

ABSTRACT

This paper acknowledges that geographical fieldwork and fieldtrips can be deeply stressful, anxiety-inducing, troubling, miserable, *hard* and exclusionary for many colleagues, students and pupils. Building on the critical insights of Bracken and Mawdsley's (2004) *Muddy Glee* we empirically extend disciplinary reflections on fieldwork, drawing on qualitative data from research with UK university-based Geography, Earth and Environmental Sciences (GEES) academics who self-identify as having mental health conditions which substantially affect their daily lives. These data prompt reflection on the nature and experience of fieldwork in two ways. First, they require acknowledgment of fieldwork as *not just muddy*, widening disciplinary imaginaries of fieldwork accessibility to encompass marginalities in/of Human Geography fieldwork practice. Second, contrary to pervasive disciplinary idealisations, these data demand recognition that fieldwork and fieldtrips are *not necessarily gleeful* but can be sites of intense latent anxiety and intersectional marginality. They evidence how fieldwork can often be experienced as sites of anxiety, isolation, marginalisation, and often silent or hidden distress. These data are not easy to read, and we argue that they require us to widen our disciplinary senses of *what fieldwork is like*. In conclusion we offer some prompts for reflection to think-with this unease.

KEYWORDS

Fieldwork, Disability, Mental Health, Inclusion, UK, Qualitative Methods

PREFACE: MIXED FEELINGS

Us: Yaay, Geography fieldwork!! #awesome!! #FieldworkRocks!! :-)

Also us: *Countless* instances of profound stress and anxiety during geographical fieldwork; *countless* little first-hand experiences of gendered, classed and ableist exclusions in the field; *countless* times we have wanted to be *anywhere-but-on-a-fieldtrip*...

INTRODUCTION: WE ♥ FIELDWORK, BUT...

As Geographers fieldwork has a special place in our hearts. It is centrally and distinctively important in our professional and disciplinary identities.

Fundamentally, fieldwork is what geographers do, and what makes us geographers, right? Moreover, we are personally grateful for some brilliant, inspiring, enduring fieldwork experiences as geography students and colleagues. However, simultaneously, we want to recognise that fieldwork can be deeply stressful, anxiety-inducing, troubling, miserable, *hard* and exclusionary.

Bracken and Mawdsley's (2004) paper *Muddy Glee* was a key contribution enabling geographers to address the centrality and ambivalence of fieldwork within the discipline (see also: Rose 1993, Maguire 1998, Nairn 1999, Hall et al 2004). Bracken and Mawdsley articulated a kind of faith in the 'glee' of fieldwork but were also able to problematise fieldwork as a taken-for-granted, normative, valorised, heroic – but often troubling – disciplinary ideal. Here and now, we value the way that Bracken and Mawdsley engaged feminist and postcolonial critiques to articulate and extend reflections on material, bodily, gendered, ableist and other kinds of deeply felt/lived exclusions in fieldwork. Importantly, *Muddy Glee* continues to serve as a provocative prompt for reflection, with many resonances with more recent work on wellness and intersectional exclusions in the neoliberal academy (Berg et al 2016, Mullings et al 2016, Peake and Mullings 2016). As this Classics Revisited collection shows, it prompts readers to share personal stories of marginalities and exclusions in/of fieldwork and disclose concerns about contemporary fieldwork as experienced by geographers with diverse backgrounds, identities and positionalities.

In this paper we empirically extend disciplinary reflections on fieldwork in two ways. First, we consider how the critical insights of *Muddy Glee* might be applicable to fieldwork which is **not just muddy**, widening disciplinary imaginaries of fieldwork to encompass Human Geography (and, by extension, any modes of multidisciplinary fieldwork which differ from the kinds of stereotypically 'muddy', physical, outdoor encounters with landscapes central to disciplinary imaginaries). Second, we explore how, contrary to pervasive disciplinary idealisations of fieldwork (including our own), fieldwork and fieldtrips are **not necessarily gleeful**, but can be sites of intense latent anxiety and intersectional marginality for many colleagues, students and pupils. We evidence and develop these contributions by drawing on qualitative data from research with 39 UK university-based Geography, Earth and Environmental Sciences (GEES) academics who self-identify as having 'mental health' conditions which 'substantially affect' their day-to-day lives. This subset of data was drawn from a wider study of Anglophone GEES academics who self-define as having long-term physical or mental health conditions (for details, see Horton and Tucker 2014, Tucker and Horton 2019¹ and note that we use respondents' own

