

# YOUR HUMAN GEOGRAPHY DISSERTATION

Designing, Doing, Delivering

Kimberley Peters



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# SECTION I

# DESIGNING YOUR HUMAN GEOGRAPHY DISSERTATION



# 2

## STARTING OUT: IDENTIFYING YOUR APPROACH

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### CHAPTER MAP

- The connections between thought and practice
  - Finding your approach to geography
  - Theoretical approaches for geographers
  - The geography in your dissertation
  - Philosophical ruminations: Moving forwards
- 

### The connections between thought and practice

As a student of human geography you are likely beginning to realise that the discipline, as well as having a ‘real-world’ relevance (with application to society, culture, politics and the environment), also has varying philosophical and theoretical underpinnings that shape our approaches to examining such areas of study. You may have attended lectures as part of your degree that seem more appropriate to the study of philosophy rather than geography. So what is the connection between geography and the wide array of concepts and theories that we are taught as part and parcel of a geography degree? It is argued that the process of conducting or doing research can never truly be separated from an understanding of and engagement with philosophy (or as Aitken and Valentine more intelligibly put it (2006: 1) ‘ways of knowing’). An example illustrates the point.

Two students are embarking on dissertation work. Both are interested in the role of the internet and virtual technologies for socio-spatial life (see Kinsley, 2014 for inspiration). However, both are interested in asking very different questions about

the subject matter. One knows she wants to explore how internet usage varies spatially – particularly between urban and rural areas, and in relation to a variety of demographic characteristics (such as age and income). The other student knows he wants to investigate how internet usage impacts socio-spatial experience. He wants to ask how we engage with virtual space, the ways it compares to ‘real’ space, and what opportunities it affords for users (see the Graduate Guidance box below).

These students have each selected – perhaps without realising it at the time – two alternative ways of knowing the world. The first takes what might be called a **realist** approach (see Couper, 2014: 227). For realists there is an understanding that the world already exists out there for us to examine, to hypothesise about, to map, to count and to do tests on. The second student takes an **anti-realist** approach. For anti-realists there is an understanding that the world is not just out there to be examined, rather it is only knowable and understandable because we invest meaning in it. One ascribes to **objective** knowledge, which provides verifiable results in the form of statistics and maps. The other subscribes to **subjective** knowledge, which provides specific and partial results in the form of data that unlocks experiences, beliefs, desires, values (see Information Box 2.1, p. 23 below). The students are also shaped by different theoretical positions (one by positivist and post-positivist approaches, the other by debates in post-modern thinking; see the section on theoretical approaches to follow). So – whether they are conscious of it or not – both students are thinking about philosophy and theory in *doing* their research. As Graham (2005: 11) puts it, ‘even the most philosophically inarticulate researcher makes philosophical choices simply by doing research’.

The good news is that you will often unwittingly veer towards a particular ‘way of knowing’ the world without even realising it. As Shurmer-Smith notes (2002: 11), the perspectives we can engage easily with, and ideas we subscribe to, will shape the way we look at and ‘know’ spaces and places around us. But why does all this matter? Graham argues that we should make an active effort to ‘bother’ about and uncover the links between thought and practice as this will help us to forge stronger research projects (Graham, 2005: 11). All good dissertations have two connected components – a strong empirical focus (*what* you study) and a solid, appropriate philosophical grounding (*how* you study it). Appreciating how you think about the world will ensure that you have situated your project in the right literature and debates (Chapter 4) and have used the right methods to examine your question (Chapter 9).

But how do we actually begin to think seriously about ‘ways of knowing’ in regard to your human geography dissertation? In this chapter we begin by considering how you find your own approach to geography. We do so by exploring the two key ‘ways of knowing’ that shape work in the discipline: knowing that is objective (seeking certainty and fact) and knowing that is subjective (seeking individual and personal realities). Next, the chapter homes in on more specific ways of knowing, examining some of the core theories that have shaped human geographic thought. These are the ‘isms’ that often underscore our approaches – positivism, humanism, Marxism, feminism, post-modernism and post-humanism. Finally, the chapter highlights the importance of ensuring your approach is

geographical. Here we explore how to connect your project with some of the fundamental concepts that underpin the discipline: space, time and movement. The chapter closes by ruminating on the importance of identifying your approach, before moving on to the task of designing your dissertation in Chapter 3.

## Finding your approach to geography

Geography is often said to be an eclectic discipline. It does not subscribe to a stable, structured sense of identity. As Richard Peet has noted (1998: 1), ‘geography has a permanent identity crisis because what geographers do is complex’. The good news is that this makes the discipline ‘dynamic, interesting and intellectually fertile’ (Peet, 1998: 1). Geography encapsulates everything from ‘hard’ science (the testing of hypotheses and modelling of phenomena), to the arts and humanities (subjective and qualitative studies of human engagements with the world). Accordingly, geographers (especially human geographers) are a motley bunch, exploring space, place and time in a variety of quite differing ways.

