

## THE SEARCH FOR GEOGRAPHIC IDENTITY

### Some notes to the possible role of geographer in the process of socio-economic transformation

Florin Žigrai

---

*Austrian Institut of East and Southeast European Studies, Bratislava, Slovakia*

**Abstract:** Above mentioned notes to the search for geographic identity as a manifestation of the self-definition and professional opportunities of geographer within the ongoing socio-economic transformation process in the Slovakia shows that this lies in the intersection point of the main object of geographic research, e.g. the study of time-spatial natural and socio-economic connections, laws and interactions existing in landscape with the key theoretical/methodological conception of geography, represented at holistic-profiled approach. Intensity and extension of the geographic identity, which main traits of the inner contents is specificity and difference of geography, depends on selected capabilities of geographer like as capability of spatial differentiation, spatial combination, geographic generalisation, co-ordination, reasoning and a gift of negotiation, as well as capability of interpretation and evaluation of analytical geographic data necessary for the problem-oriented preparation of various kinds of landscape, regional and territorial plans and studies. Varied time-spatial structure of the present socio-economic process with its impact on the landscape offers on the geographer due to its theoretical and methodological uniqueness, which cannot be substituted by other scientific disciplines, a large sphere of activities. This possibility contributes indirectly to strengthening of the geographic identity.

**Key words:** geographic identity, capabilities of geographer, socio-economic transformation process

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The contribution is a response, or answer to certain sceptic feelings or rather uncertainty about social significance and position of a geographer, his professional chances or rather omission or substituting of geographers by other experts, trying to deal

with eminently geographic questions. These pessimistic reflections were subject of discussion at several international geographic conferences held recently in Slovakia.

I understand the contemporary geographic identity above all as a need of self-definition and situation of the individual, in our case the geographer, in social and professional life of the society. One of the attributes of so defined identity are also the professional opportunities of geographer within the ongoing socio-economic transformation processes. So far, the geographers did not pay sufficient attention to the problem with the exception of, for instance A. Hynek 1997. I believe that the geographers should consider the situation and to adopt the proper measures.

The orientation of geographers as far as the contents and values of theirs' position in society and professional chances, hence their geographic identity, depend on the following circumstances:

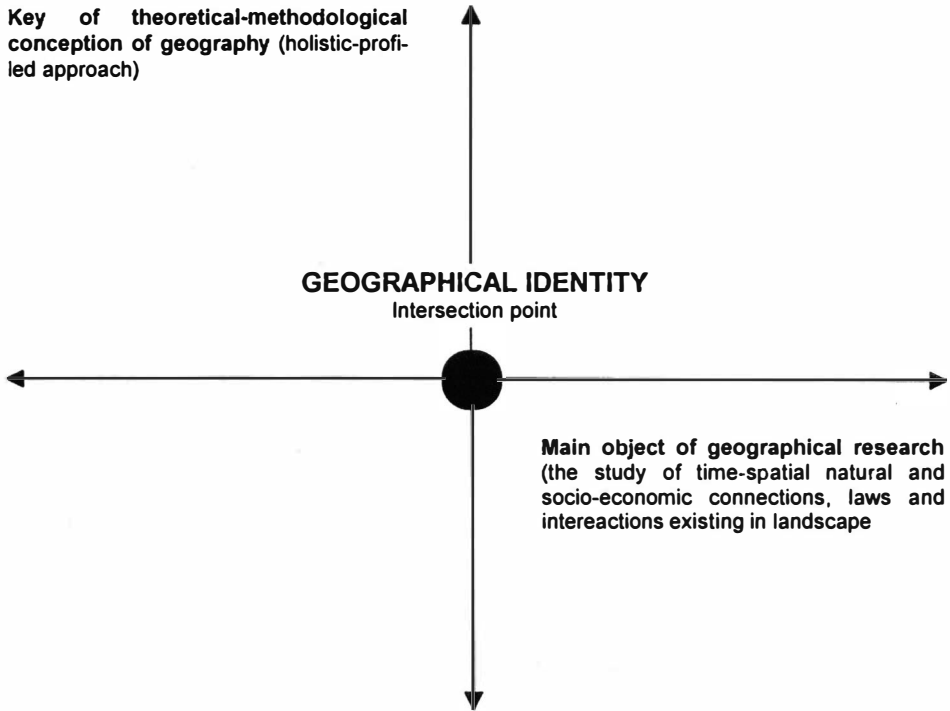
- a) the object of geographic research, expertise and theoretical/methodological approach of geography;
- b) the subject of geographic approach, i.e. personal characteristics of geographer;
- c) needs of society under transformation i.e. the social demand, and
- d) services offered by geographer to society under transformation i.e. geographic supply.

