

Difference, Geographies of

Difference is a measure by which individuals, societies, and even nations seek to distinguish themselves. It is a measure of separation (as being unlike someone) and distinctiveness. In its assertion it creates an “other”—those we are not. Forms of difference have been grouped into broad social categories such as class, gender, race or ethnicity, and sexuality. However, difference can be asserted using any criterion, such as language, nationality, birthplace, religion, ancestry, and profession. It can also be tied to particular places and operates across many scales. This entry examines the concept of difference and the many types of difference that geographers have studied. It then discusses the various theoretical approaches that have been used in this field and considers its significance for future research.

For geographers, difference is an important analytical concept. Its examination is used to assert that individuals’ distinctiveness matters: to their experience, and the constitution, of particular places; to their life opportunities; and to the functioning of communities and societies. Individuals, and particular groups, will experience particular social processes differently (such as the closure of a factory that might affect men and women in different ways), and these differences will occur unevenly over space. The geographies of difference can be understood by exploring what differences have been studied and how these have been measured and analyzed. There are also a number of approaches to exploring difference and an ongoing debate within geography as to whether we need to move beyond difference as a field of enquiry.

Geographers use the study of difference to expose the generalizing assumptions of earlier geographical work—some of which failed to acknowledge the diverse experiences of certain groups, such as women or the disabled. Thus difference as a concept is used to highlight, and fill, the silences and gaps in geographical scholarship. It is also used to understand how particular groups suffer because of their difference—through oppression or exclusion—in other words, “geographies of exclusion.” This understanding of what divides us also enables us to explore how we might build connections across differences and how we might overcome tensions between us (such as racial or religious divides) and thus live together more harmoniously. In this sense geographies of difference can take on a particular political project by being part of the debate as to how to build better societies. However, there remains a problem between valorizing difference and the need to understand the commonalities of human existence. For example, if we give too much credence to difference we can undermine the need for universal principles of justice and the power of working together (e.g., through collective action).

Geographers have explored a multitude of differences. The most frequently studied categories of difference have been class, gender, race, and sexuality. However, recent work has explored previously absent categories, for example, “old age,” and there is a nascent field of children's

geographies focusing on childhood and youth. Geographies of disability have also been investigated, including for example, reconceptualizing what it is to be deaf. In addition, what is studied within these categories and conceived of as different changes over time. These changes are in response to new contexts that give rise to new tensions. For example, since the terrorist attacks in the United States in September 2001 and in London in July 2005, the concept of race has been complicated by the emerging importance of religion as a defining marker of difference. Moreover, geographers have sought to interpret difference more broadly to incorporate majority groups, investigating masculinity and "whiteness." Thus, how we conceive of difference continues to evolve.

Theoretical and Methodological approaches

The ways in which these categories have been explored and analyzed have changed markedly over the past few decades. There remains much debate as to the most appropriate theoretical and methodological ways of perceiving and measuring difference. While there may be a spatiality to the differences that can be mapped and charted quantitatively (such as migration or housing patterns by category), more often geographers have taken a qualitative approach to exploring difference. This approach has involved understanding the processes, relations, and experiences that divide people and that shape and affect places and spaces. Such work has sought to bring the specificity of difference into view, to identify processes of exclusion, prejudice, or, conversely, solidarities and the assertion of rights and to understand how such differences are created and maintained and their consequences. In other words, differences have been explored through the examination of categories, spatial patterns, relations, and processes.

This variety of approaches can be illustrated through the example of one category—gender. In the late 1970s, gender emerged in geographical scholarship as a category of social difference. At first gender was explored through the absence of female academics in geography and the absence of women as a valid topic of geographical research. Feminist geography emerged as a field that asserted the need to explore gender relations and inequality in work, housing, and everyday life. Next, gender as a construct began to be problematized. Geographers sought to examine how the understanding of gender was socially constructed and contested, and thus studies of femininity and masculinity emerged. Moreover, the intersections between gender and other social differences, such as sexuality, class, and race complicated gender as a discrete identity. Recently, overlap with research on the geographies of sexuality has encouraged more work to explore the embodiment of gender, gender as a negotiation of our bodily beings, and how gender is performed (expressed, practiced, and displayed) by different groups. From this very brief trajectory, it is clear that there are a number of alternative approaches to the exploration of gender as a form of difference and that these approaches can challenge each other.

