

The discipline of human geography



Geographical knowledge has a long history in human development. Throughout the history of geography, it mostly involved developing knowledge of the physical features of the world but this history is itself a kind of presentation of human history. In the 19th Century, geography became formally regarded as a discipline, and human geography became established as an essential branch of the natural science; it refers to both geographical information and human activities, i. e. it includes both human geography and physical geography (Johnston, 2000). This essay firstly discusses the meaning of the discipline ‘ human geography’. Following this, it describes how human geography relates to development. Subsequently, it assesses the key themes/issues relevant to development as explored by scholars, and studies the research techniques used by researchers in this discipline. Finally, it gives an example of a published piece of work stating how it is relevant to our understanding of contemporary development.

1 The discipline of human geography

Geography can be divided into two major parts: physical and human. Both are branches of natural science, which encompass the study of the living world. Physical geography mainly deals with the processes of the atmosphere, biosphere and ecosphere, whereas human geography studies people, culture, population distributions, the urban environment, etc. It studies many cultural aspects and how they relate to their environment as well as why people migrate and how this impacts on their culture. Human geography is special in that the findings of the study of human geography may vary over time.

2 Human geography and development

Marston et al. (2005) referred to human geography as incorporating several sub-disciplines, such as globalization, urbanization, the environment and migration. These are interrelated as the condition of one of these can be reflected in the development of another. Human geography discusses the profound interaction of cultural, environmental and social evolution, and considers the views that societies adopt in addressing these issues (Robinson, 2006). Thus, the core of human geography engages directly with change and development, but can be extended to deal with the economic, social, institutional and environmental dimensions of sustainability.

Development can present diverse patterns, each with its own characteristics, as the different aspects of development, i. e. culture, economy and politics vary all the time. We can consider all these changing patterns as the results of development. The factors in development interact with each other, and change in one field can affect another or lead to changes elsewhere.

Development transforms people's lives, and as a result, development gradually alters human geography, particularly the aspects of human lifestyle, the political environment, the economic situation and even nature. Thus, the human geography of a place is its phylogeny, and that is how human geography relates to development.

3 Key themes/issues relevant to development

Human geography is an incomplete discipline without considering development, to which there are various branches, such as culture, economics, politics, health and history. However, we will discuss these aspects under the headings generally adopted by researchers, as below.

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3. 1 Culture

Culture is the norms and practices of people in particular places, and it encompasses language. It also reflects the region of settlement and other phenomena that may change or remain consistent. The first traces of the study of various cultures in different regions appeared in early 20th Century. At that time, the study of culture study was considered as an alternative to environmental determinism, which argued that human beings and societies are determined by their environment. It focuses on describing and analyzing the ways language, religion, economy, government, and other cultural phenomena vary or remain constant from one place to another and on explaining how humans function spatially (Jordan-Bychkov, et al 1994). Culture is a profound condition and is related to a region, and it has a significant impact on regional development. On the other hand, development can greatly affect cultural norms. The interaction of culture and development is just one aspect of human geography.

3. 2 History

History is the study of a wide variety of topics, including physical, theoretical, human, fictional and real geographies as well as the past. Historical geography mainly discusses how a place or region changes through time, how people interact with their environment and how the cultural landscape is created. In essence, human history is the phylogeny of people, while human geography is the study development.

3. 3 Globalization

Globalization is the process of worldwide integration derived from the interplay of world views, products, ideas and aspects of culture. It reveals the interchange of social and cultural forces, including economics, politics and religion. The Economics, politics and religion play an important role in the development of a region. (Al-Rodhan, R. F. Nayef and Gérard Stoudmann. 2006) Furthermore, the regional conditions of these factors are products of development. Advances in telecommunications, transportation and Internet business are key factors of globalization, and so development involves, in particular, industrial progress and national or international trade, and studying the close relationship between the environment, the economy and real estate. Trade is the exchange goods and services, and the ensuing economic development can improve the standard or quality of life; real estate is a reflection of the extent of urbanization. Therefore, only with all these developmental aspects can globalization become realized.

3. 4 Migration

Migration is the movement of people from one region or country to another, where they are not ' locals' but settle there. Economic migrants generally seek better education, job opportunities, life conditions and so on; the status of development in the home nation/region is the most crucial factor in immigration. Political migrants generally seek freedom from oppression. Some migration is based on other, more personal reasons, and may be the product of culture and tradition. Immigrants can bring new changes and such interplay or intercommunication partly contributes to the evolution of human geography.

