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SPECIAL SECTION

Navigating the challenges of fieldwork and childcare: Revisiting 'muddy glee'

Tanja Bastia¹  | Jessica Hope²  | Katy Jenkins³  | Charlotte Lemanski⁴  |
Paula Meth⁵ | Nina Moeller⁶ | Glyn Williams⁷ 

¹The University of Manchester, Manchester, UK

²School of Geography and Sustainable Development, University of St Andrews, St Andrews, UK

³Department of Geography and Environmental Sciences, Northumbria University, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK

⁴Geography, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK

⁵The University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK

⁶Centre for Agroecology, Water and Resilience, Coventry University, Coventry, UK

⁷University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK

Correspondence

Tanja Bastia, The University of Manchester, Manchester, UK.

Email: tanja.bastia@manchester.ac.uk

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Abstract

This commentary emerges from our collective interest in, and reflections on, the multiple ways in which parents working within Development Geography in UK academia negotiate the complexities of combining periods of overseas fieldwork with family life. Here, we bring our varied experiences of navigating these challenges (emotional, bureaucratic, and practical) into conversation with Bracken and Mawdsley's 'Muddy glee,' highlighting the ways in which a recognition of academics', especially female academics', childcare responsibilities has been largely absent from discussions around conducting fieldwork, specifically development fieldwork in the global South.

KEYWORDS

care, childcare, development geography, fieldwork, Global South

1 | INTRODUCTION

This commentary emerges from our collective interest in, and reflections on, the multiple ways in which parents working within Development Geography in UK academia negotiate the complexities of combining periods of overseas fieldwork with family life (see also Hope et al., 2020; Jenkins, 2020; DevGRG undated). Here, we bring our varied experiences of navigating these challenges (emotional, bureaucratic, and practical) into conversation with Bracken and Mawdsley's (2004) 'Muddy glee,' highlighting the ways in which a recognition of academics', especially female academics', childcare responsibilities has been largely absent from discussions around conducting fieldwork, specifically development fieldwork in the global South. Now nearly 20 years old, revisiting Bracken and Mawdsley's paper reminds us of both how far we have come in terms of addressing the significant gender inequalities within Geography, but also of how far there is still to go, as many of their reflections – especially around promotion and working cultures – remain depressingly pertinent in 2022.

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While Bracken and Mawdsley recognise that a requirement to travel long distances, and/or be away for long periods of time to undertake fieldwork, often poses a problem for women with family or caring commitments, they do not particularly problematise the gendered assumptions lying behind this observation, instead emphasising that much physical geography fieldwork can be undertaken close to home. In contrast, as the vignettes below highlight, our own research trajectories are evidence of the fact that it *is* possible to combine family responsibilities with overseas fieldwork, though we would all agree it is not easy! Like Bracken and Mawdsley's original paper, our vignettes also underline the multiple ways of undertaking fieldwork, not always requiring trips of a long duration. We thus concur with Bracken and Mawdsley's observation that there are 'other stories to tell around the opportunities and enjoyment that can be a part of fieldwork, and the range of methods and places it might involve' (p. 284). In this regard, we aim to open up the 'black box' of undertaking fieldwork as a parent, such that more parents (and especially women) might recognise themselves in accounts of fieldwork, and feel able, and supported institutionally, to consider the various ways of combining caring responsibilities with development fieldwork, as well as being open to the moments of parent-and-child 'muddy glee' that might occasionally result.

However, while all of us have been able to continue to undertake fieldwork in different ways, with or without accompanying children, this has tended to be in spite of institutional structures and support, and often at the economic and emotional expense of our families, as well as often our own wellbeing. We recognise that we have been privileged to have supportive partners and families to make this possible and, indeed, to have jobs that include overseas fieldwork. Nevertheless, we emphasise that being parents, and especially – with the exception of Glyn – being mothers, has shaped all the choices that we have made about doing (and often not doing) fieldwork: where and when to do it, how long for, and what methods are therefore feasible.¹ Such choices are not merely a case of logistics or practicalities, or a matter of personal preference, but have ripple effects across all aspects of our careers, as well as having an impact on the actual enjoyment of doing fieldwork. Several of us have reflected on the way in which leaving children at 'home' while undertaking fieldwork impacts on our own wellbeing in the field – trying to cram data collection into as short a period as possible, with little time for downtime or visiting tourist sites, as opposed to fieldwork trips pre-children when there would have been an opportunity to combine fieldwork with some leisure time. However, possibly even more significantly, these choices also have repercussions for career progression. Choosing not to do fieldwork, or to do less, or to go for shorter periods of time, or less often, than might otherwise be the case, all influence the publications we produce and the types of research bids that we decide to write, ultimately shaping our research profiles, trajectories, and promotion possibilities. The impacts of these choices therefore highlight that, nearly 20 years on from 'Muddy glee,' greater visibility of, and attention to, these issues is needed within Development Geography, in order to enable parents to effectively balance childcare responsibilities with a research career that includes undertaking fieldwork.² In this sense, Glyn's contribution is perhaps one of the most crucial to reflect on, in that while mothers have recently begun to publicly voice and recognise these challenges, fathers' voices have remained almost entirely absent, with academia continuing to presume that travel is unproblematic for men.