## 2. SOME NOTES TO THE OBJECT OF GEOGRAPHIC RESEARCH

If a geographer wants to find his social position, weight and justification of his professional existence and activity, it is indispensable for him to define the object and approach or methods of his research. Meanwhile, he must draw attention to the characteristics of the theoretical basis and methodological tools of geography, which distinguish it from other scientific disciplines. This is the way how to assess not only the specificity and difference of geography as the main traits of the inner contents of geographic identity, but also its theoretical and methodological uniqueness which cannot be substituted by other scientific disciplines.

The study of geographic literature and my own long-year experience make me believe that the focus of geographic research is in the study of time-spatial natural and socio-economic connections, laws and interactions existing in landscape.

In my opinion the specificity of geography as a main trait of the inner content of geographic identity lies in the intersection point of the main object of geographic research (the study of time-spatial natural and socio-economic connections, laws and interactions existing in landscape) with the key theoretical/methodological conception of geography (holistic-profiled approach). This combined contents of the research object with its approach is the principal feature which distinguishes geography from other scientific disciplines simultaneously representing *inter alia* the potential possibility of social application of geography (see Fig. 1).



**Fig. 1 Geographical identity, main traits of the inner contents, the specificity and difference of geography, lies in the intersection point of the main object of geographical research and main geographical research approach**

Meanwhile, the mutual relation between the basic and applied geographic research limits the scope and rate of social role and weight of geographer.

The aim of basic research that is scientific research is to obtain an objectively true image of the studied geographic object, phenomenon or process. Basic research aims to discover really new findings about objects, phenomena and processes and generalise these results in new generally valid laws on an empirical, experimental and theoretical level. Programmes of basic research should have a primarily heuristic, synthetic and anticipatory character.

The mission of basic geographic research in the framework of theoretical geography is to work out a theoretical basis and set of methodological instruments in the spatial-functional geographic direction on the topic-choric level. The result of this approach to basic geographic research is mainly the determination of landscape, environmental, social and evolutionary potential.

The aim of applied research is to satisfy the multitude of needs of society or of the individual in everyday activity either by purpose oriented transformation of the already existing results of basic research, or by working out the necessary results of basic

research ad hoc and then processing them in a problem oriented way. A typical feature of applied research is the social requirement. However, to fulfil such tasks, basic as well as applied research has to create the necessary theoretical basis and associated methodological instruments.

The mission of applied geographic research in the framework of applied geography is to react to the demands and needs of society. One of the main forms of applied geography is landscape planning, the main types of which (landscape planning of the spatial arrangement of human activities and landscape planning of building) aim to contribute to the preservation of the landscape and in the final result to permanently sustainable development.

Among other things, it is very important for applied geographical research to secure the transfer of the scientific information from the basic research of various scientific disciplines. We illustrate this circumstance in Fig. 2, which illustrates the circulating flow of scientific information between basic and applied research using the example of landscape planning. A look at this diagram shows that natural, social, technical and economic sciences provide information from basic research for the needs of analyses and syntheses of individual landscape plans, as well as for working out of a theoretical basis, that is for generalising the results and experiences of landscape planning activities. Among other things this also contributes to building up a set of methodological instruments, that is regularising the methodological approaches and procedures for working out specific landscape plans. It follows from this that development of theories and methodologies of landscape planning, like applied geographic activity, directly contributes to improvement of the quality of production of actual landscape plans, which in the end helps to satisfy the spatial demands of society on the landscape. The increasing demands of society together with the worsening quality of the landscape and environmental potential on the other hand requires the working out of still better quality landscape plans, in accordance with the philosophy and strategy of permanently sustainable development (the feed-back of practice to applied geographical research and from it to basic geographical research). The condition for improving the quality of geographical plans is intensive development of the theory and methodology of landscape planning, that is the set of methodological instruments and the theoretical base, which must provide the impulse for new and more precise information from basic research, especially in the natural, social, technical and economic sciences. This also closes the circular movement of scientific information between basic and applied research for the needs of landscape planning.

The information given above shows that the relationship between basic and applied geographic research is to a significant degree determined by the relationship between the possibilities of the scientific supply of basic and applied research on one side and the quantitative-qualitative social demand, that is satisfaction of the varied needs of society and the individual on the other side (see Fig. 3). For the relationship between scientific provision and social demand to function, it is also necessary to accept the upper limit of the carrying capacity of the application of the results of basic geographical research for the needs of applied geographical research (internal condition of functioning of this relationship), as well as the maintenance of the lower limit, the social-financial limit (external condition of the functioning of this relationship, see F.Žigrai 1996).

