

## SPECIAL SECTION

# A less muddy glee? Perspectives from a disabled researcher in the era of virtual global south fieldwork

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## Abstract

Challenges to the changing spaces of geography fieldwork have been pronounced during the COVID-19 pandemic, through one of the most significant shifts since Bracken and Mawdsley wrote 'Muddy glee' in 2004, from 'doing' to 'imagining' fieldwork. Drawing on personal involvement in conducting virtual qualitative fieldwork during the pandemic on the experiences of older people with incontinence and their caregivers in Ethiopia and Malawi as a researcher with cerebral palsy, this commentary assesses new forms of 'muddiness' and the possibilities of inclusive data collection to evoke a sense of glee in the virtual field. The commentary reflects on how, away from challenging environments and in the virtual field, researchers with disabilities can discover a less physically 'muddy' glee by being included in fieldwork conducted online. The commentary draws on the new, tacit sense of muddiness experienced due to the physical separation between researcher and participant during the virtual era. The author provides reflections on routes to a new glee using technology and redressing the imbalances of power between researchers from the global North and partners in the global South, to further round out the picture of fieldwork to include women with disabilities going beyond the COVID-19 pandemic.

## KEYWORDS

COVID-19, disability, Ethiopia, incontinence, Malawi, virtual fieldwork

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

This commentary reflects on Bracken and Mawdsley's (2004) paper in *Area*, "'Muddy glee': rounding out the picture of women and physical geography fieldwork' from an era where fieldwork has been forced to place less emphasis on physical aspects and a greater degree on virtual approaches, owing to the COVID-19 pandemic. While COVID-19 has seemingly posed many barriers to doing qualitative fieldwork across the global South, as a researcher with cerebral palsy, I reflect on the contrasting elements of the virtual field space as a mechanism for enabling the inclusion of researchers with disabilities in fieldwork, in often difficult environments, beyond the restrictions of the pandemic and into the longer-term future. Bracken and Mawdsley note how 'women, people of colour, the unfit, the disabled and the non-heterosexual are out of place when they are 'in' the field' (Bracken & Mawdsley, 2004, p. 282). Whitlock's photograph of her 'moments of muddy glee' (Whitlock, 2001, p. 21) emphasises further the need to recognise gleefulness across gender, and as this paper argues, across all abilities. Bracken and Mawdsley's challenges to this norm as women, through unpicking the changing spaces of data collection at the time through

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GIS, computer modelling, and ground truthing, have moved on further once again during the COVID-19 pandemic with online conference call platforms, connecting partners between the global South and North.

As a female qualitative researcher with a disability from the UK working in the global South, the changing spaces from the physical, challenging terrain of the field to the computer screen as the medium of connecting to field activity has opened new and inclusive possibilities for conducting my fieldwork. In this commentary, I reflect on a transition from 'doing' to 'imagining' fieldwork and on redefining 'muddiness' in a time when travel is restricted, and explore the future of glee in the virtual field, drawing on fieldwork on the experiences of older people living with incontinence and their caregivers in humanitarian settings in Malawi and Ethiopia, conducted in 2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## 2 | FROM 'DOING' FIELDWORK TO 'IMAGINING' FIELDWORK IN VIRTUAL SPACES

When Bracken and Mawdsley wrote 'Muddy glee' in 2004, they questioned the dominant image of extended lengths of time away in the field for weeks and months, particularly for women with family and caring responsibilities. 'Doing' fieldwork was situated in assumptions about women's bodies in terms of perceptions of fitness and stamina, which Bracken and Mawdsley challenged through their emphasis that much fieldwork does not require physical strength and that there is a diversity of field experiences to be recognised, including those of researchers with disabilities (Hall et al., 2002). Since 'Muddy glee' was written, a significant shift in the concept of fieldwork has been from one of 'doing' to one of 'imagining', particularly in the last two years of restricted travel during the COVID-19 pandemic. Virtual communication tools such as Microsoft Teams, Zoom, and Google Hangouts have enabled research to continue by providing media for qualitative interviews (Sah et al., 2020) and digital platforms have been created for virtual reality field trips (Gielstra et al., 2021).

