Critical review

Proximity, subjectivity, and space: Rethinking distance in human geography

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

This paper critically reviews the current status of the concept of distance in human geography in order to argue that recent experimentally-driven work in construal-level theory offers ample opportunities for recasting distance as a key geographical trope. After analysing the four entangled dimensions of distance revealed by construal-level theory (spatial distance; temporal distance; social distance; and hypothetical distance), the paper articulates this research program from experimental psychology with geographical work on non-representational theory, geographical imaginations/imaginative geographies, learning as a geographical process, TimeSpace theorising, and ontogenetic understandings of space. It is argued that the subjective understanding of distance afforded by construal-level theory can rescue distance from its entrenched association with positivistic geography and spatial analysis.

Contents

1. Introduction

This critical review aims to reconstruct distance as a central concept to contemporary human geography by subjectifying it, that is, by focusing on the subjective experiencing of distance. The current notion of distance as used by geographers often lacks in subtlety and richness.[1] The latest edition of the *Dictionary of Human Geography* does not even have a distinct entry for distance as such, and the one entry on distance it does have – on distance decay - explicitly avows that the notion is a remnant from the positivistic days of our discipline (Johnston, 2009: 169):

Distance-decay relationships underpin much of the work on spatial structures undertaken within spatial analysis and spatial science, because the costs of spatial interaction are related to the distance travelled (cf. Gravity model).

The same flavour emerges from reading the 2004 *Annals* debate on the reality of Tobler's first law of geography and some later reappraisals (Barnes, 2004; Goodchild, 2004; Miller, 2004; Philips, 2004; Smith, 2004; Sui, 2004; Tobler, 2004; Smirnov, 2016). Human geography has travelled a long distance from the days of the Theoretical and Quantitative Revolution (Johnston and Sidaway, 2016), to the extent that nowadays our discipline is dominated by post-positivistic thinking and non-quantitative approaches, and is celebratory of the importance of subjectivity, as evidenced in areas as diverse as work on geographical imaginations and imaginative geographies (Gregory, 1994; Daniels, 2011; Harris, 2014; Bonfiglioli, 2016; Rose, 2016), feminist and queer

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[1] Alison Blunt has pointed out to me that the wide range of work on memory and memorialisation in geography might be about distance in different ways. If we include these more implicit deployments, then my claim could be criticized as an overstatement.

theory (Rose, 1999; Brown and Browne, 2016; Johnston, 2016), phenomenology and post-phenomenology (Larsen and Johnson, 2012; Simonsen, 2013; Ash and Simpson, 2016), and non-representational theory (Thrift, 2008; Anderson and Harrison, 2010; Vannini, 2015). Arguably, this emphasis on subjectivity has led to the gradual emergence of 'place' as geography's key notion. Indeed, the space dedicated to the theorisation of this concept in major publication outlets testifies how much place-centred thinking has helped us "humanise" human geography, in a move away from the cold geometrical concerns of spatial science (see: Cresswell, 2014; Wright et al., 2016). The notion of distance has failed to keep pace with the transformation of our discipline and this failure is reflected in its unsurprising current neglect.[2] Can distance be turned into a concept that is pregnant with meaning? Can we update the notion in such a way so that it resonates with, and supports the centrality given to the human subject in our discipline? Can we morph it into a useable tool that genuinely improves how we think about the human subject geographically? I shall attempt to show that the answer to these questions is positive, provided that we are willing to travel beyond our discipline's boundaries, and learn from how experimental psychologists have uncovered the multi-faceted nature of this concept.

