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SPECIAL SECTION

Mud and glee at the crossroads: How can we consider intersectionality more holistically in academic fieldwork?

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Abstract

Almost two decades after its original publication, I revisit Bracken and Mawdsley's 'Muddy glee'; a landmark paper concerned with the inclusion of women in fieldwork. Whilst 'Muddy glee' made great strides towards raising awareness of gender discrimination in field-based disciplines, I argue that greater understanding of intersectionality is needed to address the exclusion(s) that those with multiple markers of difference – including, but not limited to, gender – continue to face in academic fieldwork.

KEYWORDS

discrimination, fieldwork, institutional gatekeeping, intersectional identities, intersectionality, reframing and reclaiming

1 | INTRODUCTION

I was interested to get involved in this 'Classics Revisited' piece because, even 17 years after 'Muddy glee' was written, fieldwork is still not a truly 'shared space'. In this contribution I argue that to 'promote a wider view' of academic fieldwork, as Bracken and Mawdsley (2004) endeavoured in 'Muddy glee', an understanding of the intersecting forms of marginalisation and gatekeeping at play is critical. I consider this by reflecting on how my own intersectionality has shaped my experiences of fieldwork over my academic journey so far. I conclude that greater awareness of intersectionality is needed by institutional leaders, teachers in the field and fieldwork participants alike, if we are to 'reclaim the field' for under-represented groups; including, but not limited to, women.

2 | INTERSECTIONALITY IN ACTION

Bracken and Mawdsley's (2004) seminal piece was a positive step forward in disrupting and critiquing the image of physical geography fieldwork as a masculine endeavour. The paper gave important female viewpoints on fieldwork, and advocated normalising modern and diverse methods of fieldwork that could be more inclusive than the 'arduous activity', 'long stays in remote, inhospitable and often hazardous environments' and social cultures characterised by "heavy drinking and general 'homo-sociability'" that may deter women from fieldwork.

However, what 'Muddy glee' did not fully consider is that challenging this 'mainly-male' frame of reference and traditional way of working in the field can benefit many other minority groups aside from women. The groups and

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hierarchies issues raised in the original paper are very much relatable to the feelings of isolation, lack of support, discrimination or outright harassment that those from other groups have reported in field contexts (e.g., Carabajal et al., 2017; Jackson, 2021; Olcott & Downen, 2020; Rackley, 2021). In highlighting these issues, it would perhaps be more inclusive to discuss these challenges intersectionally, acknowledging the overlaps and variants between groups; for example, a woman of colour may experience the challenges described in ‘Muddy glee’, whilst also dealing with threats of racism, racial exclusion or isolation. In order to change the perception of what fieldwork is, and what it involves, it is paramount that we apply an intersectional lens, acknowledging the overlaps and variants in the oppressions and challenges faced by different marginalised identities (Crenshaw, 1991).

Stretching our definitions of what fieldwork is makes it more inclusive to a range of diverse groups. Those with chronic illnesses may be reassured that fieldwork does not have to entail trekking up mountains or other such arduous. Those from cultures who have been historically excluded from nature may be heartened that fieldwork does not necessitate visiting green spaces where racial prejudice can be encountered. Those with disabilities may be relieved to know that fieldwork does not have to involve long stays away from home support networks and healthcare services. Fieldwork can entail visits to repositories as part of a data collection strategy. It can include working in urban spaces. It can involve virtual trips or, as suggested in ‘Muddy glee’, the use of geographic information systems (GIS).

3 | GATEKEEPERS TO THE FIELD

‘Muddy glee’ challenges the coding and perception of fieldwork as a masculine endeavour, and explains that societal boundaries continue to be ‘drawn around women and the other’. This disruption is needed, for sure – but how can it take place holistically, so that multiple groups, and those who identify with intersectional identities, benefit?

If efforts to make fieldwork more inclusive for all are to be successful, it is critical to question who the gatekeepers of fieldwork are. Whilst this line of inquiry is not actively pursued in Bracken and Mawdsley’s (2004) original contribution, the authors do hint at its answer in their nod to the institutional environment. Overlooking intersectionality at an institutional level has potential to impact negatively in a multiplier effect further down the academic hierarchy, into workspaces including the field. This is one of the reasons fieldwork remains ‘one of the key sites of ... discrimination’ in physical geography and related disciplines 17 years after ‘Muddy glee’ was written.

