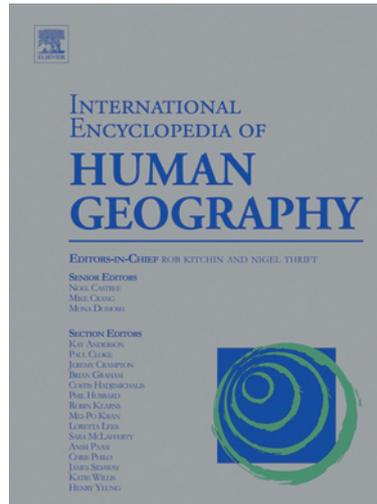


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Field Geographies

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Glossary

The British Survey Movement This movement emerged toward the end of the nineteenth century both in the UK and the USA. In a 'movement' which included several thousand amateurs and professionals, many 'regional surveys' based on 'scientific' methods were undertaken mainly by sociologists (but also by those now known as human geographers) on 'fact finding' missions. These were based on specifications of survey designs published in several pamphlets and articles by people such as Geddes, Victor Branford and Le Play House. Challenges to the positivist nature of the methodology which emerged in the late 1950s and then 1960s eventually saw the disappearance of the 'movement'.

Le Play Society It was formed in the UK in the 1920s, originally through study groups that developed around sociological issues such as social finance and credit for social needs. Eventually, geographers too began to participate in organised tours and fieldwork (Le Play tours) that were undertaken to carry out regional surveys around these issues. Soon, there was a need to separate out the study and travel focus, and a breakaway society, Le Play Society, was formed focusing solely on student tours or fieldwork.

Standpoint Theory With its roots in feminist discourse, began as a critique of 'rational', 'objective' methodologies and explanations. Standpoint theorists consider knowledge derived from this as biased to Western cultures and male perspectives which altogether present a limited picture of the world. They thus argue for knowledge that derives from multiple perspectives, a knowledge that takes into account communications which take place in a wider context and allow real voices to come through, for example, those of women in poverty.

Situatedness/Positionality Arguments are about the production of wider knowledge through the development of a methodology that is capable of relating to the context and position of actors within diverse settings. Feminist geographers, for example, have studied 'work' and 'home' as locations of situated knowledge for women. Others have considered race and patriarchal contexts in discussing post-colonial positionalities of historically colonized peoples.

Epistemological discourses such as those that have emerged from women's studies (particularly feminism)

and development studies have, however, shown geographers that there is a need to challenge the power assumptions embedded in the whole process of research, including methodological choices that can include or exclude. By tracing these discourses and using examples from these two disciplines, this article demonstrates how contemporary geography has taken on board some of the new methodological approaches that have thus transpired. In turn, this has enriched geographical enquiry, which is now, much as the subject itself, seen as a social construct requiring critical reflection and challenge.

Introduction

Often students are attracted to geography because it promises them exciting opportunities of 'fieldwork' both at home and abroad. Teachers too see fieldwork as essential in teaching geography and this is reflected in the definitive geography curricula of many higher education institutions all over the world. However, what constitutes 'the field' and defines 'fieldwork', fieldwork practices, and field methodologies has been fiercely contested, particularly in recent times. An old-fashioned, 'traditional' view is summed up, for example, in the following quote:

Field-work is essentially personal observation and recording; it brings reality to geographical study; it helps the geographer to acquire his all-important understanding 'eye for the country'; and thus it enriches his descriptive and explanatory powers. I would say that an essential part of the training of a young geographer is for him to choose some small accessible unit area that attracts him; acquire a pair of stout boots, perhaps the geographers first item of equipment, study in the area itself the association of physical and human conditions which there prevail, and in fact give the area its individuality; and record the information he collects in a series of original maps. (Monkhouse, 1955 in [Desylers and Starr, 2001](#), p. iv)

There are many suppositions underlying both the meaning of geography and geographical fieldwork in this quote. These include that fieldwork is about 'going out there' in all types of weather, that it involves collection and recording of information from a small and accessible geographical area, and that the geographer is a man, entering a tough terrain, being prepared for the masculine worlds of geographers.

As hinted in the first paragraph, in recent years however, particularly since the 1960s, all these

suppositions have been challenged through a long and ever-growing debate starting with the very premises of geography as a discipline, and what constitutes its 'fields', leading onto the nature and meaning of 'fieldwork' and how best this can be done. Geographical 'fields' are no longer viewed as accessible small area studies, as suggested in the Monkhouse quote above, or 'fieldwork' as based on 'objective' quantifying and mapping of 'facts'. Rather, contemporary geographers may argue that 'the field' occupies political and social spaces around us in our everyday locations, whether on our doorsteps or at a global distance. These 'expanded' fields can be accessible or not, in distant places or not, and visible or not. If anything, in doing 'fieldwork', we need to look beyond the visible in order to discover geographical meanings and human use of physical and social spaces.

