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# Humanistic Geography



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# Synonyms

Critical theory; Human experience; Identity; Landscape; Performativity; Phenomenology; Place attachment; Place-making; Sense of place

# **Definition/Description**

Humanistic geography highlights the individual's experiential and qualitative dimensions of space and place, offering a more holistic understanding of the intricate relationships between people, culture, and the environment. This approach provides a more nuanced, personally centered, and culturally sensitive perspective on geographical phenomena.

# **Overview of Humanistic Geography**

An important subfield within geography, humanistic geography focuses on the human experience of place and space. It emphasizes the subjective, qualitative, and cultural aspects of geographical phenomena, complementing the more quantitative and physical perspectives found in other

© Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2024 B. Warf (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Human Geography*, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-25900-5 294-1 branches of geography, and usually with regard to the individual specifically. It emerged in the mid-twentieth century primarily in response to perceived limitations of geography's dominant quantitative and positivist approaches at that time. Humanistic geography explores how people perceive, interact with/in, and attach meaning to the spaces around them, emphasizing the importance of individual experiences, emotions, and perceptions in shaping the human-environment interface.

Perhaps the most central concept in humanistic geography, sense of place refers to the unique character and atmosphere of a location shaped by the emotions, memories, and experiences associated with it. Usually tied to an individual's subjective experiences and perceptions of their spatial surroundings, sense of place research seeks to understand how people make sense of their environments on a personal and emotional level through examination and reflection of emotions, memories, and experiences associated with particular locations. Sometimes this involves place identity and attachment, such as investigating the emotional and psychological connections individuals have with specific places, and exploring how people develop a sense of belonging and rootedness in their environments. Of course, intricately linked to these facets are the cultural meaning of places and symbolism, which delves into meaning and representation attached to different places by people, and how places become imbued with cultural significance. Such aspects include narrative

and storytelling, which endeavors to capture and convey the richness of human experiences through personal narratives and ethnographies, allowing the individual to express their relationships with their place in space in a way that quantitative methods may not capture. Additionally, learning how the emotional and psychological connections that individuals have with specific places remains essential to understanding place better, and discoveries around these themes contribute to a deeper recognition of the important role individuals' lived experiences play with/in their environments. These discoveries remain crucial for appreciating the diversity of human perspectives on places and landscapes, offering insights into how spaces become culturally significant and shedding light on the factors that influence people's sense of place, belonging, and rootedness.

Taking these themes into account, overall, humanistic geography emphasizes the experiential and qualitative aspects of space and place, contributing to a holistic comprehension of the complex relationships between people, culture, and the environment, providing a more nuanced, human/individual-centered, and culturally sensitive understanding of geographical phenomena. Humanistic geography also provides a vital perspective within the broader field of geography which seeks to understand the lived experiences, cultural/traditional meanings, and emotional connections that individuals—and sometimes communities—have with their surroundings.

### **Naissance to Twenty-First Century**

#### Early Influences (1950s-1980s)

Though formal establishment of humanistic geography as a subfield was undoubtedly made by Yi-Fu Tuan (1976), several scholars made significant contributions to the subfield in its early years. In addition to Tuan, some scholars penned a paper or book chapter which helped instill the idea of individual relationships with their environment (e.g., Sauer, 1956) or propel the field forward (cf., Entrikin, 1976; Pocock, 1981; Daniels, 1985), while others offered (related) contributions throughout their careers (cf., Relph, 1976, 1981; Ley & Samuels, 1978; Buttimer, 1979; Buttimer & Seamon, 1980; Ley, 1981, 1983; Duncan & Ley, 1982; Smith, 1984—all of which have other publications that, in some cases span into the 2000s). These researchers helped humanistic geography progress within (and sometimes outside) the discipline-working to keep it afloat during its seemingly cyclical swings between the physical/natural and human/cultural camps in geography-employing methods such as ethnography, participant observation, and in-depth interviews to gain a deeper understanding of the subjective experiences and cultural practices associated with particular places. This shift toward qualitative methods allowed for a more nuanced exploration of the lived realities of individuals and communities.

