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# Teaching and learning in the tropics: An epistemic exploration of 'the field' in a development studies fieldtrip

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**Abstract**

Development studies, with its focus on the human condition in the global south, employs theories, analytical tools and teaching methods often found in geography, including the international fieldtrip which is taken to a 'developing' country. In 2013 and 2014 I led a two-week trip to Ethiopia with 60-70 students on a UK masters programme. In 2013, a worrying yet fascinating conversation with a student (recounted below), prompted me to reflect on epistemologies of 'the field' in international fieldtrips (especially to countries normatised as 'developing'), particularly the expectation among students and instructors that 'the field' is a place of difference punctuated by "exotic" encounters. To better comprehend the effects of 'the field' on students' learning, in 2014, I introduced an assessed reflexive field diary to understand what the fieldtrip experience teaches students about themselves and their relationship to the field. In this paper I present critical reflections on 'the field' in development studies fieldtrips drawing upon students' diary entries and geography literature that speaks to a provocative concept - 'the tropics'. These reflections illuminate prevailing challenges in the study and practice of development and suggest a way forward.

**Keywords:** fieldtrip, the field, development studies, reflexivity, diaries, developing countries

## 1. Introduction

> Student: You've been to other African cities, haven't you?
> Me: Yes.
> Student: Are all African cities as disgusting as this one?
> (Conversation with a student in a north Ethiopian city one morning in May 2013)

> The identification of the Northern temperate regions as the normal, and the tropics as altogether other—climatically, geographically and morally—became part of an enduring imaginative geography, which continues to shape the production and consumption of knowledge in the twenty-first century world.
> (Driver and Yeoh, 2000:1)

The student in the encounter above was 22 years old, from a large city in China and from a family well-to-do enough to send her to a London university. The occasion of the fieldtrip was her first engagement with a country and environment typically called 'developing'. Her questions surprised me greatly, initially for their lack of tact, and subsequently for the forcefulness with which she had othered the city and on my response attempted to expand this othering to more African cities. This student's questions brings to mind the concept of the 'tropics'; a constructed geography of sameness and difference that simultaneously denotes homogenous spaces distinct from the norm of western Europe (Bowd and Clayton, 2003). I apply this concept as way to understand 'the field' in development studies fieldtrips, however I do so on the understanding that discourses of representation travel (Sharp, 2009) and that students from China studying in UK universities (as in the example above) are as capable of reproducing a constructed geography of otherness as any student from western Europe.

In the first part of the paper I aim to bring together insights on international fieldtrips to developing countries from two bodies of literature: one that discusses its pedagogical value and the value of a much vaunted assessment tool - reflexive field diaries - in helping to craft deep learning (McGuinness and Simm, 2005; Robson, 2002; Rosser, 2012), and the other intently concerned with discourses of coloniality that may be enacted and reinforced by fieldtrips from northern universities to developing country destinations (Abbott, 2006; Ogden, 2008). The second part briefly describes my use of field diaries in a fieldtrip to Ethiopia in 2014, before moving on to present an analysis of the content of the diaries produced by students and their reflections on 'the field' and their relationship to it. The conclusion sums up key lessons learnt about epistemologies of 'the field'.

## 2. The value of international fieldtrips

In literature on pedagogies of geography, the fieldtrip represents at its simplest activities outside of the classroom. Although there are multiple types of fieldtrip (Fuller, et al., 2006), there are commonalities across their aim and purpose which include to enable students to link theory and practice, to understand grounded applications of what can be abstract concepts, and develop interpersonal skills that arise from getting to know faculty and their student colleagues better in a context of working together, being together and experiencing new environments together for a short but intense period of time (Dummer, et al., 2008; Fuller et al., 2006; Herrick, 2010; Kent et al., 1997). Kent et al. (1997) list a range of objectives for fieldwork (the work undertaken on a fieldtrip) under three headings: subject specific objectives, transferable skills, and the 'hidden agenda' of fieldwork – socialisation and personal development. While Kent et al. (1997) concede the value of fieldtrips can be ambiguous, such concerns appear overridden by the enjoyment of students which in turn encourages deep learning outcomes (Boyle et al., 2007; Marvell, et al., 2013).