When embarking on a dissertation, you first have to make a decision on which kind of geography you hope to explore (working on the assumption there is not one, single, geography). Your choice as to which brand of human geography your dissertation falls into (cultural geography, political geography, population geography, environmental geography) is – inadvertently – a philosophical choice. It is not simply a preference between different types of human geography, but is underscored by how we look at the world around us. These different types of geography are situated in differing philosophical and theoretical traditions, so being alert to this is crucial. In turn, you can then plan research, use methods and employ analytic techniques that are in-keeping with the area you are studying. It is useful to consider the vast array of human geographies that are undertaken in your own department as a starting point for identifying your own approach to study (Task 2.1).

### TASK 2.1

Look at the Geography home page of the university where you study. Explore the human geography research that is conducted in your own department or school. You will usually find this under the tabs describing research (most departments and schools have research groups and clusters) and on individual staff pages. Make rough notes on the following:

- What different types of geography (cultural, political, environmental, etc.) are studied?
- What particular topics, spaces, places, times, objects or subjects are under examination?
- What different techniques and methods are used?
- What kinds of questions are staff asking? How are they asking them?

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Once you have jotted down the areas of research interest, look back on your notes. Begin to draw lines of connection based on the following questions:

- Which topics and areas of study seem to link together?
- Which geographers are asking the same kinds of questions? Is there a pattern?
- Which geographers are using similar methods for their research?

Once you have grouped things together, ask yourself the following:

- Why are some types of human geography different from others? What makes them so?
- Why do geographers ask the questions they do about their topics? What are they hoping to find out?
- Why do you think the methods used are the same or different?



Go online! Visit <https://study.sagepub.com/yourhumangeography> for a link to the University of Liverpool Geography home pages. Notice the range of research that academics conduct in this department. Some staff fall under the remit of population geography (exploring socio-spatial inequalities, housing segregation, health and wellbeing indicators and the correlation between place and crime). Others fall under the banner of social, cultural and political geography (exploring the experiences of Polish migrants in the UK; the use of alternative currencies to foster community activism; and the role of the body in research practice). How are these kinds of research underscored by different ways of knowing the world?

The point of the task is to illustrate that the work of human geographers can be very varied. In my own department, and those I have worked in previously, the research conducted by human geography staff is incredibly diverse. Some of my colleagues have been engaged in research that seeks to visualise and map community and population changes over time using Geographical Information Systems (GIS). Others have drawn on Census data collected by the government about the UK population (along with other regional and national surveys) to make statistical correlations about location and a host of socio-economic factors (educational attainment, experience of poverty, mortality rates, health, job success, and so on). Most recently I have worked with colleagues who have sought to explore how governments and non-governmental organisations respond to disasters, drawing on official documents, policies and manifestos. I have also worked alongside colleagues who have used archive records to piece together stories of our colonial past in the present. My own work has employed interviews to speak first hand to people about their experiences running a pirate radio station (Peters, 2011a).

Some of these topics and areas of research have things in common, others are notably different. A geographer conducting a statistical analysis of electoral data for wards in England and Wales to understand voting behaviour for example, would appear very different from a geographer using interviews and focus groups to do the same job. But why do we know these modes of research are somehow distinct from one another? It comes down to our approach to geography and how we view the world. In other words, do we see:

1. A world that exists out there already, which can be measured, recorded, quantified, to reach objective, factual, verifiable knowledge claims.
2. A world that we are part and parcel of making, which is messy and complex, from which we can make specific, situated, partial claims to knowledge.

In other words, when we approach research we need to ask whether we want to reach statistically verifiable claims about geographical phenomena, or if we want to understand the diverse meanings that permeate human relations with space and place (or if our way of knowing is open to both; see Sui and DeLyser, 2012, and Chapter 9, 'Selecting your methods'). Crucially, when starting out with your dissertation, it is worthwhile asking if you want to arrive at objective or subjective knowledge (Information Box 2.1).

### INFORMATION BOX 2.1 OBJECTIVE AND SUBJECTIVE KNOWLEDGE

Traditionally, **objective knowledge** is that which is unbiased and impartial – it appears to be fair and non-partisan. As such, objective knowledge seems 'god like' – it seems to have come from a higher power. Donna Haraway's pivotal work (1988: 581–2) notes how objective knowledge is 'distanced' from those who create it (researchers) and, as such, it has an indisputable quality. Objective knowledge has validity in that it is based on 'facts'. It therefore makes grand claims about what exists. Objective knowledge is often – but not always – linked to forms of **positivism** (which can be traced back to the work of Auguste Comte). Positivism refers to a theory that states knowledge can only be verified and guaranteed as 'certain' through rigorous empirical testing 'to reach positive knowledge' (knowledge that cannot be challenged – unless through similar positivist testing) (Peet, 1998: 23). Moreover, objective knowledge tends to be nomothetic, that is, generalisable and universal. Objective knowledge (or the means through which objective knowledge emerges – hypotheses, formulas, models, and so on) can often be applied to different examples. Often the work of spatial scientists (creating mathematical models in relation to space) is said to be objective. That said, many geographers who work with statistics, maps and models today, although still seeking to make objective knowledge claims, take a **post-positivist** approach whereby it is acknowledged that certain biases shape results and findings.

