

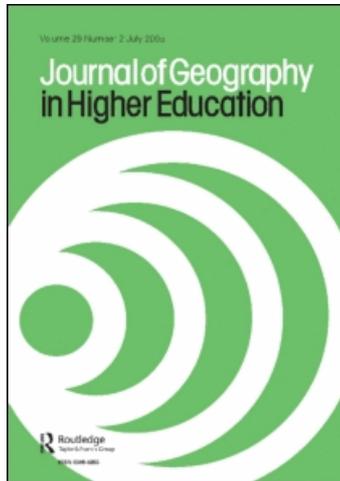
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The Importance of Direct Experience: A Philosophical Defence of Fieldwork in Human Geography

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ABSTRACT *Human geography fieldwork is important. Research has shown that when students ‘see it for themselves’ their enjoyment and understanding is enhanced. In addition it helps develop subject-specific and transferable skills, promotes ‘active learning’ and links theory to ‘real world’ examples in a ‘spiral of learning’. Stressing the socially constructed nature of knowledge and identity, however, Nairn (2005) has made a valuable critique of the assumption that human geography fieldwork gives students direct and unmediated access to ‘the truth’. Drawing on qualitative research with students in New Zealand she shows that their fieldwork experience, rather than enhancing their understanding, reinforced misconceptions they held prior to the trip. Using evidence from an action research project on the student experience of human geography fieldwork in the Western Isles of Scotland, this paper argues that while fieldwork can reinforce preconceptions in the way Nairn describes, this is not inevitably so. Fieldwork can give us direct experiences that challenge our preconceptions. The reality of others can ‘call us to attention’ in ways that make them matter to us. This ‘enhanced affective response’ helps deepen our understanding of the wider world and our place within it. It is for this reason that fieldwork remains a valuable mode of learning for human geography students.*

KEY WORDS: Fieldwork, direct experience, John Macmurray, Western Isles, affective response

Introduction: Fieldwork as a Privileged Mode of Learning

Fieldwork has traditionally been important to geographers and for many it remains a defining feature of the subject and a distinctive and important ‘mode of learning’ (Fuller *et al.*, 2006). Despite this the pedagogical benefits of fieldwork have tended to be under-theorized (Nairn, 2005); Foskett stated in 1999 that “while there is evidence to support the value of fieldwork ... most is circumstantial and inferential rather than objective and research based” (Foskett, 1999, p. 160).

To some extent this is being addressed (May, 1999) and there is now a sizeable literature on geographic fieldwork (Gold *et al.*, 1991; McEwen, 1996; Kent *et al.*, 1997; Cottingham *et al.*, 2002; Robson, 2002; Fuller *et al.*, 2003; Fuller *et al.*, 2006; Boyle *et al.*, 2007). Consequently Fuller *et al.* (2006) have recently concluded that while there still remains the

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need for research into the relationship between fieldwork and student learning “the pedagogy of fieldwork has moved on” (Fuller *et al.*, 2006, p. 93).

The research that has been conducted into the relationship between fieldwork and student learning suggests that fieldwork provides a number of pedagogical benefits. Amongst these is the claim that it can usefully enhance the causal link between student affective response (emotions, feelings and values) and deep learning (Higgitt, 1996; Fuller *et al.*, 2006; Boyle *et al.*, 2007). Evidence from educational psychology has suggested a relationship between fieldwork and enhanced cognitive and affective gain (Foskett, 1999), and Kern and Carpenter (1984, 1986) demonstrated that fieldwork increased the enjoyment of geology students and the value they gave to the subject. Boyle *et al.* (2007) have linked the enjoyment many students get from geography, geology and environmental science fieldwork to an enhancement of deep learning. With deep learning the motivation for learning comes from ‘within’; it is a valuable ‘end in itself’ and is characterized by critical thinking and a sense of ownership. In contrast surface learning has an external motivation (to pass the module); it feels like an imposition, and tends to be uncritical and lack an understanding of the bigger picture underpinning particular assessment tasks (Moon, 2004). Research suggests that surface learning tends to occur when learners are anxious about failure, and deep learning takes place when they are more relaxed and enjoying their learning (Boyle *et al.*, 2007). For Boyle *et al.* (2007) fieldwork is valuable because it can enhance student affective response in positive ways and thus aid deeper forms of learning.

A number of other claims have also been made about the pedagogical benefits of fieldwork:

- Fieldwork gives students the opportunity to develop a range of subject-specific skills (mapping, data collection and analysis) and transferable skills, such as independent learning and problem-solving (Andrews *et al.*, 2003; Shah & Treby, 2006). In addition fieldwork can usefully encourage the development of interpersonal skills (Boyle *et al.*, 2003).
- Fieldwork lends itself to the promotion of active rather than passive modes of learning (Haigh, 1996; Kent *et al.*, 1997). Healey & Jenkins (2000) for example have drawn attention to the role of active experimentation in Kolb’s experiential learning cycle and note how this “has a ready connection . . . with students learning directly from the environment, particularly in fieldwork” (Healey & Jenkins, 2000, p. 193).
- Fieldwork can create opportunities to “connect theory with real experience” (Kent *et al.*, 1997, p. 319). This reinforces classroom-based learning by following it through in particular ‘real world’ situations. Theory and practice interrelate in a spiral of learning (Fuller *et al.*, 2006).