In development studies, there is little debate around the pedagogy of the discipline other than (as Rosser, 2012, also notes) discussions on curriculum design and debate over the eminently practical skills that students of development studies ought to hold (Woolcock, 2007; Loxley, 2004). Such skills include "the skills of the 'detective' (locating, generating, analysing, and interpreting information), the 'translator' (mediating a dialogue between […] policymakers, managers, field staff, villagers, local officials, academics, donors), and the 'diplomat' (brokering differences, doing deals, moving agendas, negotiating agreements)." (Woolcock, 2007:57). Fieldtrips are an ideal teaching and learning activity where they instil 'detective' skills through fieldwork, and through exposure to different types of development actor including potential beneficiaries of development interventions (e.g. people who may be poor, marginalised, vulnerable or excluded in some way), empathy can be built; which is the foundation for skills of the translator and diplomat. Given the international orientation of the discipline's subject matter, and given its focus on issues of poverty and inequality, fieldtrip destinations tend to focus on exposing students to the material and social manifestations of poverty and inequality in countries labelled 'developing'.

Recent discussions on the value of fieldtrips reflects a student-centric curriculum design where fieldtrips can denote a learning activity with high student engagement and good potential for higher level thinking through problem-based learning (Biggs, 2012). Kent et al. (1997:321) write, "The overriding objective [of fieldtrips] should always be the maximisation of the students' engagement and educational benefit from the work." For McGuinness and Simm (2005:242), long haul fieldtrips to "unfamiliar places and cultures offers a rich opportunity to disrupt student expectations, and to

stimulate critical reflection on […] practice". It is in this argument that the strongest case for international fieldtrips over domestic ones is made and where synergy between geography and development studies is greatest: students' exposure to difference is sharper and subsequently more stimulating. Other authors have also noted, with a nod to institutional demands, that international fieldtrips are more marketable (Fuller et al., 2006; Abbott, 2006; Robson, 2002), and can be cheaper if they are taken to developing countries with lower costs of living[1] (McGuinness and Simm, 2005). In development studies, the fieldtrip undoubtedly serves as a valuable marketing tool that promises to link theory and practice for students, who typically lack working experience in the development industry and are drawn by the prospect of learning to *do* development. Additionally, such trips can involve higher risks and thus demand greater attention from instructors when conducting risk assessment and management (Ogden, 2008; Herrick, 2010) and because of the expectation of cultural difference particular attention is required to teach students the ethics of fieldwork (Robson, 2002).

For both disciplines to frame fieldtrips in terms of a student learning activity, a response to institutional demands and a logistical endeavour, instructors are in danger of seeing 'the field' through a narrow epistemological lens. In much of the literature on fieldtrips, 'the field' is a place given temporary meaning for the duration of a trip, that meaning is coded into learning objectives, student assessment, risk assessment and trip schedules. This normative value of 'the field' sets a pedagogical obstacle in terms of challenging students' expectations of what a fieldtrip is and what it can do. For example, in other narratives 'the field' is a site of political engagement between instructor, student and subject. In this narrative, knowledge production and consumption are political activities mediated by unequal power relations within a political, social and cultural context. Abbott (2006), for example, discusses the association between UK university fieldtrips to developing countries (to Gambia in her example) and British imperialist legacy, arguing 'the field' is not a neutral place and fieldwork is not a neutral activity. In a thoroughly under-researched narrative, 'the field' has its own politics into which a fieldtrip is temporarily interjected; here, 'the field' is not an activity with a beginning and an end, but the everyday places residents might call 'the workplace', 'the home' or a social arena. The dominance of a narrow epistemological lens that defines 'the field' is in danger of two things: (i) predefining the expectation of difference, as the 'field' is given meaning by the instructor who selects this place over that primarily because "unfamiliar places and cultures offers a rich opportunity to disrupt student expectations" (McGuinness and Simm, 2005:242). (ii) Where 'the field' is a developing country, 'development' may become the neutral context for study and not the subject of critical thinking.

