

SPECIAL SECTION

Classics Revisited: ‘Muddy glee’ - What geography fieldwork means in the current moment

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Abstract

This editorial introduces a Classics Revisited collection within which a range of invited authors have used Louise Bracken and Emma Mawdsley’s paper, “‘Muddy glee’: Rounding out the picture of women and physical geography fieldwork’, as inspiration for reflection and to broaden the debate around geography fieldwork. Published in 2004, ‘Muddy glee’ sought to engage with feminist critiques of the masculinist endeavour of fieldwork, whilst trying to reclaim some of the more nuanced, positive aspects of women in fieldwork. This editorial introduces the classic paper, reflects on fieldwork access today and the role of the RGS-IBG in helping to shape good practice and briefly introduces the collection of papers that together form the special section.

KEYWORDS

access, fieldwork, Muddy Glee

‘Geography is a field-based discipline’ – this is a phrase that many will have heard, and that some of us might have enthusiastically espoused in an effort to share our passion for field-based learning and research. In many ways, geography *is* a field-based discipline; the empirical measurements and observations of a range of physical, environmental and human phenomena form the building blocks of our academic endeavours and there is no direct substitute for field-based learning. But, geography is not a field-based discipline for *all* and, importantly, many individuals grapple with personal and ethical barriers when wanting to engage with fieldwork. The very idea that geography is *primarily* a field-based discipline could be the source of anxiety for some and fully exclusionary to others.

Bracken and Mawdsley’s (2004) paper, “‘Muddy glee’: rounding out the picture of women and physical geography fieldwork’, was an incredibly important contribution to *Area*, which intersected with many of the feminist critiques of the masculinist endeavour of fieldwork, whilst trying to reclaim some of the more nuanced, positive aspects of women in fieldwork. ‘Muddy glee’ was unusual, and remains so, as it explicitly tackled these issues as they related to physical geography fieldwork and because it resulted from a collaboration between a physical (Louise Bracken) and human (Emma Mawdsley) geographer. Whilst the authors were at pains to point out that they were not trying to ‘carve out a “heroic” place for (some) women in fieldwork’, they acknowledge that to not recognise those women who revel in ‘muddy glee’, reinforces the stereotype that fieldwork is a masculine endeavour.

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Since the publication of Bracken and Mawdsley (2004), the discourse around fieldwork accessibility has expanded into a range of diverse areas, covering sexuality, disability, race and ethnicity, and mental health, to name but a few. The COVID-19 pandemic and accompanying lockdowns and travel restrictions brought access to the field into sharp focus for many geographers, forcing us to re-think teaching and research plans and embrace remote and virtual methods. In so doing, it felt timely to revisit the discussions around barriers and accessibility to fieldwork, broadening the perspective through seeking views from a range of colleagues across UK higher education. This Classics Revisited collection was borne from the various authors contributing to a thought-provoking workshop organised by the RGS-IBG and *Area* editorial team. Herein, we have contributions reflecting on ‘Muddy glee’ from a broad range of intersectional perspectives, ranging from ‘women in tropical peatlands’ (Thornton et al., 2022), disabilities (Bhakta, 2022; Rose, 2022), those with intersectional identities (Lawrence, 2022), LGBTQ+ (Mackay & Bishop, 2022; Zebracki & Greatrick, 2022), race-related (Hughes, 2022), mental health (Tucker et al., 2022), those with childcare responsibilities (Bastia et al., 2022) and gendered access to the field for children (Parsons & Halstead, 2022). Each contributor has reflected on ‘Muddy glee’ from their own perspective, some engaging deeply with the original piece, others using it only as a springboard for broadening the debate. Many of the authors deliver personal and intimate portrayals of their experiences in the field and we are humbled by their willingness to share these as part of this feature. We are aware that not all experiences and positionalities are captured in this collection, but for those who contributed, all highlight the challenges that fieldwork can present to marginalised communities and individuals, whilst pointing to the benefits that it can so often bestow.

In the time-honoured tradition, we invited Louise Bracken and Emma Mawdsley to respond to the contributions to this Classics Revisited feature and their incredibly open and honest reflection provides an update on how ‘Muddy glee’ shaped them and their research, but also on how they identify with the wide-ranging positions of the contributors (Bracken & Mawdsley, 2022). We hope that such a response from senior academics will help to open up the discussion around fieldwork access, emboldening colleagues from all career stages in physical, environmental and human geography to join the debate.

The role of the Royal Geographical Society (with IBG) in engaging with and shaping the debate around fieldwork access, especially for our school, college and university students, cannot be understated. The Society has taken an active role in seeking to elicit input and participation from UK higher education in discussing accessibility and inclusivity of fieldwork, resulting in development of *The Fieldwork Principles*. These principles for taught undergraduate fieldwork bring together intersecting issues related to sustainability and carbon footprints of travel; accessibility, inclusivity and equality of opportunity; and issues of fieldwork and mental health. They foreground the value of fieldwork as one important mode of geographical learning, with a commitment to engage students and staff in discussions in their implementation and monitor and demonstrate improvement over time. The principles are [described in full on the Society’s website](#) and are supported by an extensive range of resources and reading lists relevant to each one. Furthermore, these principles are now firmly embedded in the 2022 QAA Subject Benchmark Statement for Geography.

In closing, we hope that this Classic Revisited collection will prompt readers to reflect on their own field experiences and those of others and to drive forward the discourse around fieldwork accessibility for all. *Area* is proud of the role that it continues to play in publishing important contributions to the debate around geography fieldwork, and as per our recent editorial (Leyland & Geoghegan, 2021) and in the spirit of Bracken and Mawdsley (2004) we would very much welcome contributions from individuals and teams working at the intersections of human, physical and environmental geography.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

No new data were drawn on for this article.

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