For example, Sauer stressed the importance of cultural landscapes and the human experience of place, focusing on ways in which humans shape and are shaped by their environments. He recognized and acknowledged the importance and active role of human agency in shaping landscapes and people's contribution to the creation and transformation of their environments. His emphasis on the cultural aspects of geography was a departure from the more deterministic-centered perspectives that dominated geographical thought during Sauer's (early) time. Environmental determinism was a theory that posited a direct and causal relationship between physical environments and human behavior. The "man-landscape" connections Sauer suggested, however, countered that paradigm, arguing that landscapes are not just physical entities but are imbued with cultural meaning, reflecting the values, practices, and histories of the people who inhabit them (Sauer, 1925, 1956). This focus likely traces its roots to the Chicago School's traditional sociological approach based on pragmatism and neo-Kantianism (Sauer earned his doctorate at the University of Chicago).

While Sauer continued to search for meaning beyond environmental determinism, Tuan was plagued with geography's burgeoning quantitative revolution—the movement in geography that sought to expand geography beyond landscape description and into a more positivistic framework. Trained as a geomorphologist at UC Berkeley in the 1950s, Tuan completed his dissertation on the pediments of southern Arizona (Tuan, 2021a). As a graduate student, Tuan "...posed a question to physical geography and it could not give me a definitive answer." So he began exploring, "...humanistic geography, of which no definitive answer was expected and only clarification were possible" (Tuan, 2021b). His "legacy to the discipline" of geography, Tuan's influence on humanistic geography was profound (Adams et al., 2001; Tuan, 2021a). Over decades, his work explored the subjective dimensions of human experiences in different environments, highlighting the importance of understanding how individuals perceive and attach meaning to the spaces they inhabit. He introduced concepts such as topophilia (love of place) and argued for the incorporation of personal and emotional aspects into geographic analysis until his death in 2022 (Tuan, 1968, 1971, 1974, 1975, 1977, 1979).

Aligned with Tuan's concepts, and spurred on by scholars such as Duncan and Ley (1982), Daniels (1985), and Relph (1976, 1981), geography's "cultural turn" encouraged scholars to explore the cultural meanings attached to landscapes and places and to pay greater attention to cultural dimensions of space and place. This shift marked a departure from the quantitative and positivist approaches that dominated geography until then. The cultural turn in geography represented a departure from the prevailing quantitative and positivist approaches that dominated the discipline, where (some) geographers began to recognize the limitations of solely focusing on physical and environmental factors in explaining spatial patterns and human behavior. Instead, there was a growing acknowledgment of the importance of culture, meaning-making, and symbolic representation in shaping geographical phenomena.

Still, during this period, humanistic geography drew significant influence from two overarching fields: the social sciences and humanities. The impact of the social sciences was particularly evident in the realm of phenomenology, as exemplified by Relph's (1976) seminal work, "Place and Placelessness." Relph argued that technological advances and conveniences could lead people to feel disconnected from their own place, emphasizing the importance of obtaining a genuine sense of place in the modern, built environment. Building on this phenomenological foundation, Ley (1978) explored the connections between phenomenology and social geography, underlining the significance of subjective elements such as social actions, values, and perceptions. He acknowledged the importance of both objectivity and subjectivity in understanding the human experience of place. Relph (1981) further extended the phenomenological argument, emphasizing the enduring interpretive value of humanism in deciphering the built landscape. In a parallel vein, Christensen (1982) introduced the idea that, despite phenomenology's usual rejection of positivism, there is room for the inclusion of empiricism, highlighting a dialectical relationship between the two. These perspectives, along with the earlier works of Tuan (1976) and Entrikin (1976), found continued development in Smith's (1984) work, who mitigated perceived weaknesses of humanistic geography, particularly in methodology, by focusing on four key components within human geography: action-experience relationships, ethics, the agency versus structure debate, and the intricate linkages between intellect and the world. This collective body of work contributed to the evolving understanding and acceptance of humanistic geography within the broader academic discourse and fieldwork being conducted.

Yet, despite the retention of traditional fieldwork, which remained crucial throughout the history of geography, there was a notable shift. At a time when geography primarily emphasized quantitative approaches, humanistic geography introduced principles rooted in sociology, phenomenology, and humanities. This infusion provided researchers with a diverse set of valuable tools to enhance the evaluation of their studies and bridge the perceived gap between physical and human geography. The evolution of this perspective, enriched by contemporary themes such as performativity, gender studies, feminist geography, and lived experiences, continued to guide scholars in exploring the individual's role in understanding their spatial identity.