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**Subjective knowledge** takes into account the subject – the person – the intricacy and complexity of their thoughts, feelings, and emotions. Here it is accepted that there cannot be one single, objective way of knowing the world. Instead there might be many ways of knowing the world. Subjective knowledge came to the fore with approaches such as humanism, which argued that human experience of the world cannot be understood with (or contained by) models, hypotheses and formulas. Humanistic geography sought to re-people the discipline in the face of spatial scientific approaches, where the intricacy of human life seemed all but absent. This required a different form of knowledge, which reflected the variety of **experience**. Unlike objective knowledge, subjective forms of knowledge are multiple (and do not seek one answer, or to make generalising claims to understanding). Subjectivity allows us to acknowledge there might be multiple ways of knowing. In this sense, subjective knowledge is idiographic – that is, it is unique, personal, and specific.

Have a think now. What type of human geography sits well with your own sensibility? Do you relish numbers and the ability to map phenomena to space, or to correlate human characteristics (age, health, ethnicity) to particular places, at particular times? On the other hand, are you excited by the diversity of meanings that can be unpacked in trying to understand some sort of socio-spatial experience or phenomenon? Identifying your own approach (your own way of knowing the world) will help in honing the kinds of questions you want to ask in a dissertation, and, in turn, the sorts of methods you will use. So when setting out with a project, it is essential to consider how you think about the world. This is because thought is connected to practice.



Go online! Visit <https://study.sagepub.com/yourhumangeography> if you would like to read more about philosophy and theory. Here you can find additional material outlining how ‘ways of knowing’ underscore ways of doing.

## Theoretical approaches for geographers

Whilst there are overarching ‘ways of knowing’ that support how we approach research, there are other considerations you must make when starting out with an undergraduate dissertation. These relate to the influence of theory. Geography has been shaped by theories that have guided the social sciences more generally. Notably these theories have been adopted within the discipline to develop distinctly spatial innovations relating to such ideas (for example, post-colonial theory has been utilised by geographers who have consequentially demonstrated how imperial dominance has had unique spatial outcomes – see Davies, 2013; Jazeel, 2014;

Sidaway, 2000). Just like ways of knowing more generally, often student projects are located within specific theoretical approaches without us realising. As Tim Cresswell describes,

[i]f we choose to look at the micro spaces of the home, there is a history of feminist theory urging geographers to take private space seriously. If we choose to study the structuring of public space, there are any number of theorists who have argued about the meaning of ‘public’ (let alone the meaning of ‘space’). (Cresswell, 2013: 4)

Good dissertation projects should show an awareness of the theoretical stance that has shaped the research. It is worth asking if there is a specific theoretical tradition in which your work sits, which will help you better understand and situate your findings. This section provides – as a starting point – a simple overview of the key theories that have shaped geographical research, past and present. Reading these will provide the basis for locating your project within an appropriate theoretical context. However, you should also consult more detailed texts and there is now a host of recent books dedicated to the task of exploring geographic theory (key publications are listed below and articles that use each approach are available on the Companion Website). The sections to follow also list some ‘classic’ texts associated with each theoretical shift, should you want to develop your reading further. The theories charted here follow a broadly chronological order in respect to their adoption in geographical thinking. That said, one theory rarely replaces another – and traces of previous frames of thinking always prevail.

### Key readings

- Aitken, S. and Valentine, G. (eds) (2006) *Approaches to Human Geography*. London: Sage.
- Couper, P. (2014) *A Student's Introduction to Geographic Thought: Theories, Philosophies, Methodologies*. London: Sage.
- Cresswell, T. (2013) *Geographic Thought: A Critical Introduction*. London: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Nayak, A. and Jeffery, A. (2011) *Geographical Thought: An Introduction to Ideas in Human Geography*. London: Pearson.

Go online! Visit <https://study.sagepub.com/yourhumangeography> to access a series of Sage journal articles that show how each theoretical approach (Positivism, Humanism, Marxism, Feminism, Post-Modernism and Post-Humanism) have been employed by human geographers to help them understand their topic area.