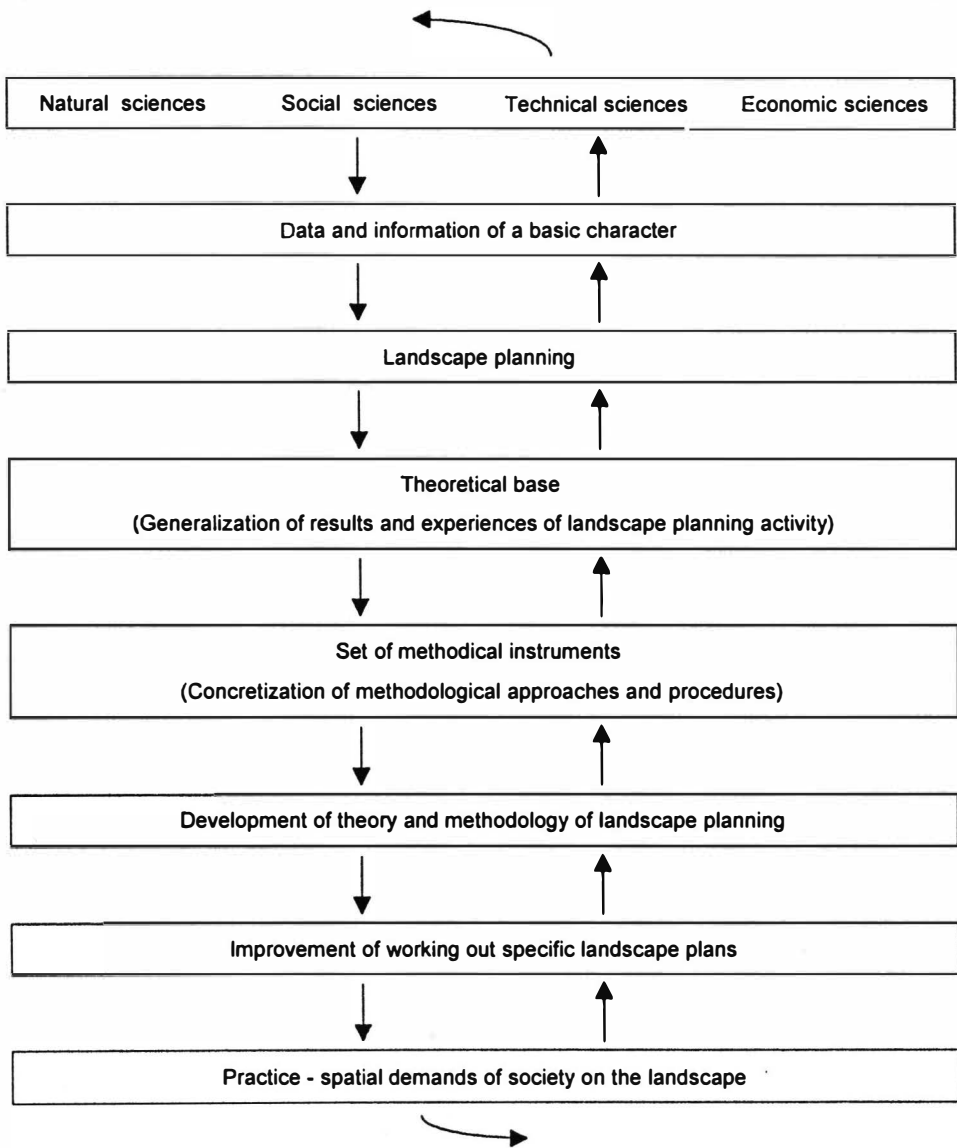
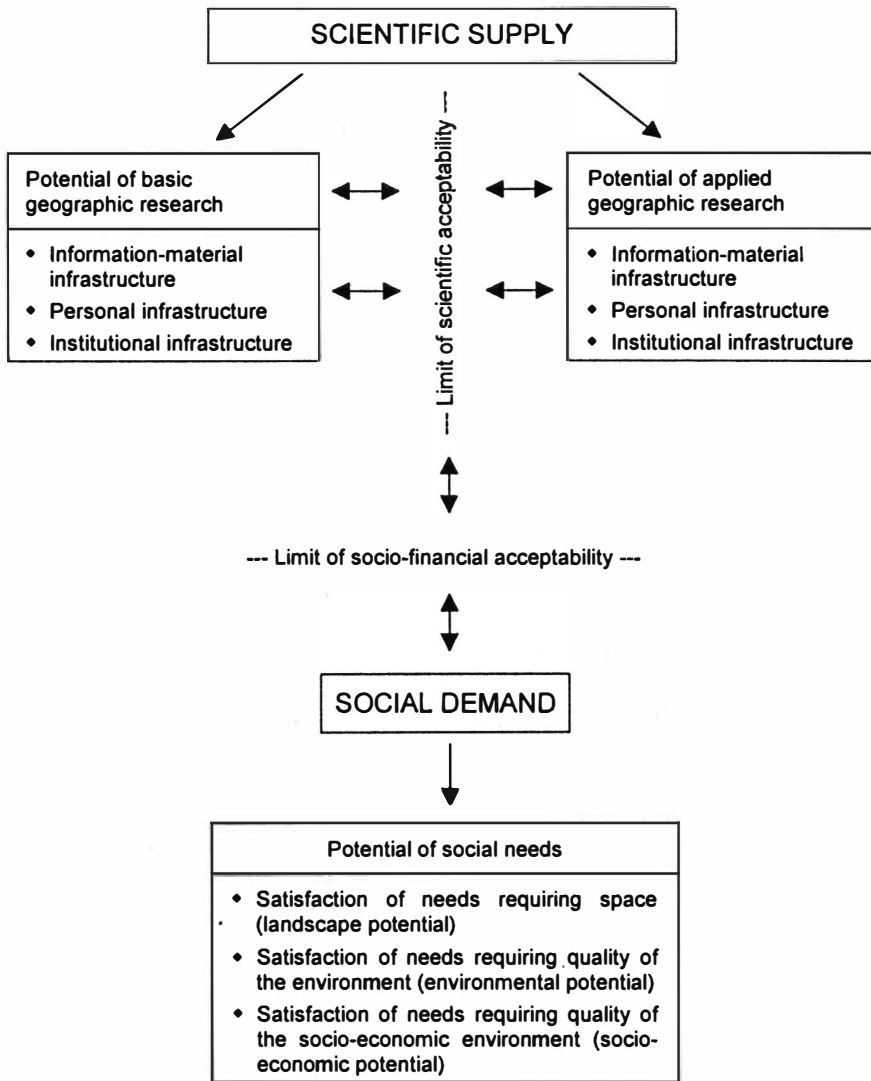