Researchers have been forced into a 'new normal' that disrupts hegemonic structures of knowledge production in creative ways, giving greater emphasis to the participation of researchers from the global South in data collection processes (Finn et al., 2020), leaving researchers from the global North to enter a realm of 'imagining' the activities of the field without seeing them. I explore these disruptions drawing on my experiences, as a researcher with cerebral palsy, of using virtual qualitative methods to research the impact of incontinence on older people and their caregivers in two humanitarian settings: Kule and Nguenyiel refugee camps in the Gambella region of Ethiopia, hosting refugees from civil war and ongoing food insecurity in South Sudan; and Chemussa, Chikwawa, Nsanje, and Kachere in Malawi, which were affected by Cyclone Idai in 2019. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, it was expected that the research team, comprising staff from Oxfam, HelpAge International, and the Institute of Development Studies would travel to test data collection tools in June–July 2020, and to collect the data at these sites in September 2020, and I would remain in the UK to provide virtual backstopping support. The onset of the pandemic delayed this process and the dates for data collection visits changed multiple times throughout 2020–21. Ultimately, the team did not travel and plans were adapted to incorporate virtual processes. A shift to virtual data collection led to the use of Microsoft Teams as our platform for being 'in' the field, to work in collaboration with partners in Ethiopia and Malawi from our desks in the UK, and to remotely capture the stories of older people living with incontinence and their caregivers in these settings.

## 3 | A LESS 'MUDDY' AND MORE INCLUSIVE GLEE IN VIRTUAL FIELDWORK

The call made by Bracken and Mawdsley to 'recognise the diversity of experiences that accompany fieldwork and data collection' (Bracken & Mawdsley, 2004, p. 284) becomes more vivid as the transition from the physical to virtual field is made. Loss of physical muddiness due to the COVID-19 pandemic has opened an opportunity to redefine 'glee' in fieldwork for a greater diversity of researchers. It was not expected that I would travel for this research due to the remote field sites and the risks posed for my wellbeing. COVID-19 grounding the flights of the rest of the team, however, paved a route for an inclusive fieldwork process, as the tough terrain expected in the communities in Malawi and Ethiopia was exchanged for the computer screen. Masculinist constructions of 'body culture' that can exclude women (Nairn, 1996, 1998) have been overturned by my presence in the data collection process from its inception to conclusion.

Connecting with local research enumerators in both field settings was made possible over video calls in which, as a researcher with a disability, physical barriers of accessibility in the field were removed and my inclusion in field activities became equal to my able-bodied team members. Online discussions enabled me to see, meet, and hear from the enumerators, understand their capacity, and gather their feedback and perspective on the process. New ways of connecting to the field in the global South strengthened the data analysis process, through real-time reflections over video calls and adaptations day by day. Moments of glee came not only through the anticipation of a call to discover what had happened in the field each day, but also in the

knowledge that when bemused faces of my colleagues in the global South who could not understand my speech as a researcher with cerebral palsy appeared on the screen, smiles would soon be added as my team translated my thoughts to them, connecting us to each other gradually through discussions. These moments provide, as Bracken and Mawdsley point out, the 'other stories to tell around the opportunities and enjoyment that can be a part of fieldwork' (Bracken & Mawdsley, 2004, p. 284). Over time, as differences in physical abilities faded over online discussions, a sense of recognition as a core member of the research team became clearer from partners in contexts where researchers with disabilities remain relatively unseen due to local taboos (Bhakta, 2020).

Removing physical muddiness through virtual fieldwork has arguably made some strides towards addressing the challenge of negotiating the trade-offs of 'post-colonially responsible' fieldwork for researchers with disabilities (Bhakta et al., 2015). This project with older people experiencing incontinence has placed emphasis on research teams and enumerators from Malawi and Ethiopia taking the lead in the field data collection while the research leads remain in the UK. In turn, this shift is fundamentally challenging notions of enacting responsibility as an unequal process, which is embedded in 'the construction of Northern actors as ... active and generous, and of Southern actors as ... passive and grateful' (Silk, 2004, p. 230). The Southern actors of fieldwork in the virtual COVID-19 era are the most 'active' in the field, with a greater onus placed on them to collect data, to make field-based decisions on the direction to take in the process based on what they see, and to analyse the initial findings. Their central role as local researchers paves a way to ensuring knowledge generated is relevant, tailored, and communicated effectively to people in the local context, with longer term implications for targeted policy and practice.