With all these reflections in mind, in the next section we include vignettes that illustrate the multiple ways that some of us have approached the dilemma of undertaking fieldwork in the global South while having caring responsibilities, underlining the ways in which our strategies have adapted and changed over time in relation to the needs of our families, and the demands of our research.

2 | FIELDWORK AND CHILDCARE VIGNETTES

Below, we describe some of our personal experiences of combining childcare with fieldwork. In particular, we highlight how having childcare responsibilities influences how fieldwork is carried out, and set out some of the challenges we have encountered in combining childcare with fieldwork in places that are far from our usual place of residence. While doing so, we also mention some of the strategies we have used to overcome some of these challenges.

Tanja first took her son to her PhD fieldwork site, Bolivia, when he was five years old and in reception class. In Bolivia, they lived in a low-income peri-urban settlement with a friend who had children of similar ages, so her son had play-mates and fitted into the daily routines. In that context, it was not unusual to take children to interviews, because most other women combined childcare with their other responsibilities. This was a low-income but relatively safe neighbourhood. The following year, when fieldwork moved to informal settlements in Buenos Aires, with a higher level of insecurity, her son stayed in the UK with his father. As time went on, long-term ethnographic fieldwork was mostly carried out in this way: relatively short trips to the field on her own, so that data collection could be concentrated in a shorter period of time, and the separation would not be too long. This was also a cheaper option than relocating the family abroad for longer periods of time. When her

youngest was born (her eldest already an adult), Tanja was in the middle of another project with a very different methodology: semi-structured interviews in urban, peri-urban, and rural areas across five different regions in Bolivia. She was not able to leave her daughter in the UK and felt that the type of fieldwork did not lend itself to combine data-collection with childcare, so opted to work with research assistants, who carried out all the interviews in the last phase of this project. Overall, Tanja missed out on the opportunity of doing long periods of fieldwork when this was an option (PhD and postdoc), and on finishing the more challenging, nation-wide data collection, but was nevertheless able to engage with migrant communities long-term and across the geographical distance, while fulfilling teaching and administrative responsibilities at a UK institution and also co-raising two children.

Charlotte first took one of her children with her on extended fieldwork to South Africa while they were still in utero. She was working in low-income urban settlements in Cape Town, and at six months pregnant, her large size and constant need for toilet breaks provided a common talking point and shared human experience with respondents. It was one of the most rewarding and exhausting fieldwork periods, as her vulnerability and physical reliance on the kindness of fieldwork participants opened deep connections. Over the following years, both her children have joined her for extended periods of fieldwork in South Africa – initially bringing family members to provide infant childcare, and then attending local nurseries and primary schools in Cape Town and Durban. At other times, particularly for shorter fieldwork blocks, they have remained in the UK with their father. Bringing children on fieldwork has provided them with fantastic opportunities and experiences, but it has also often brought financial deficits and/or family fragmentation. In most cases, grant funders have agreed to cover the costs of bringing children on fieldwork (they are less keen to cover the costs of a partner, even when they are taking extended unpaid leave to provide childcare). However, as the costs of accompanied fieldwork have always come from the total research budget, it has ultimately meant less funding for the research itself (in comparison to researchers without caring responsibilities). Furthermore, as children age and their home-based education becomes less flexible (e.g., public exams), it becomes harder to combine fieldwork with parenting (exacerbated by COVID travel restrictions). Most recently, Charlotte has relied on research assistants and local collaborators to conduct fieldwork, and while there are ethical, decolonial, and sustainability advantages to remote fieldwork, this should not be an excuse to ignore the caring responsibilities of fieldworkers.

After a PhD in the same area, Nina returned to the Ecuadorian Amazon when her children were five years old and six months old. Breastfeeding her baby at the time, it was unthinkable to travel without them. Nina and her partner had decided together to accept the fellowship offer for long-term fieldwork (involving two trips of six months and three months), even though this would mean reduced finances, with Nina's partner doing the bulk of the childcare. While the funders agreed that the travel budget could be used for travel costs for the children, it was harder to convince the university administration of this possibility. In the Amazon, Nina's son went to school for the first time, in a foreign language, and her daughter learned to walk. Like Tanja, Nina took her children (and her partner!) along to many interviews and events, and let them roam with the other children in the villages. Her connections with people were deepened by sharing her whole family with them, and it was enriching both in terms of the research as well as in terms of life experience. Returning to the UK, following the first trip, was more problematic: it was a struggle to find a school which would authorise longer absences to allow for further collective fieldwork periods with the children. But through a patchwork of home-school and a more flexible non-mainstream school, Nina's family accompanied her on a second long trip to the Amazon and a number of shorter, self-funded ones across Europe.