Furthermore, systemic discrimination towards a range of protected characteristics impacts upon academic fieldwork as it is those in positions of power within the institution who are the gatekeepers and policy-makers; and most institutional gatekeeping and policy-making fails to consider intersectionality (Bhakta, 2020; Miles et al., 2017). In equality agendas all too often gender is considered as the sole axis of marginalisation (Johnson, 2020) or, worse still, conflated with race such that white women have seen a meteoric rise in representation, power and status in the academy (Bhopal & Henderson, 2019) whilst their LGBTQ+, disabled and ethnic minority counterparts, be they male, female, non-binary or any other gender identity, continue to be under-represented (Núñez et al., 2019). Expectations of sustained excellence (Gourlay & Stevenson, 2017; Moore et al., 2017) and the intense and seemingly relentless demands of contemporary academic employment (Gill, 2010; Morrish, 2019) can also translate into taught fieldwork, rendering it a focal point of distress and ‘ordeal’ for staff from under-represented groups (Tucker & Horton, 2019). For fieldwork to be more inclusive for all, the institutional structures in which fieldwork is planned and carried out need also to be equitable and inclusive.

4 | PERSONAL ACCOUNTS AND FRAMING

Bracken and Mawdsley (2004) seek to ‘reclaim’ positive accounts and perspectives of women in physical geography fieldwork. They argue that positive framing is vital in order to reposition the social boundaries that are drawn around the ‘normal’ and the ‘other’ (Nairn, 1998, within Bracken & Mawdsley, 2004). But a fine balance to tread is striving to make those positive stories heard, whilst being open and ready to hear the challenges that under-represented groups face, and make meaningful changes to address the situation.

As an intersectional individual who has undertaken various fieldwork over the years, and experienced my fair share of muddy and gleeful moments too, I have come to realise that it is not in the field that I feel out of place but rather with the practices, politics and power-dynamics that come with it.

For example, I find it disconcerting how prior to every field trip spanning from my undergraduate days, to more recent postdoctoral endeavours, I have to describe the daily struggles and intricacies of my condition to yet another

person that I have never even seen, from another committee that I have never heard of, so that *they* can deem if I am physically and mentally ‘fit’ to undertake fieldwork. I find it frustrating that I have to provide a dossier of evidence on every risk assessment to justify that I am ‘disabled enough’ to require my parent carers to assist me in the field. I find it humiliating in group toilet breaks when, due to lack of gender-neutral facilities, I am forced to choose between the ‘Ladies’ and ‘Mens’, knowing that my choice does not reflect my identity yet will be judged by everyone else all the same. I find it upsetting when senior academics, who are the leaders and mainstays of departmental field trips, greet my white father but turn their faces away and take a sidestep when they see me and my brown mother, as if to avoid walking into the mud. I find it exhausting that I repeatedly ask and then implore and then plead for more holistic, inclusive practices around fieldwork (Lawrence & Dowey, 2022) yet progress in this area, to me, seems haltingly slow. I am sometimes so disappointed in my futile attempts to make change happen at the institution that I think I should just give up.

There are others like me that feel the same; tired and battle-worn from constantly fighting for their right to exist in academic spaces, weakened from having to report their trauma to unlistening or incredulous ears (Bumpus, 2020; Inckle, 2018; Scarlett, 2021). Some actively avoid or have opted out of academic fieldwork altogether, after coming up against barrier after barrier (Peasland et al., 2021; Tucker & Horton, 2019). And I often wonder whether it would just be easier to withdraw from the field altogether and its bounding space of academia, so that I do not have to keep struggling in a place where I do not belong.

But then I ask myself, if I give in, then who else will ‘reclaim the field’ for people like me? Who else will speak these uncomfortable truths in the world of academia where reputation is currency and lip service pays well? Who else will remind the leaders in both the field and the academy that intersectionality is not simply about buzzwords and box-ticking, numbers and statistics, but different knowledge and unique approaches, lived experiences and personal stories? Who else will talk candidly about the mud and the glee that life at the crossroads brings?

5 | CONCLUSION

By challenging the persistent cultural framing of GEES disciplines as male domains (Blickenstaff, 2005; Hulbe et al., 2010; Kass-Simon & Farnes, 1993), together with our definitions of what fieldwork is, and indeed what ‘place(s)’ it plays out in, fieldwork can be made more inclusive to a diverse range of groups. In this way, we can consign Bracken and Mawdsley’s (2004) words “Women, people of colour, the unfit, the disabled and the non-heterosexual are out of place when they are ‘in’ the field” from an everyday reality to a distant memory.

But alongside this reframing and redefining, there is a need to move beyond simple categorisation of identity, lived experience and discrimination in the context of fieldwork and wider academia. Too often, the institution deals with these characteristics separately, or even worse, pits them against one another in a race to the bottom, which invariably privileges gender at the expense of ethnicity, (dis)ability and LGBTQ+ identities (e.g., Bhopal, 2020; Johnson & Otto, 2019).

The gatekeepers to academic fieldwork – from instructors and assistants; to teaching staff and course conveners; to inter-departmental committees and institutional leaders – must further their understanding of the multiple forms of exclusion that are barriers to access and participation in field-based disciplines.

It IS important to reclaim fieldwork – but this can only truly be achieved for women if we take an intersectional approach to the problems raised in ‘Muddy glee’ and reclaim the field for *all*.

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