## Positivism

Positivism has a long tradition in geography. This includes innovations such as Alfred Weber's 'Industrial Location Theory' (1909), which mapped the prime locations for industry based on minimising costs of production and distribution (Johnston, 1986: 37) and Walther Christaller's 'Central Place Theory' (1933) that explored 'the size, function and distribution of settlements' – making broad statements about population and the provision of services (Johnston, 1986: 35). That said, in the 1960s the discipline turned firmly to positivist approaches, joining a quantitative revolution which saw geographers employing models and formulas to develop laws and equations that could compare places and predict spatial outcomes. In the mid-twentieth century, Regional Geography, which preceded this broader positivist shift, saw the discipline engage with a descriptive approach of classifying regions, developing a 'comprehensive synthesis of everything in a given area' (Couper, 2014: 18). Such an approach could provide a detailed study of specific regions but it could not say how geography was more widely applicable. Accordingly, geographers sought to make their discipline 'more scientific, nomothetic (law-stating) instead of idiographic' (Peet, 1998: 22). They developed positivist approaches based on empirical (that is, direct) observation of the world (also see Information Box 2.1, p. 23). A positivist approach arrives at 'truths' because the findings are said to be objective – mathematically certified and sound – and based on data drawn directly from the world. Positivism shaped an era of geography dedicated to **spatial science**. Although geographers still use quantitative approaches to arrive at objective knowledge (see Information Box 2.1, p. 23) many now position themselves theoretically as 'post-positivist' in their approach. Whereas positivist approaches claim absolute certainty in findings, **post-positivist** research appreciates the factors that shape any knowledge claim (for example, data limitations), thus giving the findings produced great legitimacy (see, for example Kwan and Ding, 2008).

## Key readings

Chorley, R. and Haggett, P. (eds) (1967) *Models in Geography*. London: Methuen.  
Harvey, D. (1969) *Explanation in Geography*. London: Edward Arnold.

## Humanism

Humanism emerged in the early 1970s as a direct response to the quantitative and positivist leanings of geography at the time. Geographers adopted it as an approach that focused on 'the individual as a thinking being' (Johnston, 1986: 55). A geography inspired by humanistic principles worked to re-people geography and make the discipline more **idiographic** (focused on the specific and personal) to counter approaches that focused on the generalisable and universal. As Holloway and Hubbard note, for humanists, there is no world outside of human experience;

we make the world what it is through our experience of it (2001: 71). In other words, general models and laws are totally suspect as they don't reflect the way we actually live our lives (Holloway and Hubbard, 2001: 71). Humanistic geographers therefore seek to understand the intricacies of human **experience** – what it is like 'being in the world'. To do so they draw greatly on **phenomenology** as a theoretical approach. Phenomenology argues that phenomena in the world only come into existence through human experience of them. Experience is key to humanist geographers because it is via individual experience and the meanings it generates, that place is forged and formed. Subsequently, the concept of **place** (as space made meaningful via human engagement) came to the fore (Tuan, 1977; Cresswell, 2004). However, whilst humanism was a persuasive alternative to the mathematic models and generalising laws that characterised spatial science, it was also critiqued for a lack of politics and a failure to account for the differentials of experience 'in place' that were forged through processes of power. The home, a core site of focus for humanists was regarded unproblematically. For geographers like Tuan (1977) the home was a site of attachment, coziness and comfort. The work of bell hooks (1990), the African-American cultural theorist, along with feminist proponents (see Rose, 1993) has contested the comfortable spatial associations made by humanistic geographers. Whilst humanistic geography is now less fashionable, its interests remain as geographers continue to explore human experience and engagement through approaches typically branded **post-phenomenology** (see Ash and Simpson, 2016). Here geographers are interested in opening up a more **critical** engagement with embodied, lived experience (see Edensor, 2000; Simpson, 2011; Wylie, 2005).

### Key readings

- Buttimer, A. (1976) 'Grasping the dynamism of the lifeworld', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 66 (2): 277–92.
- Tuan, Y.F. (1977) *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

### Marxism

Theories derived from the work of Karl Marx (and his colleague Friedrich Engels) gained momentum in geography in the 1960s, forging what would become known as a **radical** era of geography (for a detailed introduction see Peet, 1998: 67–146). This period marked the beginnings of a socially engaged and proactive geography. Where Marxist ideas had no particular spatial leanings, geographers (such as David Harvey, Doreen Massey and Neil Smith amongst others) recognised that it could provide a new framework for understanding relations between people, space and place. The employment of Marxist thought has been varied (there is not one Marxism, but differing forms – classical Marxism, structural Marxism, feminist Marxism and now post-Marxism and so on). However, broadly, geographers have

worked with two central ideas from Marx's writings. The first relates to the emergence of particular forms of **social organisation**. Marx noted that in capitalist societies the key division is between working and ruling classes. The working class (the proletariat) have no economic independence and must work for rulers (the bourgeoisie), those who own the means of production (the factories and equipment). Inequality lies between those who own the means of production (the machinery and buildings of a factory, for instance) and those who have nothing more to sell than their labour. In this system there is a mutual dependence – the working class have to work, the ruling class need them too, so an exploitative cycle ensues. Geographers have used Marx to argue that class conflict and uneven development are perpetuated in space. For example, David Harvey (1973) has argued that capitalist dynamics shape space: new centres come into being whilst others fall into decay. Uneven development occurs when capital is shifted and reinvested around the globe. Capitalist processes exploit new spaces to maintain profitability, leading to growth in some areas with other areas left 'behind' through capitalist exploitation. Secondly, and more recently, geographers have used Marx's ideas relating to **commodity fetishism**. In *Capital*, Marx (1867: n.p.) has written that commodities are the products of nature. However, when nature is transformed into commodities through processes of production, 'it is changed into something transcendent' with a 'mystical character', disconnecting the product from its origins. Consequently, the origins of commodities – the fact they are things of the earth – becomes masked. We cannot see things for what they really are. Geographers have drawn upon, and critiqued this work, to 'unveil the fetish' and trace the complex geographical networks relating to material items; 'following the thing' (see Cook, 2004).