The expectation of noteworthy difference to a place outside of the UK, and particularly in countries labelled 'developing', is reflected in the provocative concept of 'the tropics'. Driver and Yeoh (2000) argue the contruction of the tropics was aligned with a distinct field of geographic enquiry that operated within a binary of a geographical, cultural and climatic other separated (on essentialising grounds) from the temperate i.e. that which was "civilised, modest [and] enlightened" (2000:1). Arnold's (2000) discussion of the 'paradox of the tropics' signposts a crossover between the tropics

[1] There is also a debate around the high costs for students to attend fieldtrips in general, but especially international fieldtrips, where the cost can exclude some students (see Kent et al., 1997 and Herrick, 2010). I do not enter that debate here because the students on my programme have the costs of the fieldtrip built into their fees. Exclusion, where is occurs, is at stage of selecting a masters' programme.

as a rich natural spectacal arousing the curiosity of geographers, explorers and anthropologists, and the tropics as a poor place of human and cultural deficiency in need of technical solutions; that is, as a place subject to the mercies of the staples of development studies - disease, poverty and natural disasters. To Power and Sidaway (2004), the notable continuties between tropical geography and development studies are more explicit, particularly ideas of distinctive spaces conceptualised in binaries that imply a hierarchy of order that positions western Europe at the top e.g. tropical and temperate, developing and developed, global south and global north. To Said (1978), such differences (the Oriental and Occiential following that pattern) are entrenched via essentialising discourses of representation forged among western scholars to know non-western places and people. While the field of development geography has evolved with poststructural and postcolonial critiques to reflect on understanding places on their own terms (Power and Sidaway 2004), and development studies and its practice has too learnt to value multiple representations and interpretations of knowledge and knowledge production in 'developing' countries (e.g. Robert Chambers's (1994) work on decentring expertise in practices of development), the same effort to diversify representations of 'the field' based on a range of voices and experiences is missing in the thinking and production of fieldtrips.

Within literature on fieldtrips where international fieldtrips are discussed, 'the field' is refered to an "exotic"[2] place (e.g. see Fuller et al. 2006; Herrick, 2010; Kent, et al., 1997; McGuinness and Simm 2005; Ogden 2008; and Robson, 2002); this is a problematic term for casting an enduring tropical mist around representation of the 'field'. To this representation, we – the instructors – add a territorial space and through fieldtrip programmes designed to maximise exposure to the unfamiliar produce exotic encounters. In development studies, such encounters tend to be with 'marginalised', 'vulnerable' and 'poor' people or their representatives in places replete with development problems. However, Power, Mohan, and Mercer (2006) offer a more promising way to think about 'the field' and the relationship of instructors and students to it. With reference to fieldwork, they suggest that it is possible to produce postcolonial epistemologies through the co-production of knowledge in fieldwork and through critical self-reflection on one's own positionality. In a variation of their argument, I suggest that it is possible to produce postcolonial epistemologies of 'the field' by positioning students as subjects in a fieldtrip tasked with understanding their subjectivity. That is, understanding the role of their social identities (gender, age, ethnicity etc.) *and* the context, history and politics they come with - both of their own making, and the ones that are associated with them by virtue of the country they come from, the university they represent, and/or where they are assumed to come from by others – and its relationship to 'the field'. The reflexive diary (assessed at 30% of the module) was the medium of instruction to attain this learning objective.

## 3. The reflexive field diary

A reflexive field diary is a popular form of assessment in international fieldtrips, or in any fieldtrip where there is an expectation the student will encounter difference and unfamiliar situations. Reflexive diaries are claimed to promote the development of key skills such as observation and its analysis among students (Dummer et al. 2008), and prompt critical reflexivity engendering explorations of positionality within a fieldtrip (Hope 2009). Although Nairn (2005) notes valourising

[2] Albeit within single quotation marks, perhaps denoting the author's discomfort with the word and/or a perceived lack of an alternative.

the reflexive potential of student diaries can be frought as "the practice of journal writing […] also risks the inadvertent construction of self-reflexivity as another version of the rational subject (Rose, 1997) who is fully conscious and able to account for all of her/his motivations and emotions via the medium of individual writing" (2005:297). Furthermore, O'Connell and Dyment (2011) note a tension between student's reflections and assessment; that is the instructor's professional judgement (coded into assessment criteria) hangs over what a student reflects upon, in what way and how. These two concerns limit any claim that I can make that reflexive field diaries, in itself, can produce a range of epistemes of 'the field', as not only may students write for the instructor cenoring their thoughts on 'the field' and their relationship to it, but 'the field' itself and the student's relationship to it may already be constructed in the student's mind in ways that cannot be easily unlearnt during a fieldtrip or through the process of diary writing. Although, the student diaries discussed here illustrate that despite these limitations, different epistemes of 'the field' are present in the reflextive accounts of students.

