

### Studies of Hazard Perception

Although as a definite “movement”, behaviouralism in geography had started through Wolpert’s papers, the history of behavioural work in geography is much older. Way back in 1945, Gilbert White had presented a Ph.D. thesis on *Human Responses to Floods*. Under White’s leadership

a group of workers was formed at the University of Chicago to study human reactions to flood hazards using Simon’s (1956) theories of decision-making. From this group and their graduate students came a large body of research on perception of natural hazards. Though the initial work had related to river floods, before long it was extended to cover all types of natural hazards. The hallmarks of the Chicago school of natural hazard studies were a concern with policy as well as academic matters, and a view of man-environment relations that depicted *cognitive processes* as central to understanding adjustment strategies. White established a firm ethical standpoint in his writings, and consistently maintained an attitude of social involvement with environmental problems. For him, geography was far from a value-free subject—this was a definite step forward toward giving geography a more socially relevant orientation.

The influence of the Chicago school had quickly spread to other centres. The universities of Toronto, Colorado, and Clark emerged as important centres of research on the natural hazards problem. Soon after, cross-cultural research on this theme was begun under the auspices of the Commission on Man and Environment established by the International Geographical Union (IGU). The great majority of the hazard-perception studies adopted a framework for study put forward by Burton, Kates, and White (1968) which sought to:

- Assess the extent of human occupancy in hazard zones
- Identify the full range of possible human adjustment to hazards
- Study how people perceive and estimate the occurrence of hazards
- Describe the process of adoption of damage-reducing adjustments in their social context
- Estimate the optimal set of adjustments in terms of anticipated social consequences.

As Gold (1980, p. 214) noted, natural hazards research differed from other areas of research in behavioural geography in two important ways: First, it was a branch of research in which geographers occupied the dominant position; most initial research was done by geographers themselves and thus, unlike in other areas of behavioural geography, *research was not dependent on derived inspiration*. Secondly, natural hazard studies were unusual in that this body of research represented a coherent, integrated, policy-oriented research. One unhealthy consequence of the development of the hazard perception study paradigm essentially as a “within-geography development” was that research workers engaged on this theme were less responsive to cross-disciplinary influences. This was in sharp contrast to the multidisciplinary thrust of the rest of behavioural geography.

The initial impact of hazard perception research on the wider research enterprise in geography was rather limited. This was in part because the

students of hazard perception research were operating on the boundaries between physical and human geography: In North American geography, there was a long-standing tradition of separation between physical and human geography, so that most students experienced difficulty in relating to this research exercise. There was no such difficulty in the later research on decision-making in a spatial context so that it was through the work of Wolpert and others that the satisficing model of Simon became popular in geography, leading to a pronounced orientation toward behaviouralism.