

# CLYDE HERTZMAN: SOCIAL GEOGRAPHIES

## I. INTRODUCTION

### 1. The Framework

I met Dr. Clyde Hertzman several years ago. He was a physician and hugely passionate about the welfare of children. Clyde conducted large research studies here in Vancouver investigating the quality of children's lives (their stimulation, support, nurturance and participation). He wanted to understand how children's experiences within their social environments matter to their ongoing development. He argued that a biological "window of opportunity" exists early in a child's life, which opens support or, unfortunately, undermines the child's chances of achieving competencies (capabilities) within that window or time of development.

I met Clyde because he worked with many of the same primary teachers who taught in challenging economic areas of Vancouver. As part of Clyde's study, primary teachers filled out detailed checklists of their students' physical well-being, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive development. From there, Clyde and his team determined children's "vulnerability" (chances that the "window of opportunity" may be at risk). He mapped these rates or measures of vulnerability to where the children lived, their residential community or neighborhood.

While intimate environments, such as family and home, are critical to the child's well being, broader environments affect parents' efforts do the best for their children. He argued that in Canada, like most societies, inequalities of resources exist among families. Gains in social and economic resources and conditions to a family likely increase positive development of the child in that family.

Clyde's data and maps (of children's vulnerabilities) provided evidence that many of us already know: social and economic inequalities matter to families. However, he took his argument further by constructing a framework that works as a guide to understanding the relationships among the many social environments children (and all of us) live in, from the home and school (local), all the way to the global environments, which include national policies, industry, non-governmental development agencies and so on. The social environments he identified are overlapping and interconnected. He said the following.

At the most intimate level is the family environment. At a broader level are residential communities (such as neighborhoods), relational communities (such as those based on religious or other social bonds) and early learning, care and development service environments. Each of these environments (where the children actually grow up, live and learn) is situated in a broader socio-economic context that is shaped by factors of the regional, national and global levels. The framework also suggests that historical time is critical. The institutional and structural aspects of societies develop slowly over time and can be very difficult to change.

### 2. Using the framework in Our Course

In my reading and writing for our EDUC 170 course, it occurred to me that this framework would be a useful guide for us as we explore living, learning and teaching across different challenging contexts (as in the 4 Case Studies of the course), as well as our own teaching environments.

Here is a possible example. In one of the course case studies (the country of Cyprus), many of the young people were not born in the family homeland (another part of the island). Before their birth, their extended families fled their homeland as displaced persons because of conflict and have not been able

to return. Their homeland has now been occupied for decades. Family stories and ties to a place, culture identity and history, however, have influenced these young people and their feelings of being separated, as refugee like their parents, from the family motherland where they have never lived. In this example, we can see the layers of histories and social environments (some lost) and their ongoing impact on individuals and communities.

In our study and dialogues, we will investigate the influences of family, home, community bonds, school, and the inter/national situation that impact the displacement of communities or socio-economic hardships. When we examine the case studies, or our own situations, it is important to dig deeper and understand “why” particular conditions exist.

### 3. Related words from Paulo Freire:

“...[As a teacher] I have to be more or less critical concerning how our society is working. I need critical understanding of the very ways the society works, in order for me to understand how the education I am involved in works in the global context and in the context of the classroom. In the last analysis, we change ourselves to the extent we become engaged in the process of social change. In the intimacy of social movements for transformation, we find a very dynamic moment of change. To separate the global dynamics of social change from our educational practice is a mistake.

## II. FRAMEWORK

**“Tell me the incomes of your students’ families and I’ll describe to you your school.”**

*Think about the above quote for a minute. What do you think it means?*

*Perhaps this will help– the rest of the quote: “If the school principally served poor adolescents, its character, if not its structure, varied from sister schools for the more affluent.”*

*Just this one short quote opens up our critical thinking as we try to understand its meaning. Imagine a school in an area of poverty. Imagine a Hanif, girl-child; her family who struggles; her teacher; the school physical structure, its few resources; and the community that lives around the school, their dwellings, and animals.*

*How can we begin to understand these conditions? Why are there such inequities in living conditions? In resources?*

*Now, Let’s find out more about Dr. Clyde’s guide to social environments (reading his words below), and then see if we can imagine the same situation–the family, the school, and so forth, in a bigger picture. Dr. Paulo Freire would say that we are learning to “read the world” as well as read the word. A deeper consciousness of the situation is important to transforming it. But we must perceive the situation not as fated or unalterable, but “as limiting, - and therefore challenging.”*

Paulo Freire reminds us:

Since people do not exist apart from the world, apart from reality, the movement [transformation] must begin with the human-world relationship...the 'here and now', which constitutes the situation within which they are submerged, from which they emerge, and in which they intervene." (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, p. 85).