Fig. 2 Circulating flow of scientific information between basic and applied using the example of landscape planning



**Fig. 3** Relationship between scientific supply and social demand

### **3. SOME NOTES TO THE SUBJECT OF GEOGRAPHIC RESEARCH I.E. PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS OF GEOGRAPHER**

Success of the social role of geographer depends to great extent not only on the proper expertise or object of research but also on his personal characteristics. Let me mention at least the most important ones:

- a) capability of spatial differentiation needed for preparation of geographic analyses;
- b) capability of spatial combination needed for preparation of geographic syntheses;
- c) capability of geographic generalisation and comprehensive thinking needed for disclosure of generally valid geographic laws and correlation.

Besides the above mentioned basic characteristics of geographer needed for the basic and applied geographic research I should also like to point out the characteristics a geographer should possess in case of applied geographic research focused to the landscape, regional and territorial planning, namely:

- a) capability of interpretation and evaluation of analytical geographic data necessary for the problem-oriented preparation of various kinds of landscape, regional and territorial plans and studies;
- b) capability of co-ordination and co-operation needed for successful management of the teams active in landscape and territorial planning where it is precisely the geographer who with his comprehensive thinking is predisposed for the task, and
- c) capability of reasoning and a gift of negotiation needed for an efficient implementation of the prepared landscape, regional and territorial plans and studies in practical life.

### **4. SOME NOTES TO THE OPPORTUNITIES OF GEOGRAPHER IN SEARCH OF HIS PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY ON EXAMPLE OF RESEARCH OF THE TEMPORAL ASPECT OF THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC TRANSFORMATION PROCESS**

The ongoing process of socio-economic transformation in reform countries including Slovakia means far-reaching changes of any particular society and its sectors, sciences being no exception. This unique process and phenomenon represent an enormous challenge for single scientific disciplines, as they have to respond by preparation of the theoretical basis and methodological tools necessary for the basic and applied research in an effort to tackle the emerging problems.

The same is true for geography, which has to come to terms with varied topical phenomena and processes with synergetic effects acting in time-spatial and natural/social settings and compounds.

The abrupt socio-economic changes in Slovakia of 1989 found the society and scientific community including the geographers insufficiently prepared, unable of prompt and adequate response. This circumstance manifested even more clearly in the attempt to solve partial and for geography unconventional problem of the temporal aspect of the socio-economic transformation process.

The roots of the above mentioned inability of Slovak geography to respond and solve specific problems, the core of which is social time are more than forty years old. The preference of the material/economic aspects or the opinions concerning the social-spiritual ones in terms of sciences and their development brought such consequences for geography, for example, as underdevelopment of sub-disciplines such as social geography, behavioural geography, geography of perception or geography of culture. Few geographers were dealing with the temporal aspect and if so, the studies were mostly concerned with the temporal development of land use and development of cultural landscape or development of administrative division of Slovakia, etc. (F. Žigrai and V. Drgoňa 1995, J. Žudel, etc.).