Once formalized by Tuan (1976) however, humanistic geography gained traction, with scholars such as Entrikin (1976) and Relph (1976) almost immediately seizing the opportunity to expound on the idea, and others continuing to expand the new subfield in subsequent years such as Pocock (1981), Smith (1981), and Daniels (1985). Despite the enthusiasm—and in critical disciplinary fashion—shortcomings were almost immediately explored as well, even by proponents *for* humanistic geography, such as Ley and Samuels (1978). These early influences on humanistic geography laid the groundwork for a shift in geographical thinking.

Indeed, humanistic geography, with its emphasis on cultural factors and the subjective experience of individuals in place and space challenged the predominant positivist view, and instead sought to understand the complex and reciprocal interactions between humans and their environments. The entire humanistic geography movement was instrumental in helping bring about geography's cultural turn-a critique of positivism which was the dominant paradigm in geography at the time. Positivism emphasized objective, measurable data and often neglected subjective experiences and cultural nuances. The cultural turn sought to challenge this positivist approach, asserting that a more holistic understanding of human-environment interactions required attention to the social and cultural context. In fact, humanistic geography represented a valuable way to spur on the agenda because it emphasized cultural dimensions of landscapes and the importance of individual experiences which helped set the stage for the development of a more human/ individual-centered and culturally sensitive approach to studying geography. Although the integration of humanistic paradigms into mainstream geography continued into the 1980s and 1990s, the so-called "cultural turn" in geography aimed to move beyond traditional/original humanistic approaches.

# Expanding Perspectives and Post Modernity (1990s–Early 2000s)

Emerging from the quantitative revolution and influenced by humanistic perspectives, scholars began to critically examine the field of geography, focusing more on its human and cultural dimensions than the physical aspects. This shift was marked by ideas put forth by Duncan and Ley (1982), challenging humanism as fictional due to the impossibility of encompassing all human endeavors in a single study. Similarly, Cosgrove (1989) delved into the genesis of humanism, linking it to a white, male-dominated hierarchy rooted in historical events-a hierarchy that often persists today. These critiques were further explored in compilations like those by Barnes and Duncan (1992), where various authors discussed how elements such as maps, text, and paintings interact with the landscape, acknowledging that powerful works can transcend sociodemographic boundaries.

Continuing along similar lines of inquiry, volumes edited by Duncan and Ley (1993) and Pile and Thrift (1995) played influential roles in guiding humanistic geography through geography's cultural turn. The former suggested that meaning is shaped through various re-presentation modes, termed "cultural constructions," in textual works, while the latter paved new paths for cultural geography, incorporating humanistic components. Even so, during this period, humanistic geography expanded to include a broader range of perspectives. Scholars began to explore themes such as gender, identity, and power within the context of human-environment interactions. Concepts such as sense of place, place attachment, and emotional geographies gained prominence.

While dedicated humanistic geographers were reevaluating their work and reconsidering assumptions, elements of humanistic geography persisted in the evolving landscape of "new" cultural geography, even as scholars explored Marxist, post-structuralist, and other postmodern paradigms such as gender and feminism. For example, Rose (1993), Massey (1994), and Monk (1994) collectively aimed to free the discipline of geography from its historically maledominated roots, advancing the trajectory of the "new" geography. Among these scholars, Rose uniquely employed female experiences in space and place to directly scrutinize how gender bias in geography could and perhaps should be addressed. She emphasized the enduring importance of the triumvirate of power-subjectivityknowledge, asserting its vital role in navigating and acknowledging gender bias. Massey (1994) contributed to the understanding of humanistic geography's central element-the individualby proposing that a crucial avenue for fostering understanding across genders lies in examining places where diverse experiences unfold in space. On the other hand, Monk (1994) sought to comprehend the role of feminist geography across space, aiming to enhance recognition of cross-cultural experiences. Together, these scholars played pivotal roles in challenging the historical dominance of (white) male perspectives in geography, offering varied perspectives and frameworks for a more inclusive and comprehensive approach to the discipline.