## **Social Environments**

### **1. Family (Hanif and her school)**

"The family environment is the primary source of socio-economic and relational experiences for children, both because family members (or other primary caregivers) provide the largest share of human contact with children and because families mediate children's contact and connection with the broader environment."

"Young children need to spend their time in warm responsive environments that protect them...they need opportunities to explore their world, to plan and to learn how to speak and listen to others."

*Here we have family members across generations (grandparents, parents and children), living day-to-day together within dwelling conditions (economic conditions) and sharing cultural, religious and social bonds. Language holds stories, histories, values shared in families.*

### **2. Residential Communities (the community around the school)**

"Children and their families are also shaped by **residential communities** (where the family lives) and **relational communities** (family social ties to those with common identity) in which they are embedded. Residential and relational communities offer families multiple forms of support, from tangible goods and services that assist with child rearing to emotional connections with others that are instrumental in the well-being of children and their caregivers. Many resources available to children and families are provided on a community level through local recognition of deficits in resources, problem solving and ingenuity. "

*We also are in contact within a community of people in our day-to-day living. These are our neighbors, friends, those who drink tea with us, those we share stories and politics with, and those who help us most immediately when needed.*

### **3. Relational Communities (a larger picture...)**

"Relational communities are the people, adults and children who help form children's social identity: tribal, ethnic, religious and language/cultural. Often, they are not geographically clustered communities. Relational communities provide a source of social networks, and collective efficacy (power), including instrumental, informational and emotions forms of support. However, discrimination, social exclusion and other forms of subjugation are often directed a groups defined in relational terms. The consequences of these forms of discrimination (e.g., fewer economic resources) can result in discernable inequalities. Moreover, relational communities can be sources of gender socialization, both equitable and inequitable."

*These communities are not necessarily close in distance to us. Like a network, we share in social ways of being through cultural and religious ties. Displaced people still feel an important connection to these communities when away from their homeland.*

#### **4. Regional and National Environments (an even larger picture...)**

“The influence of the regional and national environments is fundamental in determining the quality and accessibility of services and resources to families and communities. These environments are also important for understanding the levels of social organization at which inequalities in opportunity and outcome may be manifest, and the levels of organization at which action can be taken to support families...The policy-level commitment made by certain resource-poor nations, such as Cuba, has enable them to create an environment that is far more favorable for developmental health than that in many resource-rich countries.”

*Aspects of regional and national environments are significant, such as the number of people in a particular area (density), or the health, social, political and economic status of that population. While not as powerful as the influence of family, regional and national environments affect large numbers of people. Policy changes can have impact on health and well being in the mass of people: public spending, social protection and the defense of basic rights.*

#### **5. Global Environment (the child in the world)**

The global environment can influence large populations through its effects on the policies of nations as well as through the direct actions of a range of relevant actors, including multilateral economic organizations, industry, multilateral development agencies, non-profit agencies and civil society groups. International institutions play both challenging and supporting roles...On the supportive side, enforcing the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) has the capacity to raise the bar on developmental health in 193 signatory countries. At present, initiatives are under way to monitor compliance with the rights in Early Childhood provisions of UNCRC.

*Also at this level, Civil Society is an action group organized to act upon all levels of society, government, non-government, and community action. They are instrumental in organizing strategies at the local level to provide families and children with effective delivery of services, or to improve residential communities. In some ways, this level of action and organization brings us back to the Family environment.*

*Now, let's imagine once again Hanif, the girl-child at home with her family in the arms of his mother, listening to stories in her mother's language; stories of a world bigger than her own, full of heroes who never give up...*

Hertzman, C. Social Geography of Developmental Health in the Early Years. *Healthcare Quarterly*, Vol. 13 Special Issue September 2010