This requires a rethink of methodological and 'fieldwork' practices which go beyond the 'objective' and 'distant' methods of mapping boundaries of the physical 'geographical terrain' to the recognition of the 'social terrain' where power relationships embedded in the daily politic define how maps are shaped. For example, the might of the British Empire was often portrayed to school children through (dark pink or red) colonial maps that juxtaposed Britain as the center of the world – a notion that has of course since been turned upside down by projections that have centered on others, for example, Peters projection centering on Africa. This article discusses these points further by giving a brief insight into some of the arguments that have shaped debates on contemporary field geographies. It particularly draws on two perspectives which take the notions of power and powerlessness as their central tenet, that is, a feminist one and a postcolonial one. It is suggested that these perspectives have reframed the meanings of geographical investigation, calling for a 'subjective' return to 'the field' which allows geographers to 'explore' the real stories of power relationships that define the use of space and place, in contrast to supposed neutral political spaces of 'distant' fieldwork as illustrated by the quote at the start of this section.

Exploring 'the Field'

It could be said that the 'traditional' model of the 'field' as something out there waiting to be discovered and recorded scientifically is associated with Alexander von Humboldt (1769–1859), the founding father of field studies. Humboldt was a Prussian naturalist who explored and wrote about much of Central and South America. He is famous for his diverse activities which include an extensive collection of plant, animal, and mineral specimens which he acquired during his travels; the extensive mapping of northern South America; and

the recordings he made of scientific phenomena such as altitudinal and observed astronomical events. Within the context of, and opposition from, divinity and religious-based explanations dominant at the time, Humboldt championed 'scientific reasoning', an explanation that was also to influence Darwin's *Origin of the Species* published soon after his death.

However, as Doreen Massey has pointed out, Humboldt's methods of 'scientific' investigation immediately drew criticism, for instance from Georges Cuvier (1769–1832) who carried out his naturalist anatomical studies in the dissection rooms of a museum in contrast to Humboldt's exploration-led field research. In comparing the desk-based work of a 'sedentary naturalist' who is able to minutely examine single objects with that of an explorer who takes a 'broad brush' look at the natural environment, Cuvier questioned the true location of science. Is this indoor or outdoors? Where can superior knowledge be gained, in natural habitats or through desk-based anatomical studies? Cuvier's questioning led to what Massey identifies as a definitive moment, shaping questions of epistemology, spatiality, and the general nature of science for geographers as it essentially asks where 'the field' is located, and how 'fieldwork' should be carried out.

Echoes of similar questions are evident in contemporary debates on 'the field', continuing since the Victorian times when the sons of the rich (Humboldt was a baron and women 'explorers' all but invisible) could discover exotic locations and attempt to provide a scientific rationale for geographical phenomena. Questions include key issues of the distance of locations as well as the 'objective' distance between the researcher and those researched; knowledge gathering; and appropriate 'field' methodologies including how best to represent the 'encounters' in the field in order to seek the 'truth' and represent accurately.

In fact, over the years, there has been much battling to and fro over these questions with increasingly sophisticated philosophical argument regarding various facets of 'the field' and 'field' practice. For instance, there has been much criticism of earlier influential geographical practices of 'viewing' the other from a distance as exemplified by Patrick Geddes who stood on the 'Outlook Tower' he established in 1892 in Edinburgh (Scotland), talking and pointing at a height. This teaching technique has, of course, been replaced with other interactive methods today, yet it remains a familiar method for many geography teachers in British schools. Another example is the fondness for 'objective' survey methodologies practiced in British schools and universities, the influence for which can be traced to at least a hundred regional fieldwork 'expeditions' that were carried out by the Le Play Society in Britain between 1930–60 in order to 'scientifically' collect data, identify causation, later utilized to feed into prescriptive policies.

The need for distance and 'objective' disengagement from 'the field' that is exemplified above has come under much criticism since the 1960s. This is partly due to a broadening of the discipline itself. Contemporary geography, particularly human geography, has seen a major shift in recent years from an awkward attempt to fit into a 'scientific' world of physical geography shaped by scientific tools, techniques, and justification. It is now a much wider discipline, crossing boundaries with several other disciplines such as ethnography, anthropology, sociology, and media. In fact, in the mid-1980s, as methodological boundaries between other disciplines and contemporary human geographies became blurred, geographers such as Eliot Hurst have been provoked in questioning the very existence and future of geography as a subject *per se*.

