

# Topic 1

## The concept of place

Resources and answer guidance

# 'Place' in the English language

**Place** A geographical concept that can mean a location on a map, a space given meaning by people, or the setting and scale of people's everyday interactions.

**Sense of place** The subjective (personal) and emotional attachment that people have to a place – its place meaning.



## Q1

## ANSWER

# 'Place' in the English language

- The noun *place* can mean a location (e.g. 'Let's meet at your place'), a portion of space designated or available for someone (e.g. 'There's always a place at our table for you'), or a status or position in society (e.g. 'He knew his place').
- Similarly, the verb *to place* can mean to locate (to fix in a particular location), to reserve or find a home for something/someone, or to decide the importance of something/someone.
- **Note** how many of these imply *stasis* or *stability*.

# A history of place in geography



Regional geography  
(‘descriptive’)

Spatial science  
(‘scientific’)

Humanist  
approach

Social  
constructionist  
approach

## Describing the counties of Britain

‘Cornwall is astonishingly full of entertaining and rewarding things to see, and for the holiday-maker this favourite of all the holiday counties of England divides into four: Cornwall of the seaside, Cornwall of the granite moors, the ferny luxuriant Cornwall tucked out of the wind along tidal creeks and wooded combes, and the Cornwall of small villages and small fields and deep lanes and isolated lichen-rough churches, which often seem to grow out of hill flanks in the most intimate and natural way.’

*(The Shell and BP Guide to Britain, 1964)*

## Q2

## ANSWER

## Regional geography versus spatial science

- While the description of Cornwall uses rich and evocative language to inspire the reader to holiday here, it conveys little of the map of this county and provides little information about the accessibility of different areas or cost of different activities.
- All options seem attractive but may vary in popularity between different groups of people. Perhaps younger groups would head for the seaside, while older groups might prefer exploring the settings of older buildings such as village churches.

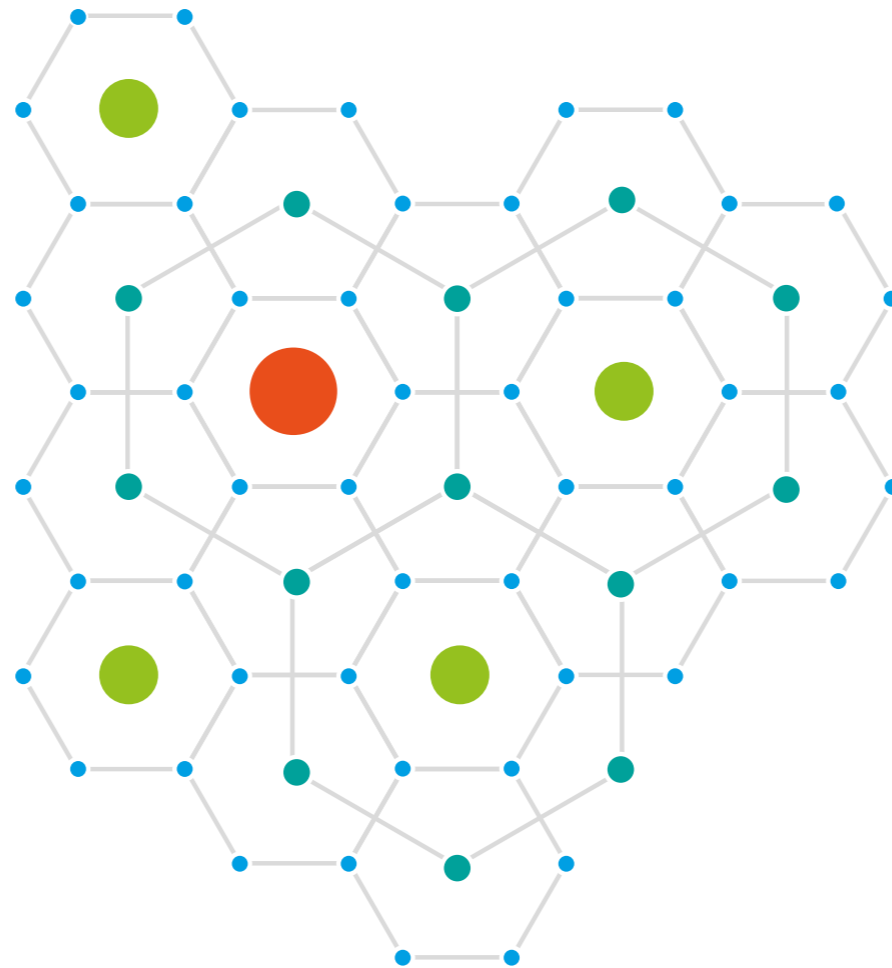
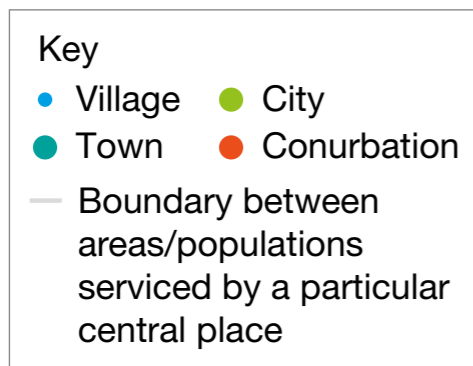
## Q2 Regional geography versus spatial science