terminology for describing their conditions). Testimonies were collected via an anonymous online survey. The following sections report findings from colleagues from diverse roles, institutions, disciplinary backgrounds and career stages, speaking about their experiences of teaching on residential undergraduate fieldtrips, pre-COVID-19. All these colleagues cared deeply about fieldwork-in-principle, but fieldtrips-in-practice were frequently experienced as sites of anxiety, isolation, marginalisation, and often silent or hidden distress. We argue that the following insights require us to widen our disciplinary senses of *what fieldwork is like*: they call us to sit with the uncomfortable realisation that, honestly, fieldtrips can simultaneously be spaces of awe *and* sites of panic attacks, brilliant opportunities for learning *and* occasions for loneliness and private sobbing, events of team-building *and* of making someone feel 'like a silly little girl'. These data are not easy to read, and in conclusion we offer some prompts for reflection to think-with this unease.

NOT JUST MUDDY

We begin by reflecting on how the insights of *Muddy Glee* are applicable to GEES fieldwork in its widest sense. Our own experiences and research suggest that to make fieldwork more widely inclusive and accessible it is necessary to move beyond an assumption that only physical geography is 'physical'. To prompt reflection on how the critical observations of Bracken and Mawdsley (2004) could be applicable to Human Geography fieldwork we present three qualitative extracts from our research. These three accounts of fieldwork demonstrate how human geography fieldtrips can be physically challenging and arduous in ways that are not explicitly anticipated by Bracken and Mawdsley's focus on physical geography. For example, in our research, accounts of human geography fieldwork often described bodily challenges and exclusions that required adaptations to support the inclusion of staff:

My involvement has helped the team to reflect on where we go and what we do. Some activities that have taken place in locations in the past have been changed - e.g. long walks around a city centre... The team has agreed that everyone should be able to participate fully - staff and students - and activities have been altered to ensure that this is the case. Where activities involve some walking, we now ensure that there are 'accessible' and 'more challenging' options available. (Human Geography, mobility impairment)

The adaptations described here in relation to mobility would perhaps be considered commonplace in both human and physical geography fieldwork. It is

evident here how adapting fieldwork to enable staff participation has resulted in field activities being more inclusive for students too. This example also suggests how frequently the approach to organising accessible fieldwork is somewhat *reactive-only*, in response to disclosures of challenges (or indeed visible impairments), focusing on the requirements of a particular student or member of staff, rather than *anticipatory, pre-emptive, more-consultative* inclusionary measures that are designed into the field activity from the start (see also Giles et al 2020, Lawrence and Dowey 2022). This absence of the anticipatory should prompt reflection on how measures to support and widen inclusivity and accessibility should be anticipatorily prioritised from the outset. Whatever our (sub)disciplinary position, we might ask ourselves: how might we build more careful, reflective and self-critical anticipatory, pre-emptive and consultative actions in support of inclusivity and accessibility into our fieldwork planning as a matter of course?

Our second narrative demonstrates the possible impacts that can arise when issues around inclusivity and accessibility are not considered. Although not necessarily geographically remote, human geography trips can still be profoundly *isolating*:

I have turned down opportunities to go on residentials to exotic locations as I don't think I would cope. I am very anxious about spending so much time isolated with my colleagues. (Human Geography, depression)

In this experience, avoidance was evidently experienced as the only possible strategy; a feeling that this geographer would simply not be able to 'cope' participating in fieldwork. It is worthwhile taking time to reflect on the term 'isolated'. Lots has been written about the significance of the social during fieldwork (see for example Gee 2012; Peacock et al 2018). It is a challenge to recognise that the intensely social nature of much fieldwork can itself be experienced as deeply isolating and anxiety-inducing, even despite the best efforts of colleagues to foster supportive environments. We might ask ourselves: what norms, behaviours, traditions and habits in our fieldwork practices might contribute to the marginality of others, and how might we mitigate these effects?

The third narrative also relates to issues around empathy. The quote here relates to mental health, but also intersects with gender and notions of 'childishness'.

I feel my condition is not taken seriously - people think I'm a silly little girl. [I would value] awareness of mental health issues. Not sympathy, just

acceptance that not everyone is the same. Not everyone finds it easy. (Human Geography, mental health problems)

From this we can read the importance of the concerns and challenges that may be faced by both staff and students when participating in fieldwork, marked by profound and intersectional marginality. The quotation gives a sense of the profound *un-ease* – whether physical or emotional – which characterised fieldwork for many Human Geographers who contributed to our survey. This participant's plea for acceptance and empathy should give all geographers pause for critical self-reflection: how do we accept and act upon this challenge – that 'not everyone is the same... not everyone finds [fieldwork] easy' – in our fieldwork practice? Moreover, and vitally: how do feelings of fieldwork anxiety/marginality intersect with gendered, aged, classed, raced, able-ist exclusions and experiences of dis-belonging and imposter-dom in the contemporary academy (Tolia-Kelly, 2017; Ahern and McArdle, 2019; Oliver and Morris, 2020), and how might these inequalities be practically reckoned-with in/through fieldwork-itself?