### Key readings

Harvey, D. (1973) *Social Justice and the City*. London: Edward Arnold.  
 Massey, D. (1984) *Spatial Divisions of Labour: Social Structures and the Geography of Production*. Basingstoke and London: Macmillan.

### Feminism

Feminism, Tim Cresswell has recently noted (2013: 147), has appeared to many to be a 'dirty word'. Feminist ideas, it seems, take us to uncomfortable ground. Yet feminism is a 'powerful collection of ideas and practices' that cannot, and should not be ignored (Cresswell, 2013: 148). Generally, it is defined as

a political movement that seeks to overturn gender inequalities between men and women. ... Feminism challenges and resists the gender roles and relations that position men and women in different and unequal ways in society. As such, feminism is concerned with ... how all spheres of life are gendered in particular ways. (Blunt and Wills, 2000: 90)

The basis of feminism is an attention to the ways in which **gendered relations** are unequal. Feminism has emerged in different ‘waves’ over time, the first relating to political movements for women’s rights and the second to the more pervasive and ingrained forms of discrimination that shape everyday life (see Nayak and Jeffery, 2011: 130–2). However, like Marxist approaches, geographers have explored the ways in which unequal gender relations are perpetuated and reinforced through *space*. Geographers have been part of larger debates around the idea of gender as a social construct (see Butler, 1990) and explorations have investigated the spatial performances of gender (see McDowell, 1997) and representations of gender (Nash, 1996). For example, Gill Valentine’s early work on fear in the city (1996) explored how the urban realm has been threatening to women, consequently shaping their spatial movements. Linda McDowell’s seminal work on gender and the workplace (1997) investigated how women altered their appearance and behaviour in city companies, taking on more masculine characteristics in order to challenge discrimination in these unequally gendered landscapes (see also McDowell, 1999). Geographical work has also expanded to take the spatial representations and performances of masculinity seriously (see Hopkins and Noble, 2009) and to interrogate the gendered formation of geographical knowledge. This has been, in part, a questioning of the role of women in the discipline (Domosh, 1991). Moreover, following the broader critiques of objective knowledge (see Information Box 2.1, p. 23 above), geographers have argued for the situated nature of knowledge (the idea that all knowledge production is shaped by the creator) (Rose, 1997). This has led to the development of distinct feminist methodologies (Moss, 2002; see also Chapter 6).

### Key readings

Domosh, M. (1991) ‘Towards a feminist historiography of geography’, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 16: 95–104.

McDowell, L. (1997) *Capital Culture: Gender at Work in the City*. Oxford: Blackwell.

### Post-modernism

Over the past couple of decades, ‘geography’ has changed its name. Where once book titles and articles in academic journals spoke of the ‘geography of crime’ or the ‘geography of climate change’, scholars working in the discipline began talking about the subject in the plural rather than the singular. Geography became *geographies*. Take a look in a recent issue of any key geographical journal (for example *Progress in Human Geography*) and you will see that authors tend towards using the term ‘geographies’ when discussing spatial phenomena. This shift has its roots in post-modernist thinking. Post-modernism separates a given field of investigation from grand, organising structures. In other words, there is



not a singular causal link between a phenomenon, event, place, person, and an overriding narrative that explains it. Rather post-modernism is concerned with a world that is multiple and complex. A host of philosophers writing at the time (such as Deleuze and Guattari (1988)) rejected, as Peet puts it (1998: 195) ‘modern assumptions of coherence and causality entirely, arguing instead for fragmentation, multiplicity, and indeterminacy’. This shift has created a geography sensitive to difference (note other ‘turns’ (theoretical and methodological shifts) such as **post-colonial** thinking – see Nayak and Jeffery, 2011; see also Chapter 11) and attuned to how a diverse array of humans – young, old, rich, poor, black, white, straight, gay – experience space and engage with space differently (see Peet, 1998: 171). However, some geographers challenged this move towards a fragmented geography, arguing instead for a need to return to some sort of order (e.g. Dear, 1988).

### Key readings

- Dear, M. (1988) ‘The post-modern challenge: Reconstructing human geography’, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 13: 262–74.  
 Harvey, D. (1989) *The Condition of Postmodernity*. Oxford: Blackwell.