ANSWER  
(continued)

- It might be argued that holidays are more whimsical activities than, for example, employment, and the behaviour of people on holiday may therefore be harder to predict.
- However, spatial scientists may argue that people react in predictable ways to choices about travel and distance – even those that relate to their leisure activities, which necessarily have a cost in terms of monetary value or travel time.

# Christaller's spatial science

*The spatial pattern of settlements of different sizes, according to Central Place Theory*





## Q3

## ANSWER

# Regional geography versus spatial science

## (a) Useful for:

- ordering the settlements by service provision, to understand their role within Cornwall;
- explaining the relative number of different types of settlements within the county;
- understanding the consumer behaviour of the year-round, resident population; threshold and range are relevant concepts that aid our understanding of consumption patterns and the nature of different service centres.

## Q3 Regional geography versus spatial science

ANSWER

(continued)

### (b) Criticisms:

- The theory takes no account of the physical shape of the country or the physical geography within it (assuming an unbounded, isotropic plane), and so fails to predict the way that settlements are spread along the coast rather than in a hexagonal pattern.
- Do tourists behave as ‘economic man’ (‘consumer zombie’)? Do they instead seek out beauty spots or *honeypot* sites, thereby travelling a greater distance than the theory might predict.

## A humanistic approach to place

Yi-Fu Tuan (1977) outlined the difference between place and space:

‘What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value... From the security and stability of place we are aware of the openness, freedom and threat of space, and vice versa.’

## Fistral Beach, Newquay



‘My special place is Fistral Beach in Newquay. I’ve been there about six times because I go and stay with my cousins every year. Even though it’s six hours from my house, I still really love it. The weather is normally very sunny, which is good for climbing all the rocks! When I go there I love surfing and bodyboarding. The waves are great! It also has an excellent restaurant which does THE BEST ice cream.’

(Millie, age 10)

## Q4

## ANSWER

## Humanistic geography

- Although this is not a description of a 'home' place, this brief account conveys the author's strong attachment to the location of Fistral Beach in Newquay.
- The author is young and her affection for the place is directly linked to personal experience: surfing, climbing (exploring the location). It is a sense of place shaped by a range of basic sensory experiences, including taste (ice cream), along with its association with familial links.

## A social constructionist approach to place

‘Place in whatever guise is, like space and time, a social construct... The only interesting question that can be asked is: by what social process(es) is place constructed?’

(Harvey, 1996)

‘First of all, it is absolutely not static. If places can be conceptualised in terms of social interactions which they tie together, then it is also the case that these interactions themselves are not motionless things, frozen in time... places are processes too.’

(Massey, 1991)

## Q5

## ANSWER

## The social constructionists

- *Social constructionists* argue that social relations shape places and therefore all places are *dynamic*. The aerial view of the Eden Project gives a sense of the many people who visit and work in this location and shape it each day. This place looks modern, dynamic and still in progress.
- Further, the hexagonal pattern of its domes (or the visible complex network of roads and paths) could represent the complexity of connections between people and places in a world shaped by global forces.

## Place as a geographical concept

John Agnew (1987) simplified the meaning of the concept of place into three organising aspects or approaches:

- **location** – a specific point on the earth's surface, which may be described using latitude and longitude;
- **sense of place** – the subjective and emotional attachment that people have to a place – its place meaning;
- **locale** – the material setting and scale of people's everyday lives and interactions, e.g. buildings, roads, public spaces.



## Q7

## ANSWER

## Different ways of understanding the world

- The fact that all places have a physical **location** (even if they are a ship or bus, at any given moment in time they have a position) should not contradict other, more philosophical approaches to the nature of place.
- The concept of **sense of place**, which is the emotional attachment that people have to a place, is the product of a different approach or understanding of space and place – more subjective and grounded in individual experience. It presents a partial perspective that theorists recognise may contradict the perspective of others.

## Q7

## ANSWER

(continued)

## Different ways of understanding the world

- The concept of locale similarly addresses a small area, a scale common to that of a locality – the focus of humanistic research.
- However, in seeking to understand the scale of everyday life, social constructionists are more interested in common features of places that demonstrate the way in which they are shaped by, for example, the forces of capitalism – in some instances denying the unique nature of all places, as championed by humanists.