In contrast to the above vignettes, Paula – whose research has been based in South Africa, Ethiopia, and India – and her partner Glyn – who works primarily in India but also South Africa – generally do not take their children (now 15 and 18) on work trips abroad, and have not travelled much together while carrying out individual or joint research work. Rather than a considered strategy, this was a response to how things worked out for them as a family unit. Although working in the same department, sabbaticals never coincided to allow extended joint travel. More positively, secure employment and living in the north of England meant more affordable childcare was available, and each was supported by a strong network of extended family and friends when the other travelled abroad. Their children have travelled with them abroad for conferences, but from a relatively young age expressed a desire to not have their schooling and lives (friends, activities, etc.) disrupted by work through longer stints of travel, despite both of them loving travel and learning about elsewhere. The children have, however, helped to host and welcome research collaborators and colleagues from various countries into their home, and see this as a valuable part of their childhood and outlook. More recently, as the pandemic has brought international research right into the home-space through online meetings and workshops, it is raising the question for Paula and Glyn of whether international travel is 'really essential' (or environmentally justifiable) just at the point that they begin to emerge from the 'constraints' of parenting school-age children.

3 | CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS: CHANGING THINKING AND POLICIES AROUND FUNDING TRAVEL AND CARE

After having her first baby, Jessica organised a session with the Development Geographies Research Group at the RGS-IBG annual conference, titled ‘Childcare & Academia: how can we make this easier?’ Since then, the same group of people who discussed their experiences and frustrations (including the authors of this piece) have continued their attempts (with some success) to change policy on travel funding, supported (and now led) by the Development Geographies Research Group and the Feminist and Gender Geographies Research Group. Broadly, our goal is to achieve a gold standard of travel funding that acknowledges and supports care responsibilities (not just childcare).³ This campaign echoes some of the points made in ‘Muddy glee,’ as well as revealing points of divergence, which are discussed below.

‘Muddy glee’ set out to give a more positive account of women doing fieldwork and ‘reclaim the ways in which women can and do make spaces’. Our work to change policies on travel funding and care highlights the continuing need for this work – pushing for more openness, dialogue, and policy-responsiveness to the many ways that parents juggle fieldwork and family. During our initial discussion, it was apparent that there was a seemingly invisible set of experiences and practices of parents taking children on fieldwork. Despite having met a number of more senior academics who have taken their families on both long and short trips, Jessica still meets parents who have never heard any positive accounts of people taking children on fieldwork. We also found that policies (from funders and within universities) are rarely clear and accessible. As part of our campaign, we continue to push for clear resources and information points.

The hidden experiences of those who take children on fieldwork contribute to a mismatch between fieldwork travel policies and care responsibilities. A central issue is access to the field, as many families simply cannot afford to carry the extra costs of taking their children on fieldwork and/or covering the expenses of their partner being away from work. This issue underpins important questions about who subsequently creates knowledge and who is excluded (Jenkins, 2020) and has led us to argue that inadequate policies are contributing to the continuing gendered inequalities of academic geography (Hope et al., 2020). In this campaign, it has often seemed that care responsibilities primarily hinder women's access to the field and our campaign has been dominated by women. However, when men do step up and take part (thank you Glyn), we start to get a much more nuanced view of how parenting and care responsibilities impact fieldwork. As in ‘Muddy glee,’ we see a wider range of experiences, which emphasise how policy needs to shift to support male parents too. The discussion on gender and fieldwork, in an update to ‘Muddy glee,’ needs to catch up with the changing gender roles within families – to enable those who are trying to parent more equally. Further, we remain too blinkered to the differences between male and female parents – assumed to be part of a traditional nuclear family. We need to be careful to include other types of family, for example same sex couples and those who are single parents by choice, to make sure that changes to archaic policy frameworks are fit for purpose and made to last.

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ORCID

Tanja Bastia  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2025-7706>

Jessica Hope  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8726-8880>

Katy Jenkins  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9174-3648>

Charlotte Lemanski  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0982-2329>

Glyn Williams  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0293-5574>

ENDNOTES

¹ Considerations around using research assistants in the field while remaining at home, as a strategy for dealing with juggling family and overseas research, are also particularly pertinent, especially in the context of COVID, climate change, and the decolonising agenda, but discussing this in detail is beyond the scope of this commentary.

- ² We also recognise the need to extend this discussion beyond childcare, to other caring responsibilities, which are even less visible or accommodated within academia (see the work of DevGRG and GFGRG).
- ³ For more information on the travel funding ‘gold standard’, see <https://developmentgeographiesrg.org/care-and-the-academy-2>

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