2. Distance in construal-level theory

Construal-level theory is the fascinating outgrowth of a sustained experiment-driven research effort in contemporary psychology. I have begun to follow its development a decade ago, but it was not until its most recent and comprehensive synthesis that it became apparent how it can radically improve the way in which we think about distance in geography (see Trope and Liberman, 2010; Fujita et al., 2016; Kalkstein et al., 2016). It is of course subtly ironic that post-positivistic geography can enhance its post-positivistic orientation by drawing on the empirical findings of a research community that is perceived by many social scientists as being still awfully positivistic (Slife and Richardson, 2008). However, since those empirical findings are about how humans experience distance subjectively, the objectivity of those findings about subjectivity should actually give to theory-prone human geographers a feeling of comfort and reassurance: we would now have an opportunity to scaffold our theorising based on compelling experimental evidence of how humans actually do experience distance in their inner worlds.

According to construal-level theory, the reference point of distance for any given individual is their *self in the here and now*. The farther any given item (real or imagined) is removed from the self in the here and now, the bigger its perceived subjective distance is. It is important to highlight at this point that various items can be distanced from one's self either in surrounding reality (a person moving away from me), or in one's "mind eye".[3] Of significance for our desire to enrich and add subtlety to the notion of distance is the fact that construal-level theorists have identified by means of experiments four intertwined dimensions of distance: spatial distance, temporal distance, social distance, and hypotheticality. In other words, there are four different ways in which an item may be removed or distanced from the self in the here and now. Removal in space (*spatial distance*) is only one of them and comes closest to what geographers have in mind when they think about distance. It also seems to be the basic dimension of distance, in two related ways (Boroditsky, 2000): firstly, it is the earliest dimension of distancing

of which children become aware in their development; secondly, it provides the metaphor for thinking about the other three dimensions, which indeed become apparent only later on in the development process because they are conceptually subtler than the basic notion of spatial distance. *Temporal distance* from the self in the here and now is created any time one thinks about the past or about the future. A historical geographer or a geographer studying the future (Anderson, 2010; Withers, 2015), for example, can do their job only by transcending their selves in the here and now through processes of "mental construal" - the psychological equivalent of what we like to call imaginative geographies (Said, 1978; Gregory, 2009a). More generally, any human process that involves remembering the past - e.g. acquiring a sense of place (Jones, 2015; Malpas, 2015), or anticipating how things will be involves the basic mental operation of temporal distancing (e.g. Anderson, 2010; Amin, 2013). Transcending of *social distance* is produced any time a given individual begins to think about people other than herself, even if those people are in the here and now, i.e. spatially and temporally close. It is an ability that develops in the first years of life, as children succeed in overcoming their earlier egocentrism and progressively take into account other minds. Traversing social distance constitutes the foundation for altruistic behaviour and for the cultivation of an ethics of care for the distant other, a fact that has yet to be acknowledged in moral geography (Barnett, 2014; Olson, 2016). Traversing social distance must also be a pre-supposed ability for any theorisation of humans as relational place-makers (Pierce et al., 2011), because place-making is a social process (Malpas, 2015; Wilson, 2016). Finally, distancing from the self in the here and now along the dimension of *hypotheticality* occurs every time we engage in counterfactual reasoning. To evaluate how things would have turned out if only we had done something slightly differently we must leave the here and now of present reality and conjure up an imaginary world. By running that mental simulation forward we can hope to learn whether the real outcome we have obtained was necessary or contingent (Byrne, 2016). Distancing through hypotheticality is the last type of distancing that develops in humans and is the most mentally taxing. The sheer fact that most contemporary human geographers subscribe to, and, indeed, emphasise, a view of the world as contingent implies that the kind of theorising that they do makes ample use of distancing along the dimension of hypotheticality (see: Simandan, 2010).

Construal-level theory has provided convincing experimental demonstrations that the four dimensions of distance cannot and should not be considered separately from one another (Bar-Anan et al., 2007; Fujita et al., 2016). Getting somebody to think about distant places (spatial distance), tends to spontaneously elicit related thoughts about more distant futures (temporal distance), about unlikely happenings (hypothetical distance), and about other people (social distance). Conversely, when we prime somebody to think about "now" (temporal proximity), this prime spontaneously generates kindred thoughts about "here" (spatial proximity), the self (social proximity), and current reality (hypothetical proximity). We cannot simply extract spatial distance from its entanglement with the other three dimensions of distance and claim that it alone is the province of geography. Rather, we need a wholesale appropriation of this rich way of thinking about distance, in which space is only one component of a collection of four meaningfully entangled dimensions of mental travel.