Closely intertwined with these themes, performativity (i.e., any enacted action) has its origins in humanistic geography and emerged during geography's cultural turn as well. Works by Butler (1993), Nast and Pile (1998), and Gregson and Rose (2000) aimed to integrate forms of movement and action with the meaning and creation of place, encompassing the concept of a "sense of place," even when those spaces are social constructs. In a subsequent article, Thrift (2003) addressed criticisms stemming from early performativity studies (and potentially gender studies preceding them) while also delineating potential future trajectories for the incorporation of performativity into the broader geography framework. Thrift further emphasized the role of the individual in understanding their place within this evolving conceptualization, shedding light on the ongoing evolution of performativity and its significance in geographical discourse.

These developments during the (late 1980s and) 1990s expanded the thematic and theoretical horizons of humanistic geography, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of the complex interplay between culture, identity, power, and the environment. The incorporation of gender, identity, emotional dimensions, and postcolonial perspectives enriched the discipline and contributed to its ongoing evolution. During this timeframe, humanistic geography was also absorbing influences from postmodernism, challenging traditional notions of objectivity and emphasizing the subjective nature of knowledge. Geographers like Soja (1989) and Massey (1993, 1994) contributed to discussions on space, place, and social justice, incorporating poststructuralist ideas into humanistic geography, and humanistic geography evolved alongside, embracing postmodern theories and methodologies that challenged traditional notions of objectivity and emphasized the subjective and socially constructed nature of knowledge.

Postmodernism questioned the idea of a stable, objective reality and emphasized the multiplicity of perspectives and meanings associated with spaces and places, allowing geographers to explore the notion of space not being a neutral container, but a socially and culturally constructed entity (Soja, 1989). This led (humanistic) geographers to critically reflect on how representations of landscapes, places. and cultures are constructed. Scholars engaged with questions of language, imagery, and narrative, examining the power dynamics involved in the production of knowledge and the representation of diverse experiences, such as those noted earlier by Duncan and Ley (1982). Taking this trend one step further, Massey (1994) saw the importance of using a pluralistic approach to understanding reality, urging (humanistic) geographers to explore the coexistence of multiple and often conflicting realities, recognizing that different individuals and groups may experience and perceive the same space in diverse ways. Beyond this, Harvey (1996) explored how spatial justice and power structures shape access to and control over space by dissecting issues of social inequality, questioning dominant narratives, and advocating for more inclusive and just spatial practices, while Lefebvre (1991) noted the importance of understanding how people navigate and give meaning to the spaces they encounter in their everyday routines by focusing on the mundane and ordinary.

During this time span, humanistic geographers influenced by postmodernism, challenged grand narratives that sought to explain overarching truths about human-environment relationships. The integration of postmodern influences in humanistic geography during the 1990s and 2000s contributed to a more reflexive and critically engaged discipline. The exploration of multiple realities, a focus on representation, and an emphasis on spatial justice enriched the theoretical and methodological toolkit of humanistic geographers, fostering a nuanced understanding of the complex relationships between culture, power, and space, as humanistic geographers embraced localized and context-specific understandings, recognizing the diversity of human experiences and the contingent nature of knowledge.

### **Current Trends (2000s-Present)**

Since the early 2000s, humanistic geography has continued to diversify and adapt, incorporating new themes and approaches that further enriched the discipline. Although often times not found under the humanistic geography heading per se, it continues to evolve, with contemporary scholars exploring new avenues such as geohumanities, which integrate artistic and literary approaches such as storytelling, virtual spaces, embodiment, and mobilities into geographic inquiry (Thrift, 2003; Bruun & Langlais, 2003; Laister, 2009; Wylie, 2009; Dear et al., 2011; Howell, 2013). Whatever the subject area, however, there remains an ongoing emphasis on understanding the lived experiences of individuals (and sometimes their wider communities), acknowledging the diverse ways in which people engage with and perceive their surroundings, sometimes stretching into the realm of ethnographies and sensory geography (Golledge et al., 2005; Golledge, 2005; Pink, 2009).

