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SPECIAL SECTION

Out in the field

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Abstract

This commentary expands upon Bracken & Mawdsley's (2004) paper, 'Muddy glee: rounding out the picture of women and physical geography fieldwork' to consider the experiences of LGBTQI+ people. Reflecting on our own fieldwork experiences between the early 1990s and today, we provide personal insight into some of the challenges faced by LGBTQI+ field scientists. Although the nature of our personal challenges differs through time, space and our own specific identities and intersectionalities, we concur that exclusion of LGBTQI+ people is a widespread problem in fieldwork. This is true of many different modes of physical fieldwork, suggesting that redefining what fieldwork looks like does not automatically remove barriers to entry for marginalised groups. Instead, we argue that inclusivity should be championed across all types of field activities, and that discipline-wide effort is required to ensure safe strategies are developed for all at-risk individuals.

KEYWORDS

citizen science, conservation, ecology, LGBTQI+

1 | INTRODUCTION

Fieldwork is an intrinsic part of geography both in terms of research and of education (and the opportunity for experiential learning); it deepens our understanding of both humanity and the natural world. What constitutes fieldwork is broad, and here we focus on fieldwork that entails visiting locations outside of the home institution for the purpose of directed learning, data collection and monitoring, and the ensuing challenges that can arise for LGBTQI+ people. These challenges largely arise because fieldwork is undertaken in mainly hetero- and cis-normative environments or 'norms', where risks to those of different sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression are rarely identified in advance (Demery & Pipkin, 2021). These risks are real, creating an environment where harassment and violence (or the fear of violence) can occur, leading to LGBTQI+ people turning away from the discipline (Olcott & Downen, 2020).

Bracken (née Bull) and Mawdsley (2004), while outlining the challenges women face when doing fieldwork in physical geography, also celebrated the pleasures of doing fieldwork, advocating that positive accounts need to be listened to in order to provide a more rounded view. The assumptions made by Bracken and Mawdsley were largely heteronormative, with no mention of being lesbian, bisexual or trans. Moreover, while harassment and sexual misconduct in the field

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Both authors contributed equally to this paper and should both be considered 'first author'.

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against women (Clancy et al., 2014) and other at-risk participants (Demery & Pipkin, 2021) is endemic, and poses real threats to inclusivity (Lawrence & Dowey, 2022), these are not mentioned by Bracken (née Bull) and Mawdsley (2004) as a cause of why women (and others) are deterred and excluded from fieldwork practices.

Here we aim to show that, despite decades of increasing tolerance for LGBTQI+ people, barriers still exist to their inclusion in fieldwork. Yet the path to genuine inclusivity can only be brought about by ensuring academia works towards creating risk-free environments for all geographers, including those most marginalised.

2 | MACKAY, ANSON (THEY/HE)

My true romance with fieldwork started in 1993, researching pollution and climate change impacts on the World Heritage Site, Lake Baikal in south-eastern Siberia. It spawned an immediate affair, with lots of secrets kept, relationships denied, and much of my personal life left unsaid. The mental acrobatics scaffolded a hybrid me, straddling two worlds, two identities, two sets of expectations. My partner of 7 years back in the UK was the affair that I had to lie about every day during a 3-month stint of fieldwork, for fear of jeopardising the new and exciting relationships that I was building with my international co-workers. I'd hazard a guess that for most people of my generation, if you were LGBTQI+, hiding one's sexuality or gender identity was the norm on fieldwork during the 1980s and 1990s. I'd also hazard a guess that persistent heteronormative expectations surrounding fieldwork are still a concern for many LGBTQI+ researchers today.

The world of doing fieldwork as an LGBTQI+ person in the 1990s and before is very different to today. Back in the 1990s, LGBTQI+ equality was only just gaining momentum, and discrimination in the UK was still legislated for; Section 28 of the UK's 1988 Local Government Act, barring positive representations of LGBTQI+ people in schools was still in place, and same-sex marriage seemed an unlikely prospect. This meant that hiding one's sexuality and gender identity was frequently the norm, even in UK universities. People's personal lives were rarely so public as now, as social media was non-existent; your public persona was not a major issue if you were worried about concealing your sexual orientation and/or your gender identity. But now, thankfully, queer people expect more in terms of equity and inclusion in geography and the geosciences, even though, unfortunately, we have a long way to go for us to feel truly safe and respected (Demery & Pipkin, 2021; Olcott & Downen, 2020).