NOT ALWAYS GLEEFUL

As well as discussing anxieties about the physical-emotional 'doing' of fieldwork and the fitness and strength fieldwork appears to require, Bracken and Mawdsley (2004) outlined the impacts of absence from home on personal and family life, and of group dynamics and social interactions. The findings of our research echo many of these issues. Fieldwork was not always gleeful – and was indeed a space of heightened anxiety and distress for some. Participants shared fieldwork stories that are not always affirmative or hopeful. For those experiencing poor mental health and wellbeing, fieldwork frequently constituted intersectional exclusions.

When a student I used to find the atmosphere of fieldtrips difficult to handle - cabin fever! Believe me - you don't want to have a panic attack in front of all your friends 100s of km from home!! Crying silently in a bunk bed in a hotel in [Mediterranean resort] would be a low point. (Human Geography, mental health problems)

Fieldwork was a site of latent anxiety for many staff who self-identified as having a mental health condition. Where staff felt unable or unwilling to disclose mental health conditions to colleagues (Horton and Tucker 2014), issues were

compounded. Rather than finding fieldwork gleeful, participants actively sought to hidden or manage multiple forms of distress.

After escaping from colleagues, I have binge-eaten in many a hotel room... like an extension of the game; keeping up the compulsion whilst on show in the field. (Human Geography, mental health problems and eating disorder)

We find it deeply moving to read these kinds of accounts of the silent and hidden distress of fieldwork. They jar so profoundly with the imaginaries of sociality, bonhomie and glee which (we as) geographers so often perpetuate when imagining and marketing fieldwork as a core disciplinary activity. They prompt us to wonder: just how should we respond, reflectively and practically, to the finding that many contributors in our survey described fieldwork as a kind of 'intolerable' but obligatory commonplace ordeal?

Avoiding people whilst on residentials – seen as a bit of a 'loner'. Can't drink as it conflicts with whatever tablets I'm on, so find fieldwork drinking culture intolerable. (Physical Geography, mental health problems)

As in *Muddy Glee*, the intense social (and often normatively alcohol-fuelled) cultures of fieldwork made many feel 'out of place' in the field. One response to these data is to consider how this out-of-place-ness might be eased and mitigated to make fieldwork more inclusive. Another, more challenging, response is to ask: what does it mean if geographical fieldwork is evidently fairly commonly experienced as a field of unease, panic, anxiety, tears, silence, desire-to-escape, marginality, unkindness, hidden distress, loneliness, loner-dom, avoidance, obligations or coercions? What does this say about our disciplinary norms, exclusions and privileges? Certainly, the data presented in this paper are not easy to breezily walk away from. They call us to sit with a whole series of uncomfortable realisations which cut across practically every aspect of our (personal, departmental, institutional, or disciplinary) normative, habitual fieldwork practices. Hopefully, they help us to commit to self-reflection, identify areas for more inclusive practice, and then – thinking-with unease – consider how fieldwork might be otherwise.

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

Reflecting on these narratives, we suggest that it is not fieldwork itself that is horrible or full of glee, but the 'norms of privilege' inherent within the discipline – and in UK higher education more generally – that make it so. Indeed, we can draw parallels here with the social model of disability. This model argues that

disability is not just the result of an individual's impairment, but that the social, political and environmental structures within society disable some individuals (Butler and Parr 1999). We suggest that the norms associated with privileges of physical and mental health – and indeed of race, gender, sexuality, age and class – may be the structures that lead to inequalities and inaccessibility in the fieldwork experiences of individuals, who often experience strong senses of latent anxiety, outsider-ness, imposter-dom and dis-belonging in multiple, intersecting ways. There is a growing recognition within UK higher education that individuals with 'protected characteristics'² (UK Equality Act 2010) may be excluded in a myriad of ways and settings. As we re-introduce fieldwork after the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, perhaps now is a good time to initiate a conversation about exclusions, embodiment and mental health in fieldwork, and how these intersect with diverse 'protected characteristics'.

FOOTNOTES

¹ The project was funded by a Higher Education Academy Small Research Grant. Due to the sensitive nature of this research, and contemporary funder expectations, participants did not consent to the full dataset being made openly accessible to third parties beyond the project team.

² The UK Equality Act 2010 identifies the following as 'protected characteristics': age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, sexual orientation.

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