Taking a cue from Glass (2014), who argues that reflexivity must be embedded into the curriculum as far as possible and that this can be achieved through multiple activities not limited to student field diaries, prior to the fieldtrip in 2014, I introduced the idea of critical reflection on practices of development through discussions of postcolonial and feminist theory[3], and in earlier assessed and non-assessed class assignments. In recognition that for the majority of students reflexive writing was a new experience, I issued a structure to students to follow. Following Schön's (1991) rather didactic process to reflect on practice, students were told to write a daily field diary of observations and thoughts and to then use this as their evidence base to subsequently analyse using relevant literature to produce the reflexive diary. This process allows students to work systematically in two steps: (i) document observations; (ii) refer to academic literature to make sense of the observations.

Students were told the diary should focus on a key lesson they had learnt from the fieldtrip about either fieldtrips in general, the research process or themselves as scholar-practitioners. As McGuinness and Simm (2005) found, some students were reluctant to write the diary and confused by what they were 'supposed' to write. Also, picked up in comments such as "I want to work in development, and asking questions of myself is good, but it doesn't help me to be a practitioner" in the end of term module evaluation, is another issue: in development studies, almost all students wish to pursue a career in the field of development and undertake a master's degree to further this aim, thus learning to question the values attached to 'development' and their own values in seeking to be a development worker can be an unwelcome lesson.

The fieldtrip was to a northern city in Ethiopia for a period of two weeks. The trip forms part of a module on development in practice and is focused on designing and implementing a small research project to better understand the effects of national poverty reduction strategies. With guidance from instructors, in groups of five or six, students prepare a research proposal prior to departure, collect data and begin its analysis in-country working closely with lecturers and researchers from an Ethiopian university nearby with whom we partner, and complete the analysis to produce a research report on their return with commentary on knowledge gaps. The report is shared with the Ethiopian university and copies are kept in their library, we also share copies with the next cohort of students

[3] In preparation for these discussions students had read papers by Gillian Rose (1997) and Gayatri Spivak (1988) on reflexivity and situated knowledge and the complexities of crafting others. These pieces were clearly influential and were frequently cited in students' diaries.

to help build a corpus of research on the city and development issues, and to avoid duplication. The students in 2014 (as in previous years) hail from around the world; approximately 70% of the student intake are international students, many from countries that might be labelled 'developing'.

Prior to departure, the students were not told to expect Ethiopia to be *different* in anyway, largely because with an international cohort of well-travelled students, to do so would be to make homogenising assumptions of their past experiences. Yet, as revealed through a careful reading of the diaries as part of the grading process, in every one of the 45[4] diaries their authors commented upon their expectation of difference, and for some – particularly students who identify has hailing from a 'developing' country – an expectation of similarity. These expectations of the field were disrupted, for most students, through reflections on positionality engendering critical narratives of 'the field' at large. In a second and more thorough reading of the diaries, I coded the various discourses of 'the field' in them. These codes were iteratively developed as I read and re-read each diary. Two dominant episteme of 'the field' emerged in students' work and are discussed below[5].

**(i) 'The field' is representative of other places**

This narrative of the field arises most strongly from students expecting a similar experience to ones they have previously known. One student wrote:

"Before leaving for Ethiopia, I told myself and others that going to Ethiopia for fieldwork will not be a shocking experience for me and that I am well aware of what to expect, since I grew up seeing poverty all around me in Bangladesh. … Before embarking on this fieldtrip, I was determined in finding commonality between the people of [the Ethiopian city] and myself…" (Student A, 04/06/14).

Another commented:

"I believed that as an African I was immune to making generalizations about Africa. A recent extended stay in Sierra Leone left me with a general sense of belonging to the continent… Since I was African I could not 'other' Ethiopians because I was one of them. As it turns out I could, and I was not." (Student B, 04/06/14).