Apart from this crossing of interdisciplinary boundaries, the 1960s political/societal movements, such as the global women's and black movements, challenged geographical assumptions of 'fieldwork', assumptions built around power relationships that either misrepresented or left out the real voices of people who were marginalized or on the edges of society. This challenge was fierce and vocal. It began to question the historical and material positioning of geographical explanations. For instance, for the millions who were on the receiving end of geographical explorations, the story was different. The Royal Geographical Society, which was founded in 1830 within the context of British colonialism, relied on geographical 'explorations', mapping of boundaries, and hierarchical classifications of 'darker continents' and 'darker races' helped to legitimize forced rule over millions. As Kobayashi and Peake in citing Livingstone suggest, "the strongest of imperial geography's metaphor was that of the moral-climatic idiom," which by naturalization of racial differences according to climatic classifications placed those of the 'dark races' at the bottom of geography's terrain.

'The field' is then a complex political arena which spreads beyond a distant, accessible location 'out there'. It is in fact where power relations between the researcher and the researched are played out, whether these are defined by class, race, and/or gender. To get into what lies beyond the surface, and to understand how power shapes space and place, requires less distancing and more engagement with 'the field', and a constant search for more appropriate, inclusive methods of enquiring into the relationship between physical environments and human interaction. In this it is important to understand the historical and social contexts within which we negotiate 'the field'. For instance, as the anthropologist Johannes Fabian suggests, time differentiates and transforms how we view 'the other'. African people, for example, within the context of historical missionary practices during the 'discovery' of Africa were often

viewed as 'savages' ready for religious conversion. Global political awareness over time has forced a transformation of such derogative stereotyping of many who were caught up in the story of colonialism.

This article discusses further the point that 'the field' is a political arena through a review of a feminist critique that has defied the androcentricism (consciously or otherwise fixating on the male as the center of the world) and distancing of the whole research process in seeking a return to 'the field' where 'subjective' engagement can be celebrated. This is followed by a review of development methodologies that have equally strongly attempted to include the invisible 'voices of the poor' that have previously been lost or dismissed in historically racialized spaces of a postcolonial world.

A Feminist Return to 'the Field'

As suggested earlier, one of the reasons for focusing on a feminist perspective on 'the field' is that, particularly since the 1960s, feminists have made a huge impact in redefining the disciplinary boundaries and understanding of geography. Feminist intervention in geography has to be understood within the context of an exciting, optimistic women's movement of the 1970s when feminist literature (such as Kate Millet's 1970 *Sexual Politics*, Simon de Beauvoir's 1978 *The Second Sex*) brought politics into the personal, questioned public spaces, patriarchal structures and the world of work (as with Anne Oakley's 1972 *The Sociology of Housework*, Maria Mies' 1986 *Patriarchy and Accumulation at a World Scale*), paving paths toward direct collective actions (e.g., with the UK Greenham Common Women's Peace camp 1981–2000).

An important strand of feminist intervention at the time has been the questioning of how we 'find out'. Feminists argued that the processes of enquiry are essentially embedded in gendered power relationships, well summarized in a book entitled *Doing Feminist Research*. This book showed how all processes of research, starting with what is included on research agendas, right up to the end process of publication reflected a male bias of power in universities and other teaching institutions. In turn, this meant that only the research that met the criteria of a dominant male rationality received status and visibility, whereas other important topics were simply left off the agenda or dismissed/sidelined through a questioning of methodological significance.

By the mid-1980s, such challenge to the androcentrism of research processes led to a severe and intense attack particularly on the rational, 'objective' scientific methodology of 'the field'. An example is Lloyd's argument that the notion of 'ideal rationality' is embodied in seventeenth-century ideals of manhood rather than those of humankind, as evident in the philosophical assumptions

of Descartes and Spinoza. Thus, feminists argued that knowledge in modern Western culture is verified primarily through men's experiences. Any 'truths' generated are therefore based on a limited knowledge of reality in which they circumvent or bypass the real conditions, and the ontological foundation of gender, race, class, and culture. For instance, in apartheid South Africa, was the 'truth' the story that of the segregated black housemaid living in poverty in Johannesburg or that of a well-to-do white 'madam' for whom she worked?

