

Application of geography as a model of inquiry



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Analyse, compare and contrast the definition and practice of geography as a mode of inquiry in two of the essays listed below. (You must select one essay from each of the two sections).

Davis, a prominent and influential academic who helped transform the Geographical tradition into being studied at a pre-University level (Dickinson, 1969), published “ An inductive study of the content of Geography” (Davis, 1906) at the beginning of the 20th century. It emphasises the notion that Geography cannot be understood in isolation; it is inherently multidisciplinary (Davis, 1906). Davis’ research demonstrates a clear preference for physical landscapes: from flooding and streamfloods (Davis, 1938) to arid and humid climates (Davis, 1930). Kwan, alternatively, draws on her expertise in Human Geographies (Kwan, 2004) to display a similar undercurrent to Davis (1906), but with a transformed application (Kwan, 2004 and Davis, 1906). Kwan exhibits the viewpoint that Geographical inquiry should be viewed holistically; coining the divide within the discipline “ unnecessary” (Kwan, 2004. Pg759). However, the pieces of literature were published nearly a century apart, resulting in the application of their perspectives differing: Kwan opting for a more pessimistic view as to whether the spheres of geographical inquiry should and can be viewed in tandem (Kwan, 2004). Although Geography has changed in its identity (Stoddart, 1986), Davis (1906) and Kwan (2004) portray a foundational premise of geographical inquiry: it cannot be undertaken without bringing together facets of other disciplines to enhance the phenomena being studied (Davis, 1906 and Kwan, 2004).

Defining any field of study is challenging as it encompasses different components which are not limited to a single subject area (Davis, 1906). Despite this, many academics have attempted to define what should, and should not, be included in the field of study we coin Geography. It's worth noting that these definitions are not static, they are constantly adapting and changing (Stoddart, 1986). Throughout, Davis toys with the different notions of Geography that have been proposed; from viewing it as a purely regional endeavour to encompassing everything that exists within a physical region (Davis, 1906). Davis portrays Geography as the relationship between elements of "inorganic control" and the subsequent "organic response" (Davis, 1906. pg69), bringing together aspects of "physiography" (Davis, 1906. Pg73) and the corresponding aspects of the environment which include the presence of humans (Davis, 1906). It could be argued that this approach is too narrow; there seems little room for any influence from human geographical studies. It's worth noting that in the early 20th century, the role of Human Geographies was dissimilar to the modern-day interpretation. Occupied by similar subjects such as "social anthropology and political sciences" (Benko and Strohamyer, 2014. Pg106), the niche for Human Geography was not as prolific and therefore the distinction between the two sub-disciplines was greater; as evidenced by Davis (1906).

Alternatively, Kwan (2004), promotes Geography under a wider nomenclature of subjects, encompassing "science", "social sciences" and expanding into the "humanities" (Kwan, 2004. Pg757). Compared to Davis (1906), this offers a broader exploration into the definition of Geography. Published nearly a century later than Davis (1906), Kwan could be alluding to

the idea that although certain aspects of the discipline have always overlapped, the boundaries between the different aspects of Geography are becoming increasingly blurred; portraying a subject which is more encompassing than the Geography Davis (1906) evokes. Moreover, it seems clear that Geography is a subject of fluidity and that attempts to purify Geography and encase it within a narrower definition have failed (Kwan, 2004). By presenting Geography as having an increased reach within the academic field, it inevitably branches into theoretical perspectives such as “feminism, race and inequality” (Agnew, 2015. Pg85). These are entwined within the sub-disciplines of “spatial-analytical...and social-cultural” Geographies that Kwan presents, conveying the notion that human geographies are able to manifest and bring influence to a greater range of phenomena than the physical aspects of Geography. Having said this, although the definitions differ, they both have a similar undercurrent by conveying that Geography cannot be viewed as a subject in isolation. The notions of “inorganic controls[s]” (Davis, 1906. Pg69) and “humanities” (Kwan, 2004. Pg757), whilst superficially may seem separated, both support the notion that Geographical inquiry is inherently concerned with “human beings in their totality” (Lowenthal, 1992).