Of these more recent humanistic geographyrelated topics, geohumanities remains one of the most prevalent in the early twenty-first century. Geohumanities combines geographical perspectives with subjects usually studied under the arts and humanities rubric. More specifically, it explores the intersections between geography, literature, visual arts, and other cultural forms such as health, emphasizing creative and expressive ways of engaging with and representing landscapes (Gandy, 2021; Atkinson & Hunt, 2020; Bauch, 2017; Dear, 2015; Hawkins et al., 2015). In fact, the American Association of Geographers created a specific journal in 2015 just for these pursuits (GeoHumanities: https://www.aag.org/ journal/geohumanities/), and it has been instrumental in creating wider audiences in terms of the geography-humanities connection-something often found and utilized within humanistic geography. The contemporary trends in humanistic geography reflect a dynamic and diverse field that continues to evolve in response to new challenges and intellectual developments. From geohumanities to sensory geographies, scholars in humanistic geography continue to explore novel ways to understand and engage with the complex relationships between culture, space, and the environment, even if they may not always be labeled as "humanistic geography" per se (Adams et al., 2001).

Two other current trends in humanistic geography include Geographic Information Systems/ Science (GIS & GIScience) and the nexus of humanistic geography and physical geography. Though younger than some of the other components of humanistic geography, these areas of scholarship include not just visualizations of individual behaviors and patterns with/in the landscape (GIS), but also stretch into community-wide evaluation and assessment which seeks to understand people's perceptions of their environment across both individuals within a community and the larger community itself. Physical geographers have also made recent strides by including individual perceptions, behaviors, and interactions with/in the physical landscape, recognizing that the environment is more than a static backdrop as well as the need for analyzing their discipline critically (Lave et al., 2014; Allen, 2011).

### GIS and Humanistic Geography

The intersection between Geographic Information Systems (GIS) or Geographic Information Science (GIScience) and humanistic geography represents a dynamic area of inquiry where the quantitative and spatial capabilities of GIS are combined with the human-centered and qualitative perspectives of humanistic geography. This intersection allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the complex relationships between people, culture, and the environment. GIS enables the spatial analysis of humanistic data, allowing geographers to incorporate qualitative information about cultural landscapes, place attachment, and human experiences into spatial analyses. This can involve mapping narratives, stories, and emotions associated with specific places to uncover spatial patterns and relationships, as Cresswell (2004) notes.

GIS also provides tools for visualizing qualitative data in spatial formats. Researchers can create maps that represent the cultural significance of places, the narratives of communities, or the emotional attachments people have to specific landscapes. This visualization can enhance communication and understanding of complex human-environment interactions, and is closely tied to cultural mapping, which involves using GIS to represent and analyze the cultural attributes of a particular area. This may include mapping cultural heritage sites, linguistic diversity, or the distribution of cultural practices. By integrating qualitative cultural data with spatial analysis, cultural mapping offers insights into the dynamic relationships between culture and geography.

In terms of groups of individuals, communitybased GIS (CBGIS) can be utilized to help researchers understand connections between local communities and their own spatial knowledge. Humanistic geography values local perspectives, and CBGIS allows communities to actively participate in the creation and interpretation of spatial data (Mukherjee, 2015; Dunn, 2007). Even though this approach fosters a more inclusive and participatory understanding of the landscape (Voss et al., 2004), it—in true humanistic geography fashion—has also been critically assessed by scholars (Elwood, 2006a, b; Kwaku Kyem, 2001).

Still, the idea that GIS (and CBGIS) can be used to spatially analyze and represent senses of place, helping researchers and communities understand how people interact with and perceive their environments beyond purely quantitative measures, is a particular draw for critical geography. Whether that involves immersive fieldwork and qualitative data collection, it can be complemented with GIS to provide a spatial context for ethnographic findings. By mapping qualitative data collected through ethnography, researchers can uncover spatial patterns, connections, and variations in cultural practices and experiences. While GIS and humanistic geography traditionally represent different ends of the geographical spectrum—quantitative and qualitative, respectively—their intersection provides a more holistic and integrative approach to studying the complex relationships between people and their environments. This interdisciplinary approach acknowledges the value of both quantitative spatial analysis and qualitative, human-centered perspectives in understanding the multifaceted nature of geographic phenomena.