With the perspective of time (apt given that I am a palaeoecologist!), I have often reflected on the actions which led me, in 1993, to re-enter the closet for those 3 months. I (wrongly) assumed the people I was working with would all be intolerant of homosexuality. By doing this, like Sou (2021), I may have silenced other LGBTQI+ people, their friends and their allies, at a time when Russian society was going through tumultuous changes, and Russian people were generally opening themselves up to potentialities beyond the Soviet empire. I (wrongly) assumed that I could prove that being gay did not matter to my being a field scientist. My thinking was rooted in homophobia and the stereotypes that I grew up with: that your sexuality could play a negative role in how you were viewed as a scientist, perpetuating the machismo myth of fieldwork. While later field trips to Siberia were not so fraught with the baggage I carried around with me, I do reflect often on the contrast between my younger and older selves.

However, without a doubt, fieldwork was (and is) one of the reasons I loved doing research (Whitlock, 2001), and not just for the ‘muddy glee’ (Bracken (née Bull) & Mawdsley, 2004; Whitlock, 2001). Fieldwork challenged me as a person to undertake complex logistics in challenging environments that had rarely been tackled before. Fieldwork informed the person I was to become, and now as an established geoscientist, I hope that I can contribute to an improved fieldwork environment for other LGBTQI+ people by (i) being out and visible about my sexuality and gender identity, and (ii) working actively towards building a community that champions past, present and future queer geographers, especially those who have multiple intersections of identity (Scarlett, 2021), as those are the most marginalised in our discipline.

3 | BISHOP, IZZY (THEY/SHE)

My formative fieldwork experiences came 15 years after Mackay's Lake Baikal trips. I first found my ‘muddy glee’ during a week-long residential field trip to the S'Albufereta wetlands in Mallorca in 2006 – part of my undergraduate training as a geographer. The landscape for an LGBTQI+ person had changed significantly since the 1990s, both within the discipline and in wider society. The first iteration of the Equality Act (2006) had just been introduced. Researchers like Mackay had moved through the ranks and were becoming more visible. I was working in the UK and western Europe – some of the most accepting societies across the globe. Nevertheless, I still hid my identity from my fieldwork colleagues. I continued to do so on various field excursions to various wetland habitats for the next 5 years. Looking back now, I realise I was not the only one.

Why?

Because I did not identify as 'that kind of queer'. Although progress had been made, stereotyping was still incredibly common. Bracken (née Bull) and Mawdsley (2004) described many ways in which physical fieldwork was still seen as a 'masculine' endeavour. They also pointed out that women had a range of different experiences and opportunities within this traditionally masculine arena. And yet, being a woman who revelled in 'muddy glee' still meant being a woman who enjoyed 'men's stuff'. As an LGBTQI+ female-identifying person in the mid-noughties, this often carried with it an assumption of a 'butch' identity. In the butch-femme dichotomy that was prevalent in LGBTQI+ discourse at the time (Levitt & Hiestand, 2005), it was incredibly difficult to sit on the 'femme' side of that dichotomy in the field. It was even more difficult to sit, as I did, outside of that dichotomy completely.

I could have embraced the 'butch' stereotype. In some ways, it might have excused me from some of the more negative experiences of straight female colleagues as described by Bracken (née Bull) and Mawdsley (2004). At the same time, I still would have been an 'other'. It would have exposed me to a different but overlapping set of exclusionary experiences. I felt that it was safer to present as a straight woman who was confident in her physical capabilities than it was to identify as queer. I was afraid that being openly queer would expose me to verbal and physical abuse related to my masculinity, and/or my lack of it. After all, I had experienced similar discrimination in other cis-heteronormative environments. I therefore hid my sexual and gender identities. I ended up in exactly the same position that Mackay was in 15 years earlier: 'A hybrid me, straddling two worlds'.