Precisely the absence of the mentioned geographic sub-disciplines especially in the initial period of socio-economic transformation negatively affected the effort of geography to join the solution of the problems of socio-economic transformation, namely their temporal aspects. The above mentioned branches lacked theoretical basis, fruit of generalisation of achieved knowledge on the one side and efficient methodology on the other, indispensable for informed scientific analysis and synthesis of a particular problem. The transformation of the obtained results to recommendations immediately applicable and comprehensible for the wide public, politicians and decision-makers was also missing.

Opening of the frontiers and the possibility of wide co-operation with the top geographic centres abroad though, offered new possibilities to lay the foundations of new geographic branches such as social, behavioural, perception or religious geography (D. Kollár, 1992, 1994, 1995, V. Ira 1996, 1998, V. Drgoňa, H. Kramáreková, A. Dubcová 1994, J. Oľahel' 1994, 1996, P. Spišiak 1993, G. Zubriczký 1996, Š. Očovský 1992, R. Matlovič 1993, V. Kondráčová 1996, F. Podhorský 1996, etc.). It, besides other, confirmed the strong scientific and invention potential existing in Slovakia and simultaneously suggested vitality of Slovak geography (see more in F. Žigrai 1999).

Solution of the outlined specific problem, the one of temporal aspect of the socio-economic transformation will possibly require the following methodological steps:

The first step will involve preparation of special questionnaires with socio-psychological contents. Geographers will have to invite also sociologist and psychologists to co-operate while the questions of the enquiry should provoke the respondents to produce answers reflecting their way of thinking, perception, and behaviour in terms of the temporal aspect. The best and most efficient method will be



the direct co-operation with the experts of above mentioned sciences (O. Mészáros 1994, J. Pašiak 1987, E. Naništová 1996, V. Rosová and G. Bianchi 1996, etc.).

The second step will involve transformation of the results of the first step achieved by sociologists, psychologists, philosophers, historians, etc. into the spatial/temporal framework, which is the role of the social, perceptual, behavioural and cultural geography. Slovak geographers have achieved some notable results in this field recently and will be able to develop the new geographic approaches. I have quoted some of the representatives of the new geographic research trends above.

Thirdly, the Slovak geographers will have to elaborate a mechanism of transfer of the obtained results into the time-spatial contents of the second methodological step in order to achieve the reasoning line necessary for their efficient inclusion in the reasoning lines of the political decision-making sphere. This will be the task of the Slovak political geography where the first steps have been already made (P. Mariot 1992, 1996, J. Buček 1995, V. Vlčková 1995, R. Ištók 1997, J. Mazúrek 1994, E. Michaeli, R. Ištók, etc.).

## **5. SOME NOTES TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF GEOGRAPHIC IDENTITY WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF EDUCATION**

One of the most important circumstances influencing the origin and development of geographic identity is the educational process applied in tuition of geography in various types of schools, starting by the basic and medium level schools and ending by universities. The single types of schools meanwhile determine not only the intensity or profundity of geographic identity manifesting in geographic awareness and in later professional life but also extent or extensiveness of geographic identity given by number of students taught.

Intensity of geographic identity depends from amount and level of taught or lectured geographic subjects, age of the students which predetermines their mental perception, and processing of time-spatial natural and socio-economic intentions and interactions in landscape. Intensity of geographic identity represents its inner (subjective) part, while extensiveness of geographic identity supplements it as its outer or objective part. Both sides of geographic identity i.e. profoundness and extensiveness then determine and support adoption of results of basic and applied geography by society. Improved social acceptance of geographers then positively influences the deepening of geographic identity on side of geographers themselves.

Fig. 4 presents not only the main aims of geographic education at the individual types of schools but also the relation between intensity and extensiveness of geographic identity and its development.

The main aim of geographic tuition while creating conditions of the origin of geographic identity at basic schools should be the stage of preparation teaching the object of geography to the widest public. Individual simple geographic examples and