# Physical Geography and Humanistic Geography

The intersection between physical geography and humanistic geography remains crucial for achieving a comprehensive and integrated understanding of the complex relationships between the natural environment and human societies. This interdisciplinary approach recognizes that the environment is not just a physical backdrop but is intimately connected to human experiences, perceptions, and cultural practices, bringing together the quantitative and spatial perspectives of physical geography with the qualitative and human-centered perspectives of humanistic geography. While physical geography provides insights into the natural processes that shape landscapes, such as landforms, climate, and ecosystems, integrating humanistic perspectives allows for a holistic understanding of landscapes, considering both the physical processes that shape those phenomena and the cultural, social, and historical factors that influence human perceptions and interactions with these spaces (Massey, 1999a, b). The intersection between physical geography and humanistic geography is fundamental for fostering a more nuanced and interconnected understanding of the relationships between nature and culture. Some physical geography researchers have found incorporating humanistic geography principles/ thought into their research allows for a broader understanding of landscapes because they can combine the scale-independent physical forms and processes that shape our environment and the various factors that influence human interactions with the environment such as perception, values, meaning,

and connection to place (cf., Rhoads & Thorn, 1996, 2011; Allen & Lukinbeal, 2011; Inkpen & Wilson, 2013; Lave et al., 2014; Thornbush & Allen, 2018).

Interactions such as how physical features influence human activities, settlement patterns, and cultural practices, how human actions such as urbanization and resource use impact the physical environment, and how physical features influence human activities, can all be researched through a humanistic geography lens. Such examinations can include environmental perceptionhow individuals perceive and experience the environment. If physical geography contributes to the identification of distinctive environmental features, and humanistic geography explores the emotional and cultural connections people have with specific places, then an intersection (i.e., humanistic-physical geography) enables the study of place attachment and identity formation which then also must consider how physical characteristics influence a sense of belonging and character, and vice versa (Allen, 2011).

### Epilogue

Throughout its history, and though it struggled to gain ground initially, humanistic geography has provided-and continues to provide-a valuable counterbalance to more quantitative and positivist approaches within the discipline of geography. It has contributed to a richer understanding of the complex relationship between humans and their environments, emphasizing the importance of subjective experiences and cultural meanings in geographical analysis. Irrespective of the chosen approach, the essence of humanistic geography has consistently revolved around the individual's quest for meaning and comprehension of their place in the world (i.e., space. See Massey, 2005). While people are often included in this exploration due to their inherent connection and emplacement within the broader landscape (Allen & Lukinbeal, 2011; Seamon, 2018, 2013; Seamon & Lundberg, 2017), the core focus remains on the individual. Instead of confining itself solely to either the domain of human geography (cf.,

Sapkota, 2017) or the realm of physical geography (cf., Lave et al., 2014), the future of humanistic geography should be envisioned as being at the intersection where disciplinary boundaries are dismantled, allowing individuals to construct a coherent understanding of their place in space.

### **Cross-References**

- Actor-Network Theory
- Built Environment
- Carceral Geography
- ► Community
- Critical Human Geography
- Cultural Geography
- ► Culture Landscape
- ► Diaspora
- Diffusion
- Disabilities and Geography
- Domestic Sphere
- Environmental Perception
- Epistemology and Geography
- Ethnicity and Geography
- Existentialism and Geography
- ► Feminist Geography
- Feminist Methodologies
- ► Fieldwork in Geography
- Gays and Lesbians
- Gender and Geography
- Geographical Imagination
- Geographies of Aging
- ► Geographies of Bodies
- Geographies of Children
- Geographies of Homelessness
- Geographies of Labor
- Geographies of Music and Sound
- Geographies of Religion
- ► Geography and Art
- Geography and Crime
- Geography and Emotions
- ► Geography of Home
- ► Geohumanities
- ► Hazards, Disasters, and Human Geography
- Human Trafficking
- ► Humanistic GIS
- Marxism and Geography
- ► Mobility

- Ontology and Geography
- ► Open Space
- Phenomenology
- Postmodernism
- Poststructuralism
- Production of Space
- Public Space
- Qualitative Methods in Geography
- Queer Theory and Geography: Crossing of New Perspectives and Traditional Principles
- ▶ Representations of Space
- ► Sense of Place
- Situated Knowledge
- ► The Rural-Urban Continuum
- ► Urban Geography
- Visuality and Geography

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