### Post-humanism

Human geography is, most obviously, concerned with human relations with space and place. However, in recent years, the discipline has made a ‘re-turn’ towards subjects that are **non-human** (materials, commodities, animals, and so on) or **more-than-human** (nature, climate, atmosphere, etc.). This ‘post-human’ turn has been driven by the acknowledgement that geography has become too anthropocentric (human-centred), omitting examination of other, non-, and more-than-human things and beings (see Panelli, 2010). As Sarah Whatmore has noted, there is a need for human geography to reconnect with life beyond the human (2006: 601). Geographers are questioning ‘how humans and non-humans relate’ and are employing new methods to explore ‘the ways in which humans, animals, plants and other actors and intermediaries come together’ (Bear and Eden, 2008: 488). These investigations are incredibly varied in scope. On the one hand, geographers have increasingly investigated **commodities**; the biographies of objects and the ‘force’ of material things (as Jane Bennett puts it, 2004). Here the path of an object can be followed to unlock the geographies enfolded within and spun from it (see Cook, 2004). Additionally, objects have been understood to hold a power, or enchantment, that has affects when in touch with human life (Bennett, 2004). On the other hand, geographers have centralised nature, breaking down the false dichotomy between nature and culture that has typified traditional examinations, instead speaking of a **social nature** (Castree and Braun, 2001). Here nature (in its many guises, from the countryside, to parks, to gardens) is held in *relation* with, or seen to be *hybridised* with humans (Whatmore, 2002).

Geographers have also investigated human relations with animal life (see Buller, 2013; Philo and Wilbert, 2000). More recently, geographers have continued this engagement with the non- and more-than-human world, to consider the **elemental geographies** of soil, air, water, fire (see Anderson and Wylie, 2009); and the ways in which these ‘earthly’ features are co-combined with human spatial experience.

### Key readings

- Jackson, P. (2000) ‘Rematerializing social and cultural geography’, *Social and Cultural Geography* 1 (1): 9–14.
- Panelli, R. (2010) ‘More-than-human social geographies: Posthuman and other possibilities’, *Progress in Human Geography* 34 (1): 79–87.

### TASK 2.2

Geography can be a confusing discipline. It has its own specialist terminology which draws on an existing range of complex theoretical ideas. In Chapter 1, Task 1.2 suggested that you keep a diary documenting the process of your research. This works both as a tool for ensuring a critical approach to research and in writing your methodology. In this diary, or in a separate notepad (or computer document), you should have a section where you note down any new terms, concepts and theories that you come across during your dissertation work. Look these up (either in a standard dictionary, or a specialised text such as *The Dictionary of Human Geography*) and jot down the associated meanings. This will help you to build a knowledge of a wide range of terms and concepts as you develop your dissertation ideas.

## The geography in your dissertation

In this chapter we have recognised that thought and practice are entwined and that our approach to geography shapes the kind of questions we want to ask, the knowledge we want to uncover, and in turn the methods we will use (see Chapters 7, 8 and 9). We have also seen that a wide range of theories underpin geographical work (and our own project will likely be contextualised within broader theoretical frameworks). Finally, though, when starting out, we must also ensure that our project is geographical. This may seem like an unusual statement. You are doing a human geography dissertation after all. However, given the diversity of human geography (as previously mentioned) – spanning from positivist approaches to post-modern investigations – the geographical elements of a project can sometimes get lost in the processes of planning research. Indeed, geography has become a catch-all term to refer to any phenomenon that happens in space. We might be forgiven in thinking that geography is everywhere

and will therefore be implicit in any project we complete. But we shouldn't just assume our project is geographical, because geography is supposedly 'everywhere'. Whilst geography may be inescapable, we still must show how geography matters to what we are researching. This means we have to engage with the core interests (as I have called them) that underscore the discipline. Listed here are three broad areas that are crucial to the work of geographers: space and place; time and temporality; and movement and mobility.

## Space and Place

If the core focus for sociologists is society; and historians, time; it is perhaps little wonder that space and place should be the central concern of geographers. As Derwent Whittlesey, a geographer at Harvard during the early to mid-part of the twentieth century said: 'space' is the 'basic organizing concept of the geographer' (1954, as cited in Blaut, 1961: 1). What is essential in an undergraduate dissertation is that space, place and *spatiality* feature. But how do we ensure our dissertation is geographical in this sense? Space and place refer to the dimensions, planes and pockets of the world in which we live. **Spatiality** refers to that which *relates* to space and place. For example, an exploration of the spatiality of living arrangements in turn-of-the-century tenement blocks would investigate how people lived in relation to space and place (the tenements, estate, city, and so on) in a given time period.

But how we think about spatiality depends on how we understand the concepts of 'space' and 'place'. Traditional understandings have conceived of space through an **Euclidean** framing. This takes space to be something geometric – a measurable plane or container on and in which social and physical activity occurs. As such, space becomes a backdrop to human and non-human life. Crucially this conception treats space mathematically. Studies that understand space in this way seek to map phenomena *onto* space and scientifically hypothesise relations between people, locations, events, and so on, to reach concrete, objective knowledge through patterns, models and formulas.