I spend much less time than I used to on extended field expeditions. This has not been an active choice – I still place huge value on traditional approaches to fieldwork – but rather a function of modern developments in research methods. Much of my current research focuses on the rapidly growing area of citizen science, meaning that I work with non-professional scientists as they collect and analyse field data in their local area. The time I spend in the field now involves planning and leading one-day training sessions rather than travelling over large areas over many weeks to collect data myself. I still find myself negotiating my queerness every time I go into the field. Working with different groups of people in different social and cultural settings means that I have become adept at quickly estimating the reception that a queer field scientist is likely to encounter. I'm also always on my guard for potential threats. However, as I introduce new people to field science, I find myself presented with opportunities to challenge existing stereotypes and preconceived notions that fieldwork is a masculine, cis-heteronormative domain. Like Mackay, I have realised that my visibility can contribute to the creation of new, inclusive spaces in which anyone can create their own love affair with fieldwork.

4 | IT NEED NOT BE THIS WAY

In retrospect, we can see that trying to shape one's own identity in order to meet the perceived expectations of fieldwork environments is not the way forward. Bracken (née Bull) and Mawdsley (2004) started to show how the *experience* of fieldwork for women does not necessarily align with these collectively held *expectations*. They mentioned changes to data collection technologies, field trip durations, hierarchies and attitudes towards women's physical capabilities as ways to offer more inclusive opportunities for fieldwork, reshaping our disciplinary expectations of what fieldwork 'should' look like. Since 2004, approaches to data collection have diversified further. In particular, increased use and availability of environmental sensing technologies and citizen science have provided opportunities for field data to be accessed more rapidly by scientists and non-scientists alike (Gabrys, 2016; Silvertown, 2009). In theory, fieldwork has never been more accessible.

It is true that many minority groups do enjoy and embrace fieldwork in many different forms, and there are many positive stories to tell. However, positive experiences are not mutually exclusive to negative ones, and for many geographers the risks associated with fieldwork are still too great (Demery & Pipkin, 2021). Bracken (née Bull) and Mawdsley (2004) acknowledge that environmental sensing is a male-dominated discipline. Citizen science is also dominated by white, heterosexual, well-educated volunteers and therefore likewise defaults to the associated norms (Mac Domhnaill et al., 2020). Lack of belonging in green spaces is often quoted as just as much of a barrier to entry into citizen science for minority groups as it is for professional field science (Johns et al., 2021; Pateman et al., 2021). Harassment and violence can occur on a half-day excursion to a local park just as it can on a three-month field trip to the other side of the world. For those working with new approaches to fieldwork, exclusion remains a reality.

Alternative approaches to fieldwork are undoubtedly providing new opportunities for research, enabling us to collect and analyse more data from more remote locations without the need for lengthy field expeditions. We cannot assume that this automatically removes barriers to participation. Conversely, as research becomes more multi-disciplinary, more globalised and more participatory, we find ourselves navigating different degrees of tolerances and intolerances in our work environments, regardless of the modes of fieldwork we personally choose to engage in. This means that we need to make sure that the field – whatever that looks like – is a welcoming environment, where nobody feels a need to moderate their identity in order to fit in or to stay safe. For LGBTQI+ people specifically, this means acknowledging the lack of mentorship that is currently available for emerging LGBTQI+ geoscientists, confronting exclusionary practices when we encounter them and increasing awareness of LGBTQI+ issues with relation to fieldwork (Olcott & Downen, 2020). Allyship has an important role to play (Mackay, 2021).

Physical field trips do not have to be shrouded in machismo. Remote sensing does not have to be a male-dominated domain. Citizen science does not have to be the realm of educated retirees. To be a visible role model or ally is to show how different people can participate in all of these experiences without bowing to the coded expectations that have historically been associated with them. If we can find ways to break down these stereotypes from within, then we have the best chance possible of passing on our love affairs with fieldwork to as many others as possible.

5 | FINAL REFLECTIONS

Despite improvements in societal acceptance of LGBTQI+ people in recent decades, that does not mean that the specificities of our experiences in the field have improved. For reasons discussed above, many queer people have, through school, family and university, had negative experiences which make them fearful of the necessities of fieldwork. It's not enough therefore to wait until society as a whole has changed, especially given that acceptance of LGBTQI+ people may even have plateaued (Curtice et al., 2019). While Bracken (née Bull) and Mawdsley (2004) suggest different approaches to the types of fieldwork can improve inclusion for women, we argue that true inclusion necessitates championing of all geographers to participate in all activities, especially geographers living in the intersection of identities who may be the most marginalised of all (Ulrich, 2021). Developing safe strategies for all at-risk individuals (Demery & Pipkin, 2021), including LGBTQI+ people, will go a long way to fostering better inclusion in geography.

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