

# THE CULTURAL PSYCHOGEOGRAPHY OF HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

**Moisès Esteban-Guitart**

Universidad de Girona  
moises.esteban@udg.edu

Human and social sciences have become fragmented sources of specific knowledge and theories. Some people think that in order to advance and to develop accurate science we need to focus on concrete realities. This probably accounts for the existence of not only different social sciences, such as anthropology, sociology, education, psychology, geography, history, art or philology, but also the various sub-disciplines, and micro-disciplines, of each one. For example, in psychology we can distinguish between clinical psychology, human developmental psychology, educational psychology, neuropsychology of social psychology. This appears to me to be a real and a dangerous mistake. It is real because this tendency is increasing. It is dangerous because it leads us to forget the holistic nature of the human species. In other words, we cannot understand human behavior by reducing our explanations to the micro-levels of genetics. Biology as a whole is needed, along with sociology, anthropology, history, psychology and so on. Reductionism of human and social phenomenon is like studying the heart outside of a body or fish out of water. It makes no sense.

It seems to me that the concept of *cultural psychology* is an excellent means of going beyond isolated disciplines. In fact, it is a magnificent combination of psychology and anthropology. However, the cultural element also contains place. It has been suggested that culture and mind are inseparable, that each creates the other. Psychology is grounded in practical cultural activities, made up of collective symbols and concepts and mediated by social relationships. Nevertheless, the relationship between geography and culture has never received much attention. Some exceptions to this in geography include Sauer's historical geography or Tuan's humanistic geography. However, these approaches have not integrated ideas from cultural psychology and show no interest in psychological development.

In this context, *cultural psychogeography of human development* (CPHD) is an attempt to reconcile three disciplines: psychology (i.e., human development and cultural psychology), anthropology and geography. Of course social sciences also include history, art and sociology, but I want to focus on the relationships between mind, culture and geography.

Generally speaking, it seems to me that cultural psychologists have not paid enough attention to these relationships.

CPHD has its roots in Vygotsky, Wittgenstein, Bronfenbrenner, cultural psychology, macro-cultural psychology, and cultural approaches in geography (for example the Yu-Fu Tuan approach).

What we mean by *cultural psychogeography of human development* (CPHD) is a field of social and human sciences which assumes the idea that culture, geography and mind are inseparable. In other words, CPHD is the study of the way «vital geography» regulates, expresses, manages, transforms, organizes, designs and mediates the human psyche and psychological development throughout one's life span. The aim is to study the cultural-psycho-geographical organization of mind and behavior, and the relationship between mind and behavior and cultural-psycho-geography.

By *vital geography or territory of human development* we mean: dynamic forms of life in which culture, geography and psychology create each other. It is the material-symbolic medium of life which provides resources for human development. It includes five components:

1) **Physical-symbolic geography.** This comprises all the physical-natural features of a territory or an area of land, such as rivers, lakes, the sea, vegetation, mountains, as well as transitory elements such as lighting, weather conditions, and sociodemographic variables like population (e.g., a rural versus an urban context), poverty, age, social class or gender distribution. It includes the symbolic elements as well. It is conceptualized by terms like «tree». Therefore, physical geography is always mediated by culture and psychology. In my view, physical geography is, by definition, culturally and psychology mediated; it involves not a 'direct' transaction between people and environment, but an indirect action. By 'indirect action' I mean that prior human practice has produced particular natural forms. My assumption is that there is an intimate connection between nurture, people (psychology) and nature.

2) **Social institutions.** This means any structure or mechanism of social order which governs, through rules, norms, practices and meanings, the behaviour of a set of individuals within a given human community. Institutions, historically modified, are identified with a social purpose, transcending individual human lives and intentions. That is to say, people have to adapt to a particular institution, modifying their behaviour accordingly.

3) **Artefacts.** These are the material (physical) and symbolic (conceptual) resources that are historically accumulated and socially transmitted and which amplify, mediate, regulate and manage human functioning. This concept includes *physical objects* such as books, buildings, computers, cell phones or cars; observable *patterns of behaviour* such as family routines – for example how families put children to bed; *social practices* – for example, how children are educated – and *cultural beliefs* – such as abstract knowledge (for instance, mathematical or musical notation), values and norms. These tools or instruments organize people's activities and their ways of interacting in relation to their environments or circumstances. For example, a clock and a calendar organize the days and the time of activities, an alarm clock helps us to wake up, a calculator permits us to solve a mathematical problem, an education law organizes the curricula or a religious belief distinguishes between right and wrong behaviour.

4) **Activities.** It is through human activities – such as education, producing goods, consuming products, providing medical care, making laws – that humans survive, develop, adapt to and transform the environment.

5) **Social relationships.** In conjunction with activities, social relationships are the mechanism that permits the provision, use and modification of the artefacts of a particular community. In other words, it is through other, more competent community members that children learn how to interiorize the rules, practices, knowledge and ideas of a particular culture. Inspired by the concept of ‘zone of proximal development’ (Vygotsky), Bruner suggested a metaphor of scaffolding to describe the process through which a teacher - or more competent peer - gives assistance to the student, and removes this assistance as it becomes unnecessary, much as a scaffold is removed from a building during construction.

Three principles are suggested. First, the *psychological landscape* is the unit of analysis. In the field of cultural psychogeography, the psychological landscape is any lived experience connected with the visible features of an area of land: rivers, lakes, vegetation, buildings, artefacts or weather conditions. In other words, it is the subjective side of vital geography or psychological territory (physical-symbolic geography, artefacts, social institutions, social relationships, activities). We perceive, we feel, we think and we remember the landscapes which constitute our lives. There is a psychological relationship between psychology and environment. Indeed, according to Vygotsky and other phenomenological approaches in geography, experience («perezhivanie») is the unit of analysis of the consciousness. Briefly, by psychological landscape I mean any lived experience (motivations, thoughts, feelings, emotions, etc.) associated with a particular region’s perception. The second principle is the *vital geography*, or *psychological territory*, which is the medium of human development. Two aspects are important here. Vital geography refers to: 1) a socially and culturally-defined geographical and physical area of actual social interaction and 2) a socially and culturally-defined set of patterns of interaction to be performed while in the setting. Consequently, if one talks about vital geographies, one is talking about socially, culturally and politically-defined places of interaction, activities, institutions and artefacts. Finally, psychological phenomena are the product of geographical levels. In this sense, *psychological cartography* aims to detect the different geographical levels involved in any lived experience. And what we mean by geographical-psychological-cultural levels that underlie human behaviour and development would include, for example, such *microagents* as partner or family, school and town along with *macroagents* such as globalization.

The paper concludes by emphasizing the inherent sense of CPHD. First, because it aims to foster an ecological mentality («green psychology») - since if we give human and psychological meanings and traits to nature, we should respect it. Second, because when social scientists combine disciplines, their research is generally less dogmatic and more rigorous.