However, notions of Euclidean space have been challenged by the popularity of the term **place** (brought into focus by humanistic geographers). Where space has been taken as abstract and geometric, place defies such definition. Place is space that has been made meaningful (Cresswell, 2004). No longer abstract, the container that is space, becomes 'filled' with human significance, care and attachment (Tuan, 1977). Ideas of 'place' move geographers beyond thinking of space purely in a locational sense. Studies that focus on place are interested in our metaphorical as well as physical relations with the world. For example, we can be 'in' a place physically, but we can also feel 'in' a place emotionally. This unlocks geography from Euclidean dynamics. Accordingly, geographers who are interested in unpacking human experience of particular locales and also the socio-spatial significance of those relations, often draw on the concept of place (see, for example, Cresswell, 1996).

However, popular today are ways of thinking about 'space' that distance it from Euclidean roots, without opposing it to 'place'. Indeed, another way of thinking

spatially is to consider what is called ‘social space’ (see Massey, 2005). This develops from a **relative** understanding of space. Following the writings of French theorist Henri Lefebvre (1991), in his seminal work *The Production of Space*, we can think of space as **co-constituted** with human activity and non-human actors (objects, nature and so on; see also Massey 1997). Space is only made (or produced) through the relations that form it.

Crucially, an undergraduate project should engage with spatiality. When designing your dissertation, look back over your research question and ask yourself if your project is *spatial* – does it engage space (in whatever way) – to arrive at a *geographical* contribution.

### Time and Temporality

In addition to space, time has become an important focus of human geographical research. Spatial relations (as described above) do not occur outside of a second dimension through which life is lived: time. Time becomes relevant in all kinds of ways to geographical enquiry. For starters, human geography projects often explore a given phenomenon, event, place, person and their spatial relations at a particular point in time. My own work on radio broadcasting has, for example, investigated the spatial politics of pirate transmissions between 1964–1991 (see Peters, 2011a). Thus, time is a way in which we *locate* our studies.

Moreover, time is often part and parcel of the spatial relations we explore in our studies. The work of Hägerstrand exemplifies this point. His important research demonstrates that spatial activity is never outside of the confines of time. For example, when engaged in the practice of walking to work, we aren’t just moving through space, but we are also moving through time. Thinking of distance alone (i.e. only space) limits how we grapple with human experience. The movement of people is not merely impacted by the space through which they travel, but by the time constraints imposed in doing so. Hägerstrand, then, challenged the purely spatial analysis of proximity, distance and relationality – highlighting how a focus on space alone tells but half the story.

Whilst Hägerstrand is often recognised as bringing temporal analysis to geography, all sorts of engagements with time now shape the discipline. Like space, time can be thought of in mathematical, scientific ways, or in relational, subjective ways. On the one hand, time can be understood as a container in which social and physical change occurs. Accordingly, time is taken to be **linear**; constantly moving forwards. This has resulted in a process-orientated view of space and place where we can map the changes to space and place over time (see Pred, 1984).

However, geographers have also explored what are called non-linear relations between time and space. Scholars examining the spatialities of memory and heritage, for example, often think about the ways in which the past and present fold into one another (see Hoskins, 2007; Nora, 1989). This **non-linear** way of thinking about time is evident in one of geography’s most pivotal innovations: time–space compression (Harvey, 1989). In his book *The Condition of Postmodernity*, Harvey (1989)

explores the annihilation of distance (of space) through time. In a globalised world it becomes possible to communicate over greater spaces (compressing traditional notions of time) which provides flexibility to, paradoxically, spread labour, goods and services further afield (annihilating distance). This idea, that time can compress and distance can shrink, upsets geometric, measured ideas of both time and space, and alerts us to an image of time and space that consists of folds – a more ‘scrumpled’ geography (as Marcus Doel puts it, 1996). From this, geographers have begun to think about the ways in which time and space come together in more novel ways, investigating the temporalities of life – the rhythms of activities and the paces of life (see Mels, 2004).

Not all undergraduate projects will engage explicitly with time, but it is worth appreciating that it is there – and cannot be separated from space. Again, we have seen that there are different frames to thinking about how time matters. When designing your dissertation it may well be useful to consider how time fits in to your spatial contribution and how it relates to the spatial examinations you are making.

## Movement and Mobility

What is evident through the two previous sub-sections is that movement is fundamental to the ways in which we engage with space, use time, make place and produce temporalities. Movement and ‘mobility’ (a term used to describe politicised and power-filled movements) have started to shape and arguably define the interests of geographers who recognise that our world is a mobile world (see also Adey, 2009; Cresswell, 2006; Urry, 2007). Indeed, in a paper featured in geography’s landmark journal *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, Peter Merriman expresses the idea that scholars take another concept as important in geographical endeavour: movement (2012). Movement, he argues, is a key way through which space and time are experienced, progressed through, challenged and maintained.