3. 5 Urbanization

Urbanization is the development of cities, and many rural migrants concentrate in cities, resulting in the physical growth of the urban environment. The structure and experiences of the urban landscape are crucial to human geography. Urbanization is closely linked to modernisation, industrialisation and the sociological process of rationalisation. During the process of development, cities and towns grow, and urban population around the world have been soaring. Urbanization is not just a social phenomenon; rather, it is a historic reform of human behaviour on a worldwide scale. The rapid growth of some big cities, such as Chicago in the 19th Century and Tokyo in the 20th Century, is largely the result of rural-urban migration; it is commonplace in developing countries. People living in cities can take advantage of diversity, proximity and competition in the marketplace. With all these factors, the urban environment can develop rapidly.

3. 6 Environment

Environment is a subfield of human geography and a reflection of development. Specifically, transformation of the environment is a result of physical and biological factors caused by the interactions of culture, customs, politics, industry and other aspects, i. e. development. Being part of human geography, the environment changes during the development process, and these changes also affect human geography.

4 Research techniques used in human geography

4. 1 Social surveys

Social survey is a crucial method in obtaining human geography information. The object of the study of human geography is to comprehend the social environment, and in this, social investigation is key to understand the cultural landscape and social phenomena clearly, scholars use social investigation as a means of collecting information and opinions relating to particular social events or trends. To garner the views and thoughts of people, researchers can conduct surveys among the target population. Social surveys also entail consulting historical data or other materials to develop a picture of change, and thus, through social investigation, we can understand both the past and present ages better.

4. 2 Document collection

Documents represent a priceless treasure of human history and geography, and can reveal the experiences and the scientific and technological achievements of ourselves and our predecessors. Current documents can be classified as paper and non-paper materials. Paper materials often refer to books, journals, reports and other data sources, from which people can gain knowledge of human geography. Non-paper materials mean the Internet, where researchers can access knowledge mostly relating to the present era. Searching on-line libraries or particular website-based information resources can assist in gathering a great deal of information quickly. With the development of science and technology, the means of document collection will become more diversified.

4. 3 Exploiting data sources

Our predecessors left much precious information about human geography. We contemporary people can gather these materials together, assess them, compare them and draw conclusions from them. As a result, we can learn of the development of human geography. Examining historical data can help us understand the differing features of human geography in different regions. Through assessing the differences between historical and current data, researchers can determine how people, culture, economics, politics and other factors have varied over time, i. e. what changes have occurred in a location, what kinds of inhabitants have ever lived there and what traditions they had and have. All the information can be found through careful organization and collation of the data. These methods are different from but complementary to surveys and document collection, but involve a great deal of effort in handling the data.

4. 4 Spatial analysis

Spatial analysis can be used in complex cases, and involves defining the varying spatial locations of the entities being studied. Applied to human geography, spatial data analysis can reveal population distribution patterns, the densities of structures at the human scale and spatial population dynamics. The characteristics of these issues are constantly changing in line with human development. Scholars often establish models by using spatial data to analyse the factors that impact on population distribution, etc. Spatial analysis contributes to assisting a deeper comprehension of the features of human geography, taking a spatial overview of the dynamics of population structures resulting from development.

4. 5 Interviews

Interviewing stems from the desire to know more about the people around us and to better understand how the people around us view the world we live in. (Seidman, 1998) Thus, interviewing is most effective when the goal of the given research is to gain insight into the “ subjective understanding” of those around us. In the past, it was uncommon to use interview as a method to study human geography. Gradually, researchers realized the importance of people’s social background, education, cultural and traditional norms in decision-making. Only through interviewing special groups of people can researchers identify the factors that influence behaviour. In underdeveloped regions, people there may not be literate, and so interview is the best method for obtaining first-hand materials to study their history and culture. Not only can researchers learn about specific events in development, they can also gain insight into people’s interior experiences, specifically how people perceive their world and how they interpret their perceptions, and how events are affected by their thoughts and feelings. In this, researchers can understand the process of an event instead of what just happened and how the subjects reacted to it.

5 One example illustrating how human geography is relevant to development

An article entitled ‘ Progress in Human Geography’ by (Radcliffe 2004) discusses the evolution of human geography, and argues that global networks and human rights are related to this discipline because it is now clear that these two factors have a great impact on national development.

This is just one example of many, telling us that the development of one country is inextricably linked to human geography.

Conclusion

Human geography is a representation of economic, political and historical development, and it examines the interplay between people and the built, rather than the natural, environment (although environmental impacts are considered). The interaction of a wide variety of factors drives human history to move on, as people seek to improve their lives and raise their living standards. A multitude of changes have occurred and will continue to occur as human behaviour changes, resulting complex contemporary societies in which cultures and identities are transformed. Thus human geography is the study of the change, formation and transformation of people and nations over time, or the taking of snapshots of particular human events, behaviours or activities.