3. Re-placing distance at the core of human geography

In order to transcend the paucity of thought and feeling inherent in restricting one's experience to one's self in the here and now, one needs to build a representation, or imaginative geography in one's mind's eye (Trope and Liberman, 2010; Kalkstein et al., 2016; Fujita et al., 2016). This kind of subjective experiencing is

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[2] For a related critique of naïve near-far dichotomies in the economic geography of knowledge creation, see Rutten, 2016. For topological understandings of distance as relational, see Martin and Secor, 2014, and Müller and Schurr, 2016.

[3] The "mind's eye" is the lay term for the visuospatial sketchpad component of working memory; see D'Esposito and Postle, 2015.

what separates humans from other animals and should rightly be a key object of study for a discipline that calls itself *human* geography. By downplaying the significance of representations, non-representational theory has foregrounded the significance of sensing and feeling the world in the here and now (Thrift, 2008; Anderson and Harrison, 2010). This by itself is indeed a laudable contribution to making the discipline more aware of our sensuous dwelling in the actual world around us (Pile, 2010; Vannini, 2015). Yet by disregarding the centrality of representations, non-representational theory risks to limit and truncate the understanding of human experience to precisely those components that we share with other animals.[4] That which is uniquely human – being able to distance oneself from the here and now with the help of mental representations - is downplayed and marginalised in what seems to me a counterproductive move.

We do not need a mental representation for the self in the here and now. We can simply open our eyes and the world of me in the here and now presents itself to the senses in an unmediated manner. All our mental representations or imaginative geographies involve some degree of distancing from this reference point, because their very function is to enable us to transcend the narrow epistemic horizon afforded by this reference point. This significant observation that the transcending of distance is the core function of our imaginative geographies has been largely absent from geographers' theorisation of this notion. Thus, Gregory's definition informs us that (Gregory, 2009a: 369–370):

> Imaginative geographies [are] representations of other places – of peoples and landscapes, cultures and 'natures' – that articulate the desires, fantasies, and fears of their authors and the grids of power between them and their 'Others'. The concept is not confined to ostensibly fictional works. On the contrary, there is an important sense in which all geographies are imaginative...

By appropriating into geography the rich concept of distance proposed by construal-level theory we can learn not only to make the important conceptual connection between distance and imaginative geographies, but also to grasp how the former determines the properties of the latter. Indeed, construal-level theory has pointed out a fact of fundamental importance about the relation between the distance we travel from our reference points and the quality of our mental representations: the more distant (in time, space, sociality, or hypotheticality) the world conjured up in our imagination is, the more *abstract* is our mental representation of it. In other words, imaginative geographies of distant objects and events tend to be represented by their perceived primary or central attributes, while peripheral or incidental features are deleted. Because of this process, construals of very distant worlds tend to be more coherent, more schematic, simpler, and less ambiguous than the more concrete mental construals of more proximate worlds. This should not be misread as meaning that imaginative geographies of far-away worlds are simply impoverished versions of their less distant counterparts. Instead, as work in postcolonial theory has demonstrated (Blunt and McEwan, 2003; Noxolo and Preziuso, 2013), the process of abstraction encompasses both acts of deletion of those details perceived as insignificant and acts of enrichment of the representation with added meanings from one's store of knowledge - or "archive" – (Gregory, 2009a).