It is possible to identify a number of approaches to understanding difference and, in particular, the geographies of difference. Difference is most easily defined as being in opposition to others around us. In this way it is relational as it only makes sense if we define how different we are in *relation* to others. This can be taken further to understand that the context (or place) in which we exist shapes how we understand those differences. Thus, people will identify commonalities and differences in part due to the place they are in (and those differences in turn shape how place is constructed). This notion becomes most obvious when we are displaced—we move to another place, and that movement makes us realize something about ourselves that we might not have particularly noticed previously. For example, we might not have considered our race if we grew up surrounded by those of similar race, but moving elsewhere to a place where our race is markedly different enables us to understand our race as a difference. Thus, place and, hence geography, is a key aspect of how we should understand difference, and difference is significantly informed by the place in which people exist.

If difference is relational, then it is also dynamic and fluid, rather than static and fixed. This is because if our understandings of difference can change according to the place we are in, they will also change over time or through encountering others in everyday life. So what it means to be a particular gender will change as we age, change location, change jobs, have children, and so on.

Difference can be understood as an assertion of a particular identity. This can happen in several different ways. People might unite around a common identity (such as being gay) despite differences (such as race, gender, and class). They might do this to assert political rights or in response to a personal need for expression and a sense of belonging. Identity may also be an outcome of several layers of difference on a broader scale, for example as a national identity. Geographers also increasingly understand that identity is not fixed; rather, we have multiple identities (such as being a woman, a mother, and an academic). Taking an identity approach enables us to understand how difference is a dynamic mix of choice, history, and place and is a result of power relations.

The notion of multiple identities illustrates the permeability of many categories of difference and how they intersect and overlap. Some scholars have argued that this degree of intersection is key to understanding how people experience difference. Thus, the negative implications of being different—oppression and exclusion—will be compounded by the interconnection of multiple forms of difference (such as being gay *and* black). Consequently, to fully comprehend difference we need a broad and complex examination of these intersections and power relations within society. Such an approach raises important questions about what broader processes might be occurring behind these categories of difference to which we should pay attention. The examination of power is a way to explore the relations of difference, but more than that it is potentially an approach that moves beyond difference and seeks instead to understand the unevenness of societies as a result

of uneven power relations. An examination of power enables a nuanced exploration of why difference will manifest itself unevenly across social and spatial relations, and, thus perhaps most important, how the negative aspects of difference can be challenged.

Approaches to the geographies of difference continue to evolve. Just as difference came to be perceived as a social construction, there are those who challenge such assumptions or argue that we accept too easily what counts as sameness: We need to look beneath apparent similarity to understand more complex geographies. New theorizations of difference are emerging, such as the examination of fleeting encounters or temporary transient events as moments through which we can explore the possibilities of moving beyond difference or articulating new forms of difference that challenge existing conceptualizations. Perhaps examining the geographies of *indifference* is just as important an endeavor. For example, certain acts such as racism can be allowed to continue precisely because of a broader indifference to others. Scholars are also exploring the notion of hybridity, which rejects the traditional categories of difference such as gender and race and instead focuses on the performative subjectivity of individuals and integration of seemingly irreconcilable elements.

Regardless of the new directions scholarship might take, the geographies of difference are important precisely because the categories of difference are so enduring. The categories represent the real divisions and inequalities that continue to shape people's lives and the places they inhabit. Geographers continue to explore how differences emerge, why certain markers of difference "stick" more than others and matter more in some places than others. Some differences, such as class and gender, have longer historical stories that appear to constrain the possibility of their radical reinvention or change. Other forms of difference are embraced, reclaimed, and subverted as powerful identifiers and useful intersections of commonality. Whatever their histories, boundaries, or expression, the task remains for geographers to acknowledge difference and yet understand and assert what it is that we have in common.

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[Further Readings](#)

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