Despite both portraying a similar undercurrent to geographical inquiry, the two essays differ in how Geography should be enacted. Davis (1906) explores how Geography should be endorsed by other natural sciences. This links directly with Davis’ definition; bringing together the “organic response” to the “inorganic control” (Davis. 1906. Pg69) and the idea that all geographical phenomena, and the science behind it, should be extended as

far as possible (Davis, 1906). Initially, this could be viewed as a way of diluting Geographical inquiries. However, Davis comments that by keeping Geography as purely the study of a location or region produces a subject of limited scope (Davis, 1906) which is more damaging. Further, the control and response relationship within his definition can be relaxed: cirrus clouds, for example, are inorganic and, at the time, were said to have limited connections with organic responses (Davis, 1906). With modern knowledge, we know this is false. The interactions of the hydrological cycle are intimately linked with organic responses (Trenberth, 1998), but when produced in the early 20th century, the interactions between the natural sciences were not as sound as our modern understanding: perhaps why Davis was such an intense advocate for bridging the divide between the scientific disciplines (Davis, 1906).

Kwan, conversely, views human and physical Geographies as being distinctly different (Kwan, 2004) and argues that the scope has become too large to bridge the divide between the sub-disciplines. Arguably, that the diversification of Geography, within the last 100 years, is the main driver behind the existence of the sub-disciplines: with Kwan (2004) breaking human geographies further into “ spatial-analytical” and “ social-cultural” geographies (Kwan, 2004. pg756). Moreover, Kwan (2004) delivers a contrasting message as to how Geography is enacted. Unlike Davis (1906), Kwan (2004) coins the bridging of knowledge between the physical and human Geography as “ cosmopolitan tolerance” (Kwan, 2004. Pg760) and therefore not necessary to understanding the Geographical phenomena being studied – viewing them as separate entities. Despite this stratification,

the nature of Human Geography is still intimately linked with other similar subjects, namely “ economics, sociology and political science” (Holloway et al. 2003. Pg55). This could imply that human geographical study is more subjective than physical Geography and is applied to a myriad of circumstances whereas physical geography is more limited in its application as it is often based on similar scientific endeavours (Hartshorne, 1939). If we accept this divide, then this draws a clear contrast between the two sub-disciplines. It could be argued that physical Geography examines the objective and human Geography studies the subjective aspects of the planet and its inhabitants. Underpinning that conclusion is the notion that despite their differences, both aspects of geographical inquiry are based on the study of the Earth; illuminating the idea that despite their differences, a common undercurrent runs throughout.

Interestingly, both the texts tend to exclude each other in their focus'. One aims towards geographical subject knowledge (Davis, 1906) and the other aimed towards geographical methods (Kwan, 2004). In particular, Kwan (2004) focuses heavily on the role of Quantitative methods and the overlap that exists between the techniques used both within Geography and other disciplines: the application of quantitative methods in Geography in a constant state of evolution (Poon, 2003). It seems clear that the approach taken by Kwan (2004) exemplifies the notion of “ hybrid Geographies” (Kwan, 2004. Pg758) which is implied to produce the most conclusive results when looking at any phenomena: whether physical or human Geographical in nature. Davis (1906), alternatively, focusses on the subject knowledge of Geography. Despite this difference in premise between the two, it could be

said that the nature of geography is upheld by both: you need both subject knowledge and its methods and application in order to be viable. Therefore, this brings together the works of Kwan (2004) and Davis (1906) because although they view the nature of Geography differently, they both appreciate the interconnectedness of their subject: Davis (1906) bringing together the work of the natural sciences and Kwan (2004) adopting the work and methodologies of other social science subjects within the text. This demonstrates the nature of Geography and exemplifies what could be argued as Geography's biggest strength: its interdisciplinary nature (Driver, 1993).

Clearly, Kwan (2004) and Davis (1906) have different definitions and approaches to the nature of Geography and it's apparent that Geography has manifested itself differently depending on the scholar and the time period in question. Despite the different contents and audiences, both texts are innately connected through their relationship to the Earth and demonstrate the overarching theme of enacting successful Geographical inquiry. It's reasonable to suggest that Geography has innately blurred subject boundaries and is larger than any past or current sub-disciplines that Geography entails. It cannot be viewed in isolation as by doing so would be failing to appreciate the true extent of any given phenomena. Despite being written nearly a century apart, both texts vehemently defend the notion that Geography should be viewed and explored holistically -whether through the natural sciences (Davis, 1906) or through inter-disciplinary quantitative methods (Kwan, 2004): exploring knowledge and methodologies of other

disciplines gives a deeper understanding and meaning to any Geographical context.

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