In the past, our relationships with space and place were thought to rest upon stability and rootedness. To know a place, to belong, we must be fixed in place. This was known as a **sedentary metaphysics** (Cresswell, 2006: 27). However, with the development of a ‘new mobilities paradigm’ (Sheller and Urry, 2006), scholars now recognise that our relationships with space and place are often connected to the ways we move (or are unable to move) as individuals: the movements made possible (or not) via transportation and infrastructure (such as rail, the motor car, airplane and pipelines and cables); the movement of objects (parcels and goods); and virtual movements (made possible via technologies such as email) (see Cresswell and Merriman, 2012 for a good overview, and Burrell and Hörschelmann, 2014; Birtchnell et al., 2015, and Turner and Peters, 2017 for some more particular examples). In other words, mobility pays attention to the dimensions of power that shape the manifold ways in which people, objects and ideas move on a variety of scales (from the individual body, to global connections).

*(Continued)*

Heterotopia consequentially became the crux in my theoretical framework for thinking about how users' bodies inhabited multiple spaces simultaneously through mediation. Through this theoretical lens I was unknowingly adopting a post-modern way of thinking about the world. While these spatial theories initially seemed a world apart from the study of fantasy football, such ideas helped me map the geographies of fantasy football.

If I was to offer advice on using theory, I would say it is important to remember you are not expected to know everything. Theory can be daunting, but trying to read complex ideas can help in making sense of your own research. I remember for the first month of my dissertation, I felt like I had to consult geography handbooks, dictionaries and my supervisor almost constantly in a bid to understand what I was reading. But these ideas, though challenging, made my project better. I didn't force theory on to my project, rather it emerged and guided my ideas as they arose during the research process. Without theory then, I would have had great difficulty in understanding and mapping the geographies of fantasy football.

## Philosophical ruminations: Moving forwards

This has been something of a heavy chapter, but it is a necessary one. When writing this book I grappled with where exactly the chapter should be placed. This is because our approach to geography and our use of theory matter in all stages of research – designing it, doing it and delivering it. Eventually it has ended up here, near the start, in recognition that we begin every research project by thinking about what interests us (and what doesn't). The decision about what we want to study, and how we want to study it, is driven (whether we are aware of it or not) by our 'way of knowing' the world.

Thus, it is useful to identify our approach from the very start – our approach to geography in a broad sense (interrogating what kinds of knowledge we subscribe to, objective or subjective or both); and to more specific theoretical framings (those 'isms' of social theory that are applied geographically). It is also essential to identify how our approach connects to the fundamental tenets of geographical endeavour: space, time and movement. In short, this chapter has been a whistle-stop tour of how we approach our research practice, through 'ways of knowing' and understanding (Aitken and Valentine, 2006: 1). However, the dip-in, dip-out structure of this book means that you can refer back to this chapter when necessary, as your research progresses.

The relevance of the chapter will become more obvious (and applied) as we move into the more practical stage of designing the dissertation in Chapter 3.

It is vital to design research, and plan to use methods appropriate to what you want to find out. If you want to find out about thoughts, feelings, emotions, opinions, values – how people ‘make’ their world – you must use methods which allow you to uncover subjective meanings. If you want to find figures and numbers and make general claims – believing there is a world out there ready to study – you must use quantitative methods which allow you to show statistical significance or mapped relations. Being a geographer is not simply about a direct, hands-on engagement with the world – it is appreciating that such engagement is shaped by, and in turn shapes, ways of thinking and knowing. As noted in Chapter 1, a dissertation is about the production of knowledge – of ideas. A dissertation makes the reader think. And thinking can be very powerful indeed.

## Chapter Summary

- Our engagement with the world is shaped by particular ‘ways of knowing’. Thought and practice are always connected because ways of ‘doing’ research are embedded in ways of ‘thinking’ about research.
- It is useful to identify our approach to geography, and the type of knowledge we want to arrive at (objective or subjective, or both), as this will shape the focus of our dissertation project. Do we see a world that can only be known through the laws of science; or one that cannot be measured and modelled? Do we think the world is a geometric and pre-existing realm for us to extract data from, or something that is made by us through the attribution of meaning?
- We can often locate our approach by identifying how it sits within and speaks to a particular body of theory (such as humanism, Marxism, feminism, post-modernism and so on). This can help inform the sorts of methodological approaches we take, and frame our interpretations of data, to make sense of it in relation to our research question.
- Our approach to geography should identify with the fundamental, central concerns (or ‘basic organising concepts’) of geographers – space and place, time and temporality, movement and mobility. The approach taken in an undergraduate dissertation should identify with how the subject under consideration is *spatial* and *spatialised*.

### Key readings

- Aitken, S. and Valentine, G. (eds) (2006) *Approaches to Human Geography*. London: Sage.
- Cresswell, T. (2013) *Geographical Thought: A Critical Introduction*. London: Wiley Blackwell.
- Graham, E. (2005) 'Philosophies underlying human geography research', in R. Flowerdew and D. Martin (eds) *Methods in Human Geography: A Guide for Students Doing a Research Project* (second edition). London and New York: Routledge. pp. 8–33.
- Shurmer-Smith, P. (ed.) (2002) *Doing Cultural Geography*. London: Sage (particularly Chapter 2).