Writers such as Nancy Hartsock and Susan Harding in 1986 and 1987 therefore argued for a feminist standpoint, the framework of which is a nonandocentric, nonidealist methodology that is contextually grounded, and enables a differing understanding of social relationships of power and powerlessness. For example, in the author's own work with poor women who make meals for migrant workers in the horrendous and vast slums of Mumbai, her 'field' was located within the context of the extreme poverty and vulnerable lives and livelihoods of the slum dwellers. Within this unpredictable and harsh world, there was no neat methodological fit. The author was also so disturbed by what she saw, it was impossible to stay at an 'objective' distant, as a woman researching circumstances of other women. A feminist standpoint gave her the confidence to adapt methodology to the particular context and to use subjectivity and feelings as evidence.

Standpoint theory, as with other politico-ontological questions, drew much criticism, particularly from women who saw their boundaries of oppression as defined differently. This included black and Asian women, lesbians, and women from the 'Third World' whose daily reality was shaped through race, color, homophobia, and poverty. This, they argued, was very different from the often privileged and ethnocentric backgrounds of Western academic women. This argument came home to the author sharply during the research she mentions above. While, for instance, she shared her role as a wife or a mother with the women in the slums, there was no comparison between the advantageous background in which she carried out these roles, with those of the wives and mothers from lower caste, poverty-ridden backgrounds who struggled daily just to feed their children.

Over the years, debates on a feminist standpoint and difference have become very complex and refined, giving rise to further subdebates such as on positionality and situatedness which have led to alternative understandings on space, place, and scale. The range is wide and stretches from microlevel local studies, including body mapping and gendering of everyday spaces, to macro-level studies on interconnectedness between regions, nations, and global linkages, supported by feminist geographers such as Massey, McDowell and Sharp, and Bell and Valentine. As we go into the twenty-first

century, dominant questions include those of identity and place, especially with those who have 'no place'. This includes the millions of displaced around the world through conflict, through global capitalist restructuring, through environmental destruction, and through religious fundamentalism that undermines women's position in society.

Feminist epistemological discourses that began as a challenge to male power, scientific rationality, and 'objectivity' have therefore turned a full circle. Instead of a 'distancing', feminist standpoint celebrates subjectivity, thus demanding a return to 'the field' where the 'truth' tells the real story behind the lives of the 'researched' rather than a partial one. For instance, which is the partial and fuller truth behind infant mortality rates in the slums of Mumbai? Is it through the 'distant' census records of infant mortality, or is it through the grief displayed in a mother's story, which will inevitably draw a 'subjective' researcher into her life, particularly if this researcher is a woman and a parent herself?

A Postcolonial Return to 'the Field'

Like the feminist paradigm, those whose 'fields' are the worlds of post-1950s developing and transitional economies, question the value of 'Western' field practices and methodologies within very different and highly complex social situations of poverty. While a major issue for 'field' studies in development (which is a branch of geography specializing in mostly ex-colonial economies as above) has also centered on a methodology that engages rather than distances the participants, a primary starting point of the discourse is whether 'fieldwork' should be done in the first place, particularly by researchers from the 'West'.

Underlying this dilemma is the acute awareness of how a colonial hegemonic ideology has represented the 'other' (evident in many, often erroneous, anthropological studies of tribes and 'darker' races as discussed earlier). Development practitioners and academics share 'the field' of time and space, not even a full century apart, between 'field truths' that fed the colonial imagination, and research that counts toward poverty alleviation based on meaningful cultural interactions. Fear of the intrusive nature of fieldwork, fear of exploitation, and fear of reinforcing patterns of power and privilege underpin the conflict that is so created. Therefore, since the 1980s, a very rich discourse has emerged on the ethical dilemmas of development especially from 'postdevelopment' critics of Latin America, Asia, and Africa, who question development intervention of any type led from the 'West'. One such is Escobar who argues that the debates around 'development' that have emerged from the West are reinforcing the legitimacy of Western 'experts' (such as

World Bank consultants), and undermining local people and indigenous knowledge.

Related to this is the realization that 'fieldwork' (on which 'experts' feed) continues to either misrepresent or underrepresent the needs of people in developing countries, particularly marginalized people. Therefore policy and practice, which are integral to the development agenda, have at best left out those who are most burdened by poverty and inequality, and at worst subject them to bad development projects that have further impeded progress. Two influential, groundbreaking interventions came from Boserup who pointed to the omission of gender and women's significant contribution from a development analysis, and Chambers who argued for an inclusion of local voices in research through a participatory approach.