## 4 | NEW FORMS OF MUDDINESS

The pandemic has paved new routes for inclusive fieldwork, yet there are new, tacit forms of muddiness for researchers of all abilities to contend with in the virtual era. Senses of space and place and connection to people and community are muddled by not knowing how the field physically looks and sounds, and loss of pleasure of being taken outdoors (Bracken & Mawdsley, 2004), which can only be imagined through reading the data gathered by enumerators in Malawi and Ethiopia from my desk in the UK. The glee of mundane moments of 'indifference' in playing with children from the local communities, which is central to the enjoyment of fieldwork as a researcher with a disability in the global South (Bhakta, 2020), is no longer accessible from such a distance away. COVID-19 has brought a striking muddiness in not being able to meet and see the expressions of participants' faces in response to interview questions, to understand in depth their feeling beyond the words on a page. Researchers have become blinded in the ability to follow up on interesting matters in interviews, to contextualise and relate findings to place by seeing the living conditions of participants, in this case refugee camps and cyclone-affected communities, and to gather deeper quotes through people's stories about the challenges of managing incontinence where facilities are lacking. Muddiness becomes more complex and weirder when analysing data about the participants who are central to the research but who I have not met, evoking questions about their personalities, sounds of their voices and expressions.

Lack of physical presence of the research team poses further challenges to glee and creates muddiness on both ends of the video call, particularly when there are too many complex data collection tools. Training enumerators over video calls is much more time-consuming than when in the field and is only made possible when research partners who are knowledgeable about the topic are present on the other end of the video call, facilitating the training in a room and conducting quality checks on the process. The virtual field has emphasised the need for surveys and interview tools to be kept few and as simple as possible for our partners in the global South to be able to act as our eyes and ears and to provide voices in the fieldwork process without us being there.

As a researcher with cerebral palsy, the ever-present muddiness of partners in Malawi and Ethiopia trying to understand my speech remains the key barrier to accessible virtual fieldwork, despite the absence of physically challenging environments. The muddiness of my unclear speech can only be clarified by my UK-based colleagues who are 'tuned' into my voice to our colleagues abroad, who are navigating the additional challenges of trying to communicate across two languages within the team, in addition to poor internet connectivity.

## 5 | THE FUTURE OF GLEE IN THE VIRTUAL FIELD

The methodologies being adopted in the era of the virtual field raises questions and opens areas of debate around how and where 'glee' will be found in future data collection, particularly where qualitative research and connection to people and place in the global South are concerned for researchers, including those with disabilities. Travel restrictions, whether due to physical

ability or global pandemics, could open the opportunity to redefine 'remote sensing' as a method for qualitative research and teaching in geography. Space should be made to explore the possibilities for teams across Africa, Asia, and Latin America to use smart phones to record videos to enable researchers in the global North to 'experience' the data collection, through footage of journeys of research teams to and around communities and interviews in participants' homes, to 'see' and connect to people, place, and space. Where mobile internet connectivity is available, 'remote sensing' could extend to researchers being virtually present in interviews led by enumerators in the global South over video chats, seeing and interacting with research participants, if ethical aspects of appropriate filming and data storage are considered.

Less presence of researchers from the global North may pave a way to redress imbalances caused by 'helicopter research', where researchers extract, analyse, and publish data from low- and middle-income countries, with sparse input from local partners who are central to the process (Haelewaters et al., 2021). Increased participation by local partners to lead the process, which in this study in Ethiopia and Malawi involved key members of staff from government ministries, ensured that decision-makers have directly seen the issues faced by the older people in the research, reflected on the analysis, and can make policy and practice decisions for the long term based on the research findings. Possible routes to a new 'glee' may lie in the ability to create longer term impact from remote fieldwork through redefined relationships between researchers of all abilities and international partners.

## 6 | CONCLUSION

Since "'Muddy glee": rounding out the picture of women and physical geography fieldwork' (Bracken & Mawdsley, 2004) was written, one of the most significant challenges to traditional conventions of fieldwork has been the COVID-19 pandemic. The picture of fieldwork has been rounded out further to include female researchers with disabilities, as computer screens and video calls have replaced field visits over long periods of time to challenging contexts in the global South. Arguably, these disruptions to the masculinist notion of fieldwork have created a level playing field for women with disabilities, where all researchers are prevented from reaching the field and the diversity of researchers of different abilities and their experiences becomes visible through the different faces seen on the computer screen, and the reliance on imagination of the field becomes essential for all.

The era of the virtual field has redefined the concept of muddiness, marked by a distance between researcher and field, and researcher and participant, leading to a multitude of questions for researchers analysing the narratives of faces they have never seen in environments they have never been to, aside from the practical challenges of remotely managing a research team. Looking ahead, the reversal of roles where researchers of the global South lead data collection while researchers in the global North observe at a distance could redefine responsibility and create a new glee with a widened scope for impact from research. Ultimately, although revisiting 'Muddy glee' at this moment in time provides a context for the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, it also highlights how the pandemic has forcibly widened the possibilities for a greater inclusion of women with disabilities in fieldwork, as a direct result of the progress made in the era of travel restrictions and reliance on methods of the virtual field.

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