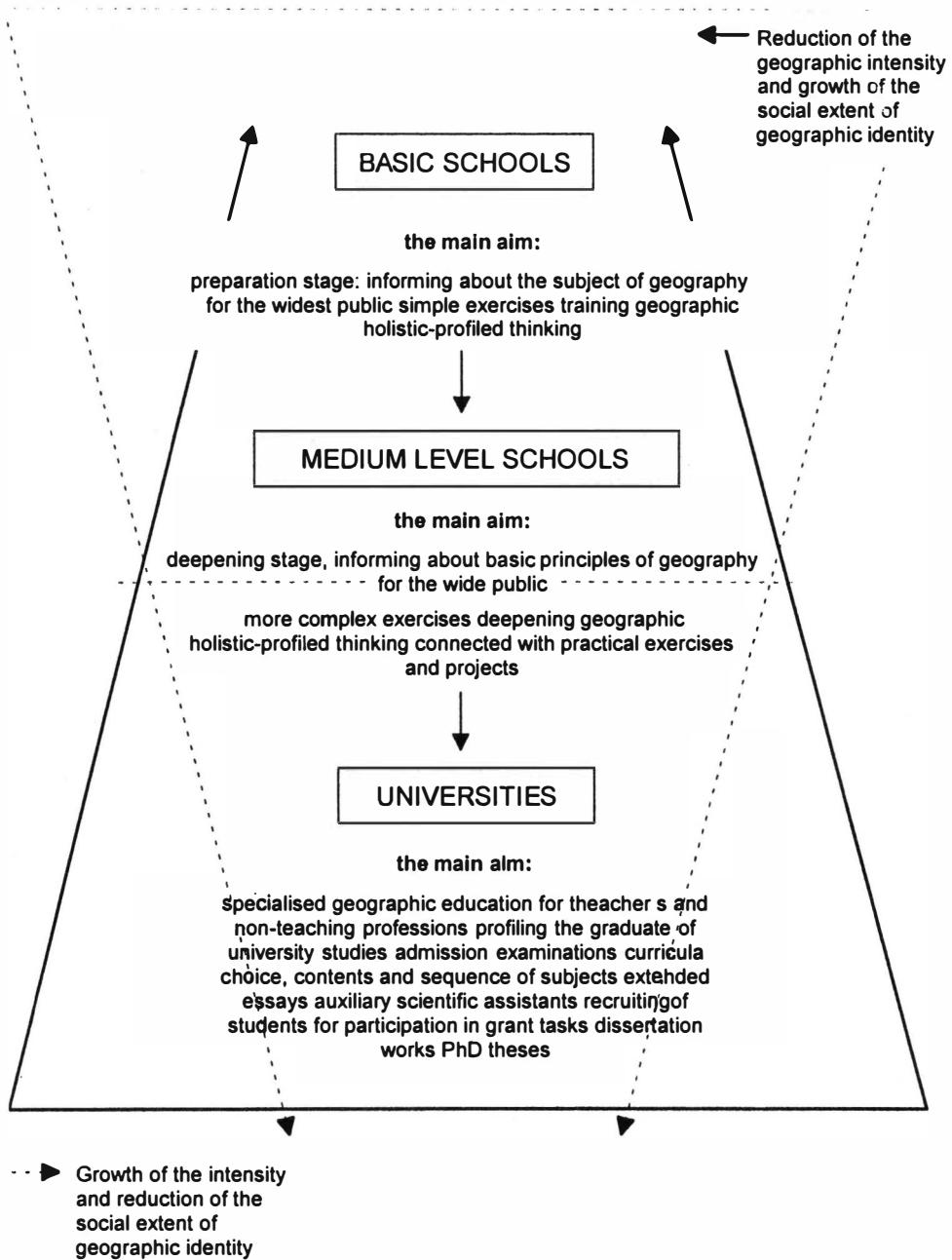


Fig.4 Relationship between intensity and extension of geographic identity on the various levels of school education

exercises motivated by an effort to develop the ability of spatial differentiation, combination and generalisation should lead to geographic holistic and profiled approach. This is the way, how the students get used to thinking in simple time-spatial natural and socio-economic notions and interactions in landscape.

The principal aim of geographic tuition at medium level schools should be deepening of geographic knowledge obtained at basic school, and above all, learning the basic theoretical and methodological principles of geography. The focus of geographic tuition should lie in more complex geographic problem-oriented exercises and projects deepening the holistic-profiled thinking leaning on more developed ability of spatial differentiation, combination and generalisation of the medium level students. These abilities must be now supplemented by the ones of interpretation and evaluation of analytical and synthetically geographic data. The exercises and projects should be linked to practical life.

The principal aim of geographic tuition at the universities and higher educational institutes of non-university type should be the preparation of the specialised geographic education for a relatively slim university community of the specialised and teaching professions. It means that along with deepening of the specialised geographic knowledge within individual geographic subjects emphasis should be laid on adequate mastering of theoretical and methodological principles and research method of geography and its disciplines or subdisciplines. Along with the partial research approach, the future graduates should intensively develop also their holistic or profiled approach by means of extended essays, projects, dissertation works and grant tasks. This is the reason why it is necessary to develop intensively in students the most important abilities such as spatial differentiation, combination and generalisation, as well as the ones of interpretation and evaluation of the analytical and synthetic geographic data. Future professional work of the graduates of geographic studies requires also development of the capability of co-ordination and co-operation of landscape planning and territorial planning work teams, capabilities of reasoning and negotiation for efficient implementation of the worked out projects.

