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SPECIAL SECTION

Classics Revisited: Revisiting Louise Bracken and Emma Mawdsley's 'Muddy glee'

# Inclusive LGBTQ+ fieldwork: Advancing spaces of belonging and safety

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**Abstract**

Increasing everyday levels of LGBTQ+ phobia and other forms of identity-based prejudice reveal the need for systematic attention across the versatile geographic discipline to the belonging and safety of LGBTQ+ field researchers. Through an expanded reflection on Bracken and Mawdsley's (2004) account '"Muddy glee": Rounding out the picture of women and physical geography fieldwork' (*Area*, 36, pp. 280–286), we consider the major issues – including forms of discrimination, exclusion and, sometimes, violence – that LGBTQ+ researchers (and more widely fieldworkers engaging LGBTQ+ communities) encounter at different stages of field research. We pursue a critical dialogue with opportunities and limitations provided by field, disciplinary as well as home institutional contexts and practices, including ethics and risk assessments, codes of conduct and support levels (or rather their deficiencies).

**KEYWORDS**

belonging, fieldwork, inclusion, LGBTQ+, risk assessment, safety

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

'Muddy glee', authored by Louise Bracken (née Bull) and Emma Mawdsley (2004), accounted for gendered blind spots in doing field research and producing outputs based on field findings in the discipline of (physical) geography. Bracken and Mawdsley's article (2004) brought into critical relief the masculine ideals of geographic fieldwork (cf. Cupples, 2002; Vanderbeck, 2005) and challenged this through centring the joys and pleasures of doing fieldwork from their own and other women's perspectives. 'Muddy glee' recognised how women fieldworkers have themselves carved out spaces and ways of doing research on their own terms, challenging the '"over-privileging" [of] fieldwork as an obvious site of "hyper-masculinity"' through 'promot[ing] a more inclusionary set of images and practices' (Bracken & Mawdsley, 2004, p. 285).

On these pages, we expand on Bracken and Mawdsley's (2004) account through a focus on the challenges met by fieldworkers identified as LGBTQ+,[1] while acknowledging intersectionalities with other forms of social difference and protected characteristics (cf. Hopkins, 2019). LGBTQ+ people continue to face exclusions and barriers in fieldwork contexts. Our research on the ESRC IAA project Pride in the Field (see Funding Information and Figure 1) in conjunction

with our own experience as human geography and queer scholars demonstrate that fieldwork often remains an exclusionary experience for many LGBTQ+ fieldworkers, including academic and technical research staff and students. Significant challenges around safety, risk, support and an overall sense of belonging appear widespread. Institutional and methodological blind spots about the needs of, and risks facing, LGBTQ+ researchers in the field reveal the prevailing heteronormativity of fieldwork disciplines (Zebracki & Greatrick, 2021a). Challenges confronting gender and sexual non-conforming researchers also highlight dominant masculine and cis-normative tendencies within field research (Zebracki & Greatrick, 2021a), echoing and building on the challenges identified in 'Muddy glee', nearly 20 years on.

Far more needs to be done to ensure fieldwork is inclusive of the needs and experiences of LGBTQ+ people. Notwithstanding, it is also the case that LGBTQ+ fieldworkers uphold to carve out spaces and ways of doing field research safely – with joy and glee in the spirit of 'Muddy glee'. It is within this purview that we aim to address the challenges facing LGBTQ+ field researchers, and in the process centralise the disruptive, hopeful and exciting opportunities of promoting and doing LGBTQ+ inclusive fieldwork.

## 2 | QUEERING 'THE FIELD'

First of all, it is important to recognise that people's experiences of fieldwork, and the 'field' itself, will not be uniform. However, disciplines can uncritically reproduce geographies of 'the field' and fieldwork as ontologically uniform. In this vein, neither the ontology of 'the field' nor epistemologies and one's experiences thereof can be essentialised. The piece by Bracken and Mawdsley (2004) has urged us to rethink fieldwork as a space defined not only by 'masculine ideals' but also heteronormativity. How does 'the field' or 'fieldwork' become inclusive, or exclusive, for LGBTQ+ people? Here, we approach inclusivity in a holistic fashion, pursuing situated knowledges (Rose, 1997) and critical dialectics that push beyond and destabilise gender and sexual 'others' and spatial binaries (e.g., here/campus, there/field) as well as hegemonic conceptions of 'the field' and sub-disciplinary boundaries (e.g., human/physical geography). It is also paramount to recognise the diversity of (field) research needs among lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, intersex and gender and sexual non-conforming people (TigerinSTEMM, 2019). Taken together, and building on 'Muddy glee', we see LGBTQ+ inclusion in the field as both an elemental means of challenging narrow masculinist or heteronormative notions of fieldwork, but also a means of thinking critically about the field and the instability of researcher–field relationalities.