Both of these students were expecting similarity based on an essentialising discourse of 'Africa' and 'developing' country. They had constructed an Ethiopia that was poor (in the way one student understood 'poor') and African (in the way another student understood Africa). The search for similarity proved fruitless for them and through field observations and interactions with

[4] Two masters' programmes were combined for fieldtrip activities in 2014 totalling 63 students; 45 were from one programme and only they were instructed to write field diaries.

[5] Other less dominant narratives of 'the field' include places of deep difference based on little more than negative stereotypes with highly problematic conclusions. E.g. Student F wrote on attending a marketplace, "My first thoughts were pity for the people having to live and trade in such conditions. However, I quickly realised that this was normal for the locals and [they] even welcomed us with smiles." (04/06/14). Student G wrote, "Through our interviews I [found] that the farmer only works for fifteen days per month, and only six hours per day, compared with East Asia[n] workers their working time is very short […] due to the lack of education and the traditional culture […] the efficiency of the workers are very low." (04/06/14). I do not discuss these narratives here because the issues raised by them have been effectively and thoroughly discussed in other papers e.g. Nairn's (2005) paper on students visiting a marketplace and Ogden's (2008) paper on "the colonial student" who views the world "from the veranda" last occupied by colonial rulers.

respondents, these students re-evaluated their expectations and learnt that their gaze on 'the field' is not representative of other places and times. The lesson is eloquently summarised by another student who wrote, "Having volunteered in Africa previously, I arrived in Ethiopia unworried and rather nonchalant, believing myself to have a good idea of the ways of the continent. Yet as the trip progressed, I was surprised to find some of my expectations disproved." (Student C, 04/06/14). The student recounted an episode that forced her to rethink her assumptions of similarity. She explained:

"In our first day of fieldwork […], two of my research team members and I interviewed three government officials, all of them men. Before the interviews, I mentally prepared myself to witness subtle or explicit sexism [presumably on the basis of previous experience], and worried that the officials might only offer handshakes to our male team members and translator … Yet as the day progressed, the officials seemed to treat us all, male or female, with equal respect … On reflection, beneath my fear that I would encounter sexism from male officials was an assumption about the treatment of women in Ethiopia, specifically, that they must be treated unequally and unwell." (*Ibid.*)

Although this experience prompted the student to reflect on 'the field' and the relationship she had assumed between it and her previous knowledge of an African country, something she does not discuss is the highly contextual nature of encounters that prompt an understanding of 'the field'. This student was treated in a way she did not expect which forced her to question her ideas of sexism. But, what if the government official behaved differently? Might she have reached a different conclusion on sexism with a similar strength of conviction? These three examples illustrate the shallow basis on which expectations of similarity and difference in and of 'the field' are constructed and dismantled, and thereby illuminate problems with the seductive simplicity of framing 'the field' as experiences of similarity and/or difference. Potentially, a more fruitful representation of 'the field' is a place given meaning in a context with students encouraged to suspend the temptation to see difference or similarity with other places.

**(ii) 'The field' is a series of subjective encounters**

In complement to 'the field' as a contextual encounter, this narrative arises from my analysis of students' diaries rather than a conclusion students reach themselves. Where students do discuss subjective encounters they do so in relation to fieldwork. One student wrote:

"As a researcher, it is incredibly difficult to accurate[ly] discern how your positionality and interpretation is influencing the knowledge produced in a study. I wonder, did my identity as a foreigner, or my age or my gender, impact the answers given … One consideration is the difference between lived and observed experiences, that is, the impossibility of truly 'knowing' what our research subjects know when we have not ourselves experienced it… [Thus] [t]he knowledge produced from these interviews was not objective but subjective and interpretive…" (Student C, 04/06/14).

Through reflecting on the idea of knowing another's reality, the student raises questions over how knowledge is produced and the mediating lens of students' experiences and identities. Although Student C is discussing knowing research subjects, Student D (below) connects students' experiences

and identities with knowing places. Student D offers an interpretation of her classmates' reactions to the hotel we were staying in:

"After hearing complaints about the living conditions throughout the day […] I noticed how although many colleagues were born and raised in developing countries, they had lead [sic] very different lives to and were sheltered from many of the problems that most people in their country faced. Therefore, their difficulties adjusting to some of the realities of the fieldtrip experience stemmed from their social status." (Student D, 04/06/14).

