

Our Dichotomies, Ourselves

Our human experience is full of dichotomies: female/male, black/white, liberal/conservative. We dichotomize geography, too, creating such time-honored contrasts as physical/human, theoretical/applied, and qualitative/quantitative.

Strictly speaking, a dichotomy divides a whole into two parts that are mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive. You might, therefore, argue that the examples I posed are false dichotomies. You would be right, but I will suggest that, nonetheless, the work of trying to determine whether they are exclusive and exhaustive, and the discovery of what lies between them, can prove fruitful. One way of exploring a concept is to break it into end-member opposites. Two points define a line. Articulating two opposing points helps define their differences, and the end-member groups they represent provide distinct identities for their core practitioners. The good news, then, is that even imperfect dichotomies create structure and facilitate communication about the relationships between them.

I have observed that many geographers have eclectic interests, individually and collectively (that's an understatement), and that our breadth of interests and close associations with colleagues in other fields lead us to discover and pursue fascinating realms of inquiry that fell "between the cracks" of disciplinary boundaries. Similarly, we are well suited to explore what lies between our dichotomous end points (see the Focus sections on critical quantitative geographies in issues 3 and 4 of the 2009 Professional Geographer for excellent examples).

Physical/Human

To me, one of geography's strongest attractions is the juxtaposition of the physical and human core areas of the discipline and the interactions that result as we investigate relationships between the physical and human components of landscapes. Given the breadth of the field of geography, being able to say "I'm a physical" (or "I'm a human") geographer is indeed a helpful shorthand way of beginning a conversation about research

interests. Co-locating physical and human geography within an academic unit presents a wealth of opportunities for examining the world through new lenses or with new tools. Meanwhile, scholarship within the "poles" advances knowledge and strengthens the authority of geographers in those areas of inquiry.

In the absence of thoughtful interaction between human and physical geographers, we might find human geographers treating the physical earth as an inert platform or physical geographers treating people as "disturbance elements" that cause change to natural systems. What's wrong with this picture? Treating people and the physical environment separately puts each end member in a box and limits our ability to advance our understandings of both or either.

In our daily lives, we see human impacts to natural systems in the form of exotic plants and animals, built landscapes, and water diversions (to name only a few!). If we face the other direction, do we see environmental impacts on people? Is it possible that our wholesale rejection of environmental determinism constrained our ability to observe people adjusting to their environments and adapting to environmental change? In this era of accelerating environmental change, we must be sure to be free of any such handicap. Interactions between physical and human systems, in both directions and as they evolve and re-evolve over time, continue to be fertile and socially important areas of research.

Theory/Application

The distinction between theory and application once seemed clearer than it does today. Today, the difference between them is predominantly one of scale. Applied work is generally more place-specific, but geographic theory, which must, by definition, be more generalizable, also depends on local case studies and real-world data. In the

past, theoretical research has typically been given credit for having higher intellectual value than applied research, but theory and application have both changed.

Now, theory is apt to take the form of models—conceptual or computational. We use models to represent our understanding of relationships and to make and test predictions. We then adjust the model based on what we learn from its application. Thus, linkages between theory and application have become more iterative and less hierarchical. Applied research anchors theory in reality, motivates new theory, and produces new knowledge. It may challenge the researcher to develop new strategies, metrics, or tools, and it also connects the researcher more directly with issues of concern to the broader society.

Dichotomies as Cartoons

Occasionally, we find a dichotomy that contains, not just one pair of opposing poles, but a bunch of them. The liberal/conservative dichotomy, for example, tends to bundle together philosophies of government, approaches to fiscal management, religion, ideas about traditions, and miscellaneous other positions that aren't necessarily related to each other and don't define a unique line between them. While simpler dichotomies invite flexibility and exploration, multi-dimensional bundles are likely to muddle rather than help define relationships between the poles.

Of course, we recognize that our dichotomous divisions are overly simplified. Viewing them as cartoons reminds us of the potential benefits of humor and the need to remember that our "camps" have more connections and opportunities for interaction than we might see at first glance. Enjoy the humor and reach out across the divide. ■

Carol Harden
charden@utk.edu



Harden