Participatory approaches are about development from 'below' rather than 'above', informed by knowledge of those who are at the receiving end of it, rather than 'experts' whose knowledge is remote. Theoretically, this enhances a fuller knowledge base and empowers grassroots participants through the research process as they gain confidence in identifying their problems and designing solutions. Participatory methodology as both theory and practice has thus allowed development studies to break away from the traditional mold of the 'objective'/expert researcher and the subject/respondent. Embedded in this is a recognition that quantitative information (e.g., surveys, census, baselines) is useful as background or complimentary data, but the real information about people's lives and livelihood comes from qualitative responses, the oral histories, the untold stories, case studies, and an understanding of the subjective where research responses are of prime value.

Since participatory approaches have generated much interest from many disciplinary strands, there are several textbooks on how to actually conduct participatory research. There is also much critique on its idealism and limitation, for example, that these approaches are still a little more than another information technique and that participation is not always equal. Nevertheless, participatory approaches over the years have increasingly demonstrated that research roles are actually integrated with goals of development. This is because the 'field' is where researchers intervene in social processes that shape other people's lives and culture. How that intervention is carried out requires introspection and critical reflection, particularly as the history of development is littered with examples where well-meaning, but uncritical initiatives have left local people worse off. Because of this, critical reflection aims to include as many stakeholders involved in the process of development as possible so that the knowledge base of progress can be extended. Extended knowledge thus informs wider debates and policy decisions with lesser margins of error. In

the process, participants can expect to be further empowered in shaping their own futures rather than be dictated 'from above'.

In recent years, the idea of participatory 'fieldwork' has taken on new meanings in what has become known as 'action research'. Action research relies on 'field' activity that brings together a number of stakeholders who share interests in generating an outcome. These stakeholders can include a range of local people, voluntary or funding agents, academics, and development practitioners, all of whom share a wealth of acquired lived knowledge and are best placed to generate lived theories of how to negotiate action in 'the field'. Action research is, therefore, that which is generated through both lived and critical knowledge amassed by stakeholders who act together to challenge and change their own circumstances in a manner which will generate sustainable, grassroots development.

An example of this is a women's farming project (The Banjundling Women's Vegetable Garden) in the Gambia where women farmers, local activists, interested volunteers, and the author herself as an academic have come together to develop initiatives on how to generate income by diversifying crops. The women farmers have lived knowledge of the soil, farming techniques, and cropping, while local activists, that of internal marketing and sales, and the author, as an academic, has skills which help with funding applications or writing up of reports. In this way, a differentiated group of people shared action over a farming project that over the years has generated income for some 150 previously displaced women farmers.

It is important to note that action research is often a lengthy process which is not always smooth. For instance, in the above example, the project took some 10 years to establish itself and there were many trials and errors during this time. It is also important that the project remains sustainable and can build capacity to teach others at a grassroots level. Action research therefore has a social aim in that ideally this should empower the participants. In the example given above, the women farmers involved in the original project have now helped to establish another nine such projects. They have also learned to negotiate for more land, enter markets, and diversify into animal husbandry. Action research also has a political aim in that it initiates change in power relations. For example, women in the Gambia work the land but mostly do not own any. They live in a fairly patriarchal society, often in polygamous marriages. Participation and working collectively has given them strength to address some of these structural biases that affect their daily struggle.

Discourse around developmental 'fieldwork' has therefore attempted to decolonize understandings based on historical colonial power relations which have

presented European knowledge as central. It takes lived knowledge of people at grassroots level as its mainstay in 'the field'. Development geography remains concerned with questions of ethics, representation, historically tangled relationships, and methodological significance. However, at the end of the day as development is about action, full engagement with 'the field' where lived experience and knowledge create action that better lives is of central importance.

Conclusion

Contemporary geography no longer exists as knowledge of lists, classifications, and worldly facts – acquired by traipsing around in muddy boots, mapping, and measuring of a vast expanse of homogenized space of the 'conquered' world. The geographical field in the twenty-first century is much stretched since the 1960s Pattison definitions of the four traditions of geography, that is, geometrical boundary mapping spatial tradition, the area studies tradition, the man–land tradition, and the Earth science tradition.

The geographical 'field' is now understood as vast, being further extended through globalization and interconnectedness through real and virtual worlds. This has meant that difference within spaces and cultures has become increasingly apparent while at the same time globalization has brought new questions in relation to power.

Within this, 'fieldwork' remains an important part of geography, and lends it some distinct identity. However, as the feminist and developmental geographers have argued, there is a need to engage actively in 'the field' in order to open up knowledge and spaces that have often remained invisible through a search for distancing and 'objectivity'.

See also: Developmentalism; Feminism/Feminist Geography; Fieldwork; Participatory Action Research; Postcolonialism/Postcolonial Geographies;

Quantitative Methodologies; Regional Geography I; Spatial Science.

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