This excerpt is problematic because the student writes in essentialising terms about her classmates and does not write about herself, but as an interpretation of her peers it is noteworthy that she identifies social status, or class, as a mediating factor to understanding "realities of the fieldtrip". If 'the field' is a snapshot of conditions in which development is practiced, then to this student, many of her classmates are excluded from understanding another's reality because of the limited exposure they have in their own countries stemming from their social status. Both excerpts infer that 'the field' is an arena for encounters with people and places that students are unlikely to encounter because of their social identities and status, and that students' knowledge of 'the field' is produced by the experiences and identities through which they gaze on 'the field', suggesting 'the field' as a snapshot of conditions in which development in practice is actually produced through subjective encounters.

## 4. Conclusion: lessons learnt about epistemologies of 'the field'

Through student's insights on 'the field' in international fieldtrips to developing countries, this paper aimed to disrupt dominant narratives of 'the field' prevalent in literature on the pedagogies of fieldtrips where 'the field' is largely an "exotic" encounter selected for its potential to expose students to unfamiliar places, cultures and, in development studies, unfamiliar people. With reference to debates on the tropics and its enduring legacy in and critique of development studies, I suggested it was possible to have students reflect on their subjectivities to engender postcolonial epistemologies of 'the field' in the hopes that this may (i) disrupt the framing of 'the field' as encounters of difference or similarity; and (ii) where 'the field' is a developing country, establish 'development' as a subject of critical thinking and not simply the context in which development is practiced.

The two narratives of 'the field' that emerge strongly in student reflexive diaries are 'the field' as contextual and as a series of subjective encounters. This is a potentially fruitful positioning of 'the field' that enables students to ask "the awkward questions raised by race, gender, poverty and power" (Abbott 2006:328) in field study to 'developing' countries. The relevance of these complementary narratives of 'the field' are enduring beyond development studies fieldtrips to wider practices of development within the development industry. In the industry, 'the field' is a common and popular term that refers to sites where development projects (for the most part) are implemented; typically, 'the field' is a different location to the main offices of implementing staff. It is a place, pre-determined by development managers, where development is practiced. Several students saw their experiences in and of 'the field' in the fieldtrip echoed in the discourses of the wider development industry. One student, reflecting on the importance of understanding cultural contexts in practices of development, wrote:

"It is easy to sit in country offices in the capital city and design interventions, without knowing the local context. This is something that I was familiar with during my work experience in Bangladesh when dealing with foreign technical staff setting the terms of how people in poor countries should live." (Student A, 04/06/14).

Another student reflecting on his ability to know another's reality wrote:

"I felt there was an incommensurable distance between myself and the people I observed, perhaps due to time constraints, and linguistic and cultural differences. However, the same distance existed between local [NGOs] and […] communities. For instance, representatives from the local NGO […] used the same development language as ours and did not [seem to engage with] local solutions to local problems. […This] NGO relies on international donors, particularly USAID, for funding and this poses questions on their accountability [and responsibility] to locals…" (Student E, 04/06/14).

In both of these examples, the students are trying to understand their position to 'the field' in the fieldtrip by relating their findings to prevalent practices in the development industry i.e. practitioners planning for development without understanding or perhaps appreciating the contexts and realities of others and their own limits to knowing another's reality.

The necessity to critique and broaden the narrative of what is 'the field' in fieldtrips to developing countries is salient to the wider development industry. Where fieldtrips can build skills of the "detective" and build empathy for the skills of a "translator" and "diplomat" (Woolcock 2007), fieldtrips also need to build reflexivity and an awareness of the power of epistemologies of 'the field'. I advocate that it is essential in preparation of a fieldtrip that 'the field' itself is the subject of rigorous debate and critique with students. In my own teaching and taking advantage of the international and diverse make-up of the class, I intend to introduce this debate by having students reflect and develop a definition of 'the field', to reflect on what experiences influence that definition, and to compare and contrast across the class to illuminate ideas of perception and positionality in knowing 'the field'. By encouraging a positioning of 'the field' as contextual and as produced through subjective encounters, the prospect of postcolonial epistemologies of the field is deepened which can only disrupt the enduring legacy of the tropics which otherwise hangs over field study and practice by students from a northern university to a so-called developing country to produce and consume knowledge of unfamiliar people and places.

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