Fulfilment of the above mentioned aim requires submission of the whole specialised and pedagogic preparation of the future graduate of geographic studies to the individual and logically linked-up steps such as admission examinations, curricula or choice, contents and sequence of the geographic subjects, extended essays, dissertations and the PhD theses. All these degrees of preparation of future geographers must adhere to one central pedagogic idea that is the development of the above mentioned abilities along with acquisition of the basic amount of geographic information, methods and techniques. Education and preparation of the future geographer oriented in this manner will mean great contribution to their successful professional life and indirectly strengthening of their subjective and objective geographic identity.

The above commented scheme besides other reveals the laws controlling the development between intensity and extensiveness of geographic identity in dependence on type of schools. The higher the type of school, the higher the intensity of geographic identity or geographic professionalism while the extensiveness or number of pupils or students diminishes and vice versa. Also the mutual ratio of intensity and extensiveness

of geographic identity changes. While geographic identity is at its lowest and extensiveness is at its highest at basic schools the opposite is true of higher educational institutions. The most balanced ratio between intensity and extensiveness of geographic identity exists at medium level schools where the age of the students allows teaching of more advanced overall time-spatial thinking and the number of potential students are still sufficiently large. This besides other suggests that didactic attention will have to be concentrated to medium level education as a qualitatively and quantitatively satisfactory potential reservoir of future students and graduates of geographic studies at the universities. This will also lead to wider choice of gifted students of geography and later to an increase of their geographic identity.

## References

- Buček, J.** (1995): Mesto, štát a územie. In: Acta fac.rer.nat. Univ.Com. Geogr. Nr. 36, 131-250.
- Drgoňa, V. - Kramáreková, H. - Dubcová, A.** (1994): Mobilita chodcov v centrálnej časti mesta Nitra (pohľad geografov). In: Geographic Studies, Nr. 3, pp. 97-137, University of Education Nitra.
- Hägerstrand, T.** (1970): What about people in regional science? In: Papers of the Regional Science Association, 25, 1970, p. 7-21.
- Hägerstrand, T.** (1972): The impact of social organization and environment upon the time-use of individuals and households (Plan International Special Issue 1972) in: Kuklinski, A. (Ed.) Social Issues in Regional Policy and Regional Planning, Mouton, Haag, 1977 (New Babylon Bd. 27 s.).
- Hynek, A.** (1997): Profesní příprava geografů - pedagogů: SWOT analýza. In: Sborník české geografické společnosti. 102/3, s. 181-188.
- Ira, V.** (1996): Etnická a religiózna štruktúra obyvateľstva východného Slovenska a percepcia etnických a religióznych napä. In: Geografický časopis, 48, 13-34, Bratislava.
- Ira, V.** (1998): Niekoľko otázok k časo-priestorovému výskumu v sociálnej geografii. In: Nové trendy v geografii (Ed. A. Bezák), Zborník referátov z III.teoreticko-metodologickej konferencie Slovenskej geografickej spoločnosti. Piešťany 24.-26.10.1988, 39-42. Bratislava 1989.
- Ištok, R.** (1997): Štát na politickej mape sveta (Politicko-geografické a geopolitické aspekty). In: Geografické práce, ročník 7, č. 1, 170 str., FHPV PU Prešov.
- Kandráčová, V.** (1996): Formovanie územnej organizácie gréckokatolíkov na Slovensku. In: Geografické informácie, č. 4, s. 75-80, Univerzita Konštantína Filozofa Nitra.
- Kollár, D.** (1992): O niektorých otázkach a úlohách sociálnej geografie. In: Geografický časopis, 44, 2, pp. 149-161.
- Kollár, D.** (1994): Importance of Perception and Evaluation of Environment in Spatial Behaviour of Man. In: Geografický časopis 46, 205-218.
- Kollár, D.** (1995): Problem of the Boundary and Behaviour of Man (on example of the Slovak-Austrian Boundary). In: The Boundaries and their Impact on Territorial Structure of Region and State. (Ed. V. Baran). Geographic Studies, Acta univ. M. Belii, Banská Bystrica, 60-65.
- Mariot, P.** (1992): Priestorové hodnotenie výsledkov volieb do SNR (jún 1990). In: Geografický časopis 44, č. 3, 231-249.