In this critical review, I hope to have shown that contemporary human geography would benefit from a wholesale rethinking of the concept of distance, so as to bring it in closer alignment with the discipline's post-positivistic interest in the spatial dimensions of the *subjective experience* of human beings. I have described the outlines of construal-level theory to argue that the understanding of distance emerging in this empirically-grounded theory holds the key to the wholesale rethinking of the concept that I have in mind. The distinctive features of this new conceptualisation of distance are: (1) a focus on a subjective notion of distance, on how humans transcend distance in their subjective worlds; (2) an enrichment of what is meant by distance by means of adding three non-spatial dimensions to it (temporal, social, hypothetical); (3) a productive and provocative integration within the concept of distance of four categories that are often thought of as separate (space, time, sociality, and hypotheticality); and (4) the fact that this theorisation has been developed in tandem with experimental work on how humans actually operate with distance in their subjective worlds.

Two immediate ways in which the new understanding of distance can illuminate what is happening today in human geography have already been signalled: the first of these suggests that the attempt of non-representational theorists to downplay the centrality of representations in human affairs may be misleading because the capacity to transcend the here and now is what separates humans from other species and the exercise of this capacity *requires* the use of representations. The second of these articulates two previously disconnected geographical concepts – distance and imaginative geographies – by explaining why the former is the key ingredient to the understanding of the latter. A third potential way in which construal-level theory can inform contemporary debates in human geography pertains to recent efforts to recast learning as a geographical process (McFarlane, 2011; Simandan, 2002; 2011a, b,c; 2013a,b). Most forms of learning require us to mentally travel beyond the self in the here and now and this transcending of distance offers another vintage point from which to refigure learning as a geographical process.

I would like to end this paper by revealing that the kind of move I am attempting to make – the provision of a subtler, richer, and more integrated conception of distance – is not only congruent with, but directly supports a similar move that has occurred in human geography in the last fifteen years or so. The move began in 2001 with May's and Thrift's book *TimeSpace* (May and Thrift, 2001). They advocated the removal of the hyphen between time-space and their literal merging into the dyad TimeSpace to highlight that these two central geographical categories should not be thought of as interlinked (yet distinct), but as truly mutually constituted. Whenever we think of the two categories as separate, we inadvertently lapse into one of two pathways to impoverished and biased thinking: spatial imperialism (if space is privileged over time) or debilitating historicism (if time is privileged over space). Several years after this proposal, Gregory (2009b) argued in his dictionary entry for the concept of space that two of the four features of contemporary theorisations of space in human geography are the integration of time and space and the co-production of time and space. Note that the concept of distance I have argued for fully supports this broader disciplinary move because it envisions spatial distance and temporal distance as mere dimensions of the superordinate category of distance, and that these dimensions are fully entangled with each other in the process of subjective experiencing. Furthermore, the dimension of social distance incorporated in the broader category of distance has an equally interesting parallel in the sustained efforts of human geographers to rethink space as *socially constructed*, as imbricated with social life, rather than as mere container for human activity (Kitchin, 2009; Gregory, 2009b; Müller and Schurr, 2016). Indeed, it seems to me that there is a strong resonance between ontogenetic theories of space, which see space as a verb, as a doing (Doel, 1999; Rose, 1999; Martin and Secor, 2014; Wright et al., 2016), and the description in construal-level theory of how humans manipulate

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[4] For related critiques of non-representational theory, see Barnett, 2008; Colls, 2012, and Cresswell, 2012. For a critique of theoretical projects that set humans apart from nature, see Anderson, 2014.

their experience of space by overcoming distance through the building of imaginative geographies. In both approaches, space stops being a noun or a container and becomes something we make and remake and "sing into being" (Thrift, 2015: 103).

To conclude, the way in which geographers think of distance, if they still think of it, has not kept pace with the theoretical effort that has so dramatically altered how we now view the concepts of place, landscape, or TimeSpace (Johnston and Sidaway, 2016). Instead of letting distance stand as a positivistic relic in the periphery of contemporary geographical debates, I propose that we should enrich it and articulate it with work carried out on these other key concepts. This paper has begun to outline several potential directions for doing so, with the hope that ensuing disciplinary conversations will take them even further.

Acknowledgments

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