Native Americans, Hispanics, and Anglos. Physical characteristics of the region are not given importance. Lavender, a historian, also emphasizes the cultural and social history of the region, and does include some discussion of some of the present-day problems of the region related to its physical characteristics. Byrkit adapted the bioregionalist approach to examining the region's interrelated physical and cultural traits, many of which are

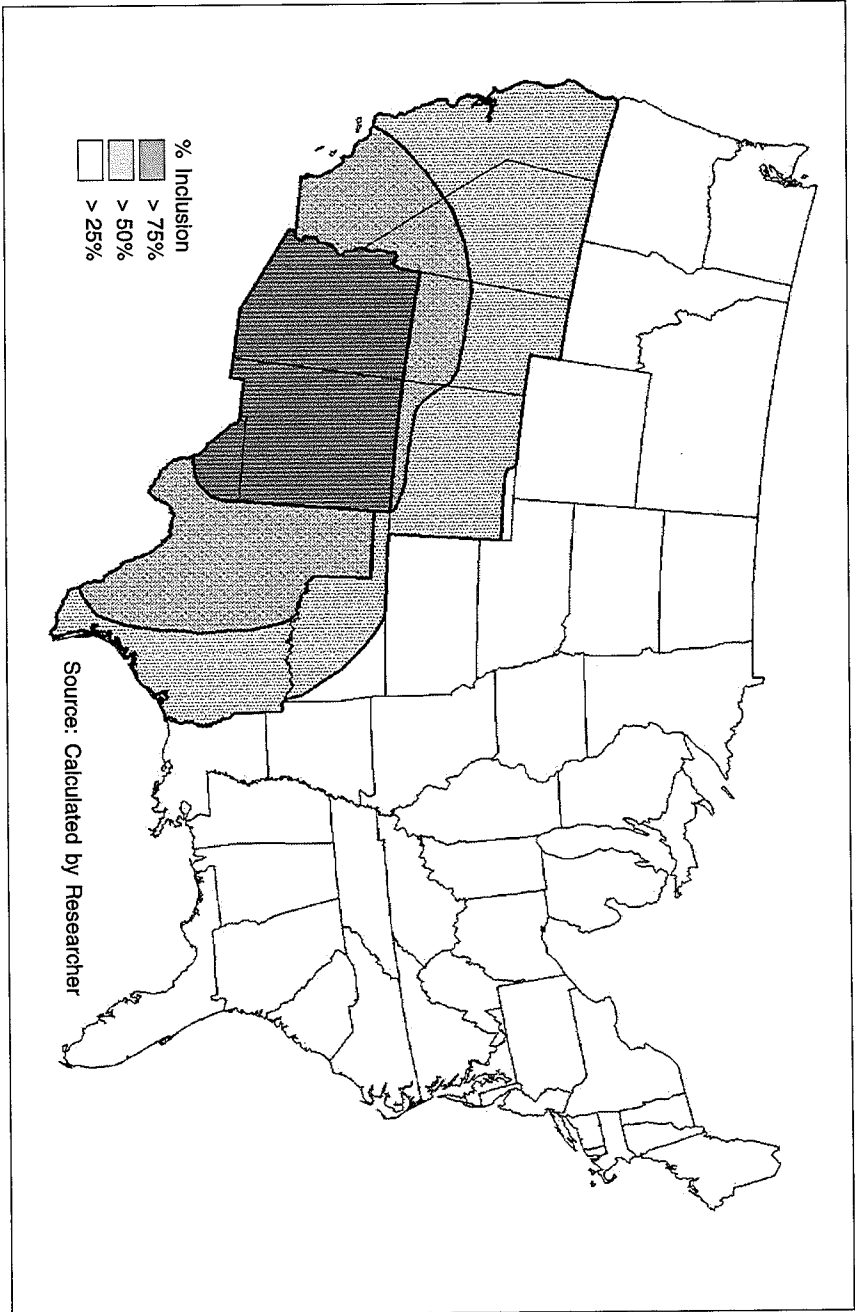


Figure 3. The Perceptual Southwest

among those listed by the respondents here.

This Southwest presented here is a new perceptual definition of the region. Its spatial extent is unlike those offered in the past. Its characteristics have not previously been determined through sampling. When compared to other non-perceptual spatial definitions it is larger. But this is because it is centered on its core and is allowed to fall away in rates of inclusion to the non-Southwest. This more closely approximates reality; cultural regions do not have abrupt boundaries. Characteristically, it is similar to the definitions of Meinig, Lavender, and Byrkit, but is perhaps less human oriented than the Southwesterns of Meinig and Lavender.

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