- Mariot, P.** (1996): Účasť obyvateľstva najväčších miest SR na voľbách do Slovenského parlamentu. In: Geografické informácie, č. 4, 56-59, Univerzita Konštantína Filozofa Nitra.
- Matlovič, R.** (1993): Religiózna geografia. Prešov (Metodické centrum).
- Mazúrek, J.** (1994): Slovenská republika vo vzťahu ku geopolitickým problémom stredoeurópskeho priestoru a ich interpretácia vo vysokoškolskej edukácii. In: Geopolitické trendy v stredoeurópskych regiónoch a ich vplyv na teritoriálnej štruktúry. Zborník z medzinárodného seminára, Banská Bystrica, 26-31.
- Mészáros, O.** (1994): Sociálny čas a koordinácia ľudskej činnosti. In: Filozofia, ročník 49, č.10, 659-679.
- Michaeli, E. - Ištók, R.** (1996): Formovanie územia Slovenska a geopolitické faktory jeho polohy. In: Geografické informácie, 4, 51-55, Univerzita Konštantína Filozofa, Nitra.
- Naništová, E.** (1996): Niektoré prístupy k štúdiu nútenej geografickej relokácie. In: Acta Environm. Univ. Com., Vol. 8, 97-100, Bratislava.
- Očovský, Š.** (1992): Princípy geografického štúdia religióznej problematiky. Zborník referátov z X. zjazdu SGS pri SAV, Bratislava, pp. 138-148.
- O'ahel', J.** (1994): Visual Landscape Perception Research for the Environmental Planning. In: Geographica Slovaca 6, 97-103.
- O'ahel', J.** (1996): Krajina, pojem a vnem. In: Geografický časopis, 48, 241-253.
- Pašiak, J.** (1987): Sociálno-ekologická problematika kvality mestských sídiel. In: Životné prostredie, 6, 293-297.
- Paulov, J.** (1994): Kontext globalizácie a "lokalizácie" v súčasnom svetovom hospodárstve. In: Geografické informácie III, Univerzita Konštantína filozofa, Nitra, 36-41.
- Podhorský, F.** (1996): Religiozita a religiózna štruktúra obyvateľov miest Slovenska. In: Geografické informácie, č. 4, 71-74, Univerzita Konštantína Filozofa Nitra.
- Rosová, V. - Bianchi, G.** (1996): Environmentálna psychológia, jej predstavitelia a úroveň environmentálno-psychologického poznania na Slovensku. In: Acta Environm. Univ. Com., Vol. 8, 53-60, Bratislava.
- Spišiak, P.** (1993): Percepcia potravinového systému Petržalky - časť Bratislava, obyvatel'mi Petržalky. In: Zborník referátov zo seminára "Geografia - aktivity človeka v krajine", Katedra geografie PF UPJŠ Prešov (Ed. R. Novodomec), 196-201.
- Zubriczký, G.** (1996): Príspevok k mentálnemu mapovaniu Slovenska - Záhorie. In: Geografické informácie, č. 4, 159-162, Univ. Konštantína Filozofa Nitra.
- Žigrai, F. - Drgoňa, V.** (1995): Landscape-ecological Analysis of the Land Use Development for Environmental Planning (Case Study Nitra). In: Ecology (Bratislava) Vol. 14, Supplement 1/1995, p. 97-118.
- Žigrai, F.** (1996): The relationship between basic and applied landscape-ecological research in Slovakia. In: Ekológia (Bratislava), Vol. 125, No. 4, p. 387-400.
- Žigrai, F.** (1999): Význam a možnosti štúdia časového aspektu socioekonomického transformačného procesu z pohľadu slovenskej geografie. In: Folia geographica 3, Prírodné vedy, roč. XXXII, Acta Fac. Stud. Human. et Nat. Univ. Presoviensis, p. 110-115.
- Žudel, J.** (1993): Utváranie hraníc Slovenska. In: Geografia, roč. 1, č. 1, Geo-servis, Bratislava, s. 3-5.

## Resume

### **Hľadanie geografickej identity (Niekoľko poznámok k nožnej úlohe geografa v procese sociálno-ekonomickej transformácie)**

Z vyššie uvedených pár poznámok k problematike hľadania geografickej identity, ako prejavu sebadefinovania a uplatnenenia sa geografa v súčasnóm sociokonomickom transformačnom procese na Slovensku vyplýva, že sa táto nachádza v priesečníku hlavného objektu geografického výskumu, t.j. štúdia časopriestorových prírodných a socioekonomických súvislostí, zákonitostí a interakcií v krajine s kľúčovou geografickou teoreticko-metodologickou koncepciou reprezentovanou holisticko-prierezovým prístupom. Intenzita a extenzita vlastnej geografickej identity, ktorej hlavným vnútorným znakom je geografickosť, pritom závisí od vybraných schopností geografa, ako napr. priestorovej diferenciacie, kombinácie, generalizácie, koordinácie, kooperácie a argumentácie, ako aj schopnosti interpretácie a evalvácie geografických údajov potrebných pre problémovo orientované vypracovanie krajinných a územných plánov. Rozmanitá časopriestorová štruktúra súčasného socioekonomického transformačného procesu s jeho dopadom na krajinu poskytuje geografom vďaka ich špecifického, inými vednými disciplínami nezastupiteľného výskumného prístupu, veľké pole pôsobnosti, čo nepriamo prispieva aj k posilneniu ich geografickej identity.