Indeed, Bracken and Mawdsley (2004) argued for a gendered analysis that expands geography's understanding of the 'field' that is inclusive of 'other places of research and data analysis (the laboratory, the office, conferences, the coffee room), where women in physical geography may have more to contend with' (p. 285). So, manifestations of 'the field', and performing 'fieldwork' should, we argue, be rendered as a 'fluid' space: the field(work) navigates dimensions of 'coming into the field' (what to plan in advance), 'out in the field' (carrying out fieldwork), and 'returning from the field' (reflecting on fieldwork). Consequently, the field should be understood at scales ranging from campus to community. The field and fieldwork also might well encompass (mobile) technologically mediated spaces including spaces 'on the move' and spaces of the home. The latter setting (though this falls beyond our paper) has been strikingly demonstrated by remote activity as necessitated by COVID-19 lockdowns, foregrounding and reinforcing gendered aspects of academic (field) work as well as care-related domestic work (Greatrick et al., 2022; Manzo & Minello, 2020).


**FIGURE 1** Decorative image live scribed by Laura Evans-Hill (Nifty Fox Creative) at the ESRC IAA project event 'Pride in the Field: Tools for Promoting LGBTQ+ Inclusion in Fieldwork' held at the ESRC Festival of Social Science, 30 November 2021

Our argument is limited to LGBTQ+ inclusivity in the 'offline' field where we acknowledge and promote the idea of intersectional justice (cf. Mollett & Faria, 2018). That is to say, the cause for advancing LGBTQ+ inclusivity cannot be isolated, both analytically and empirically, from wider human rights advocacy and activism around race, ethnicity, social and economic status, disability, religion, health, neurodiversity, etc. Therefore, it is fundamental to pay attention, and be sensitive, to how multiple overlapping identities and systems of discrimination, exclusion and oppression relate to particular field experiences, sites and risks. It is also crucial to discern that these will vary considerably for different LGBTQ+ fieldworkers, depending on individual and contextual circumstances.

## 3 | CLAIMING LGBTQ+ SPACES IN THE FIELD

The ESRC IAA Pride in the Field project has provisionally identified numerous major issues confronting LGBTQ+ researchers in field settings. We argue that these should be considered ahead of fieldwork, in risk assessments and associated contingency plans and codes of conduct (cf. Prior-Jones et al., 2020). The list below presents a non-exhaustive summary (in non-hierarchical order).

- LGBTQ+ phobic laws and customs in certain countries (e.g., non-recognition of gender-neutral passports, access and restrictions to carrying prescription drugs including HIV medication and hormone suppressors, deportation based on HIV status)
- Risks connected with political sensitivities of the research theme (e.g., problems with obtaining research visa)
- LGBTQ+ phobic social attitudes
- Feelings of discomfort and fear and mental health issues
- Risks related to visible markers of identity
- Lack of institutional support
- Lack of diversity in field disciplines and practices
- Working responsibly and ethically with LGBTQ+ research participants

What is striking here is the substantial risks that relate to the physical visibility of *being in*, and *working in/through*, 'the field' as an LGBTQ+ person. Visible signs of identity and difference – looking 'gay', appearing gender non-conforming, etc. – could mark people out for LGBTQ+ phobic abuse (cf. Clancy et al., 2014). This might present significant challenges to LGBTQ+ researchers. 'Muddy glee', however, reminds us of the necessity to understand and 'reclaim' fieldwork as a site of joy for those otherwise marginalised by gender and sexual difference. Just as women in fieldwork carve out space, as 'Muddy glee' illustrated, so too do LGBTQ+ people in fieldwork, as we argue in our research. They traverse (sometimes ambivalent) knowledges and practices that play a pivotal role in negotiating safety, disclosure and belonging (or alienation) in relation to a diversity of people and settings. Such knowledges and practices constitute an important part of situated geographic epistemologies of doing fieldwork.

For example, our own collaborative research activities (e.g., Greatrick et al., 2022; Zebracki et al., 2021) and those considered by diverse LGBTQ+-identified contributors to our dedicated Pride in the Field blog series in *Geography Directions* (see Zebracki & Greatrick, 2021b) display how LGBTQ+ people themselves are naturally experts at navigating the field. They develop practices and ways of being in the field that offer some hope to an otherwise rather gloomy picture. Whether through finding solidarity and allyship among colleagues engaged in LGBTQ+-related networks or working to address LGBTQ+ rights and inclusion in their own academic and professional work, the Pride in the Field project argues that LGBTQ+ people are themselves carving out space and making claims to more inclusive fieldwork.

Nevertheless, LGBTQ+ researchers should not be left to confront risks and safety alone. Across our engagement with peers, it was frequently noted that LGBTQ+ researchers opt to conceal their identity in the field (cf. Sou, 2021a, 2021b), allowing them to present themselves, or 'pass', as straight by de-emphasising or 'toning down' their perceived identity expression. These practices can feel like a return to 'the closet', of feeling shame, discomfort and stigma about their identities (cf. Garcia Rodriguez, 2021). This process of concealing one's sexual and gender identity may be deemed as the only viable option of mitigating risks linked to LGBTQ+ phobia in situ. However, this can also result in mental harms that LGBTQ+ researchers often feel unsupported in dealing with beyond the field alone (cf. Anon., 2021).

LGBTQ+ researchers can habitually cope with the burden of specific risks by themselves. A general lack of mental health support for LGBTQ+ researchers in the field can lead to 'downstream risks', too. These might lead to reduced mental wellbeing, potentially discouraging researchers from returning to the field, or abandoning research or academic

careers altogether (cf. Demery & Pipkin, 2021). Here, critically resonating the focus of 'Muddy glee' on institutional blind spots concerning 'entrenched gender biases' (Bracken & Mawdsley, 2004, p. 282), a failure to take seriously how doing fieldwork impacts LGBTQ+ researchers might contribute feelings and experiences of marginalisation.

Institutions, project teams, research leadership and potential supervisors, we argue, must take earnestly the challenges facing LGBTQ+ researchers (including academic and technical research staff as well as students) in the field. By failing to properly, or proactively, address ensuing risks, research teams leave the burden of such risks on the shoulders of LGBTQ+ researchers (cf. Demery & Pipkin, 2021). This is reflected in a survey conducted by LGBTQ+ Field Network (cited in Greatrick & Zebracki, 2021), partner of the ESRC IAA Pride in the Field project, which found that over 50 per cent of LGBTQ+-identified field researchers feel that they had not been supported by their institutions to tackle risks relating to LGBTQ+ phobia. Although more extensive research is required in this area, this suggests there is a lack of institutional resources or information specifically available to LGBTQ+ researchers, both staff and students, to engage the risks that surface in the field.[2]

The latter is especially the case regarding ethics procedures and risk assessments and in the way projects are managed, meaning opportunities are regularly missed to maximise the mitigation of risks to LGBTQ+ researchers as well as participants in the field (cf. Barrett et al., 2020; Dagkouli-Kyriakoglou, 2021; Garcia Rodriguez, 2021). This is also expressed in a wider lack of LGBTQ+ diversity and representation within disciplines that carry out fieldwork (cf. Mackay, 2021). All of this combines to produce a less than ideal situation, meaning LGBTQ+ researchers might feel discouraged from conducting fieldwork, and may miss career and other professional development opportunities as a result (cf. Olcott & Downen, 2020).

## 4 | AN LGBTQ+ RETHINKING OF 'MUDDY GLEE'

What stands out from our work on LGBTQ+ inclusive fieldwork practices, and which is perhaps overlooked in 'Muddy glee', is how the personal challenges that exist for field researchers (in this instance, those who identify as LGBTQ+) inform ethical challenges of safely and responsibly executing field research. Conducting ethically sound field research requires thinking carefully about confidentiality and anonymity, issues of disclosure, trust and relationship building (cf. *Area*'s Special Section: A life course approach to the field and fieldwork, edited by Wimark et al., 2017). It is vital to identify the methodological innovations and insights LGBTQ+ fieldworkers have developed on their own terms – usually in uncodified ways – as examples of 'situated knowledges' (Rose, 1997; cf. Misgav, 2016). Such situated knowledges challenge the idea that fieldwork is inherently masculinist, as advanced by 'Muddy glee', but also heterosexist, cis-centric, etc. Diverse experiences make up the doing of fieldwork and recognising and finding modes to support these are imperative to advancing LGBTQ+ inclusivity.

Ensuring safety in the field should involve more considerations and actions than just moderating specific risks. Feeling safe requires an ethics of care, allowing someone to also feel included, to sensitively raise concerns, and to feel that these concerns are taken seriously and that they are systematically and consistently followed up – in the first place through the affiliated institution(s). We posit that such coordination entails that fieldwork is approached as an 'extra-institutional' space and activity that promote inclusion and belonging (cf. Greene et al., 2021). Barriers to fieldwork, including stereotypes, such as fieldwork being for 'rugged', cis-gendered, able-bodied, white men, can make those who do not conform to such stereotypes – and who are unable to cover the emotional and/or financial costs of fieldwork – believe that it is not for them. Reverberating Bracken and Mawdsley (2004), this would lead to exclusion rather than inclusion. Too often the same stereotypes limit the extent to which inequalities in the discipline are spoken about or recognised (cf. Demery & Pipkin, 2021). This is where human and physical geography can support each other through a shared disciplinary interest in promoting inclusion, diversity and taking heed of the implicated ethical and methodological challenges.

Furthermore, LGBTQ+ researchers find themselves differently able, or unable, to address the challenges they face in light of other intersecting identities and their relationship to structures of power and privilege (as mediated through race, gender, class, dis/ability and so on). Many staff, students or research participants may never have been to 'the field' before. Some fieldworkers may feel comfortable being 'out' in public whilst others may not. It is important that 'opening up' or making spaces and disciplines more inclusive equally acknowledges different LGBTQ+ experiences, identities and backgrounds.

For example, inclusion should not necessarily be synonymous with the increased visibility, or 'outing', of LGBTQ+ people in the field, noting how visibility may or may not be safe or possible in particular circumstances. Because of this, any measure of inclusivity should be assessed by how inclusivity is acted on in practice to support and promote safety

and dignity in the field. This pertains to the design and delivery of fieldwork where any possible changes to the initial fieldwork plan should be carefully considered in full consultation with all those taking part prior to being put into place. As such, this would ensure the creation of safe LGBTQ+ spaces of belonging (cf. Giles et al., 2020).

Here, responsibility, we assert, should also lie with those with greater privileges, including heterosexual, gender conforming and/or more senior, secure academic and research staff. It is key that those already marginalised by diverse barriers to safety and belonging are not solely responsible for dismantling those same barriers (cf. Scarlett, 2021). Instead, there is a need for sustained collective action. Shared effort and responsibility are required, defined by Tormos (2017) as intersectional solidarity.

Finally, wider critical reflection is demanded for thinking in terms of 'geographies of safety and inclusion'. A trope has emerged that assumes field spaces in the Global South would be 'unsafe' for LGBTQ+ fieldworkers, in contrast to 'safe' spaces in the Global North. 'Muddy glee' makes a point to recognise how many of the issues experienced by women in (physical) geography are as much located in labs and on campus as they are in the field. It is crucial to remember this in discussions about LGBTQ+ safety in the field in order to hold to account issues within the discipline 'on campus' – but also to challenge potentially problematic (and colonial) tropes that frame the Global South as inherently 'unsafe', lacking the sorts of attitudes, guarantees and 'progress' that 'we' see in 'the West' (cf. Rao, 2014), especially in contexts allegedly understood as '"leading the way" in terms of sexual and gender inclusions' (Browne et al., 2021, p. 4). Such views and qualifications of the field as 'unsafe' may overlook the complex realities of the study sites concerned, essentialise entire people and places as, for example, homophobic, and incorrectly idealise the campus as a 'safe space', overlooking its own shortcomings. Rather, it is within neoliberal universities that many problems originate around risk assessments, duty of care, career considerations and so on (cf. Sou, 2021a).

## 5 | BEYOND 'MUDDY GLEE': ADVANCING LGBTQ+ INCLUSIVE FIELDWORK

Bracken and Mawdsley's (2004) 'Muddy glee' remains relevant in the way it addresses inadequacies, challenges and experiences in the field that are often overlooked through dominant masculinist biases. Such biases endure and also manifest in heterosexist, cis- and white-centric constructs of fieldwork experience. Addressing these must be a priority. And the onus here rests with all – researchers, health and safety officers, etc. – if we are to promote and facilitate inclusive practice in fieldwork, and in the field of geography as a whole.

Fieldwork should neither be essentialised/reified as 'masculine' nor as 'heterosexist' or 'cis-centric'. Specifically, 'Muddy glee' has invoked us to pursue inclusive fieldwork from LGBTQ+ perspectives of belonging and safety. LGBTQ+ fieldworkers continue to carve out spaces and ways of doing field research safely, and considerately, with joy and glee. We realise the scope for geography, and geographers, to deliberate on how field research can be *worked out*, i.e. outlined in (institutional) plans, and *worked in* and hence internalised in practice to advance more responsible and inclusive spaces for LGBTQ+ people, where they feel safe and valued.

We encourage peers to join the debate that paves the way for not only more inclusive ways of planning for fieldwork that 'feed forward' LGBTQ+ support and reporting mechanisms *to the field*. We also think that there is much more potential for 'feeding back' lessons *from the field* in a step-by-step and coherent manner to build more LGBTQ+ inclusive institutions – promoting the diversity of field researchers and representing both the field and the fieldwork process as (more) welcoming to LGBTQ+ people.

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## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no new datasets were generated during the current study.

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## ENDNOTES

[1] We use the broad acronym LGBTQ+ to refer to lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer and intersex people and people who identify themselves through different non-heteronormative gender and sexual characteristics.

[2] For valuable context, see 'The principles for undergraduate field courses' developed by the Council of Heads of Geography in UK Higher Education Institutions (CHGHEI) at https://www.rgs.org/research/higher-education-resources/fieldprinciples/

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