However, geographic fieldwork is not without its critics. Attention has been drawn to problematic discourses of inclusion and exclusion that underpin it (Rose, 1993; Kobayashi, 1994; Nairn, 1999; Hall *et al.*, 2002). Nairn (2005) has suggested that human geography fieldwork is premised on a naive epistemology because it assumes that ‘going to see the real world for yourself’ gives direct, unmediated access to ‘the truth about the world’. Consequently geographers are wrong to privilege it over other modes of learning. Drawing on her own research into the student experience of human geography fieldwork, Nairn argues that students did not have ‘direct experience of others’; instead, they encountered the world through a ‘filter’ of socially constructed views that were a reflection

of the student's own position within the wider social structure. The apparent factual 'truth' of the fieldwork experience tended to confirm rather than challenge these preconceptions.

This is an important argument that needs to be challenged at a philosophical level. In this paper, I develop a more differentiated account of the social construction of the self and knowledge than the one Nairn provides. I use this to explain why some students experience human geography fieldwork in the way Nairn describes, but I show that, for others, 'direct experience' through fieldwork is possible. I then draw on some related arguments to demonstrate how direct experience can stimulate emotional connection and deepen understanding of 'the other'. I use these to defend the view that fieldwork remains an important pedagogical tool for human geographers. In developing this argument I draw on evidence from an action research project on the student experience of fieldwork in the Western Isles of Scotland.

The Problem with Direct Experience

Nairn's starting point is "a politics of position" (Nairn, 2005, p. 295), which is the view that:

... where we are located in the social structure as a whole and which institutions we are in ... have effects on how we understand the world. (Hartsock, 1987, p. 188)

Our knowledge and understanding of the world is fundamentally shaped by larger social processes of which we are part. Nairn's point is that it is unlikely that attitudes and understandings shaped by these larger forces will be significantly altered by a short fieldwork experience. It is much more likely that we will take our established values with us on fieldwork and these will remain unchanged and more than likely be confirmed by the experience.

Nairn illustrates this by drawing on her research into the student experience of a number of human geography field trips designed to teach students about disadvantage in contemporary post-colonial New Zealand (Larner, 1995; Anderson, 2000). One of the field trips Nairn describes involved a visit "to a large outdoor market located in a low income suburb" (Nairn, 2005, p. 299). The majority racial groupings at this market were Maori, Pacific Island and Asian people and the pedagogical idea that underpinned the visit was that the students who were Pakeha (White New Zealanders) would gain a sense of what it is like to be part of the disadvantaged Maori, Pacific Island and Asian communities (Nairn, 2005, p. 299). Nairn found, however, that the experience did not challenge the students' established views. She draws on Frankenberg (1993) to suggest that, on the contrary, the experience reinforced their preconceptions, in effect upholding attitudes that were premised on the students' occupation of "a location of structural advantage, of race privilege" (Nairn, 2005, p. 303). Students didn't have direct experience of 'the other', but rather made interpretations that reflected their position within wider and unequal structural contexts.

Nairn goes on to argue that human geography's uncritical privileging of direct experience over other ways of knowing is itself a socially constructed position which after Lee (1996) she calls a "logocentric essentializing epistemology" (Nairn, 2005, p. 294). This is:

... the assumption of the unmediated presence of the truth of nature ... that the truth or reality or experience (of a situation) will be transparently available to students if they (experience that situation) rather than read about (it). (Nairn, 2005, p. 294)

Her research showed that this discourse of 'direct experience' was itself part of the problem because it acted to reinforce the students' racist preconceptions about Maori, Pacific Island and Asian people. The apparent factual truth of the marginalization of these communities that the fieldwork revealed acted to confirm their 'otherness' (different, strange) and link their disadvantage to these essential differences. Their traditions and culture were seen as the causes of their marginalization. The vivid fieldwork experience obscured the wider post-colonial social relations that structured the disadvantage of these communities—wider relations of power within which the Pakeha students were themselves embedded. The result was that the disadvantage was accepted as factual, even natural and linked to difference. This was something that the ideology of direct experience as unproblematic truth acted to confirm.

Rather than hoping that a field trip can transform attitudes like these, Nairn argues that human geographers need "to attend to the historical and geographical processes that . . . position subjects and produce their experiences" (Nairn, 2005, p. 24). In these terms the task is to address and challenge the racist attitudes of the Pakeha students and the relations of power that privilege their voices over others. As hooks (2003) suggests, this is a difficult process that takes time, and cannot be achieved through the magic of a brief field visit. It is also, Nairn argues, a collective rather than an individual process, as ultimately it involves transforming larger structures of power which individuals cannot address on their own. For Nairn this is a task that is best suited to classroom-based learning (2005, p. 307).

Nairn's is a powerful and important argument that draws attention to the limitations of fieldwork as a pedagogical strategy in human geography. Because the self and knowledge are structured in the way Nairn describes we need to be careful not to exaggerate the ability of fieldwork to transform values and viewpoints, not least because these values are located in the wider social world and are stubborn features that have built up over the course of a person's life.

The implication of Nairn's argument seems to be that students will inevitably experience human geography fieldwork in this way; in the remainder of this paper I take issue with her contention. In the following section I draw on the results of an action research project on the student experience of fieldwork in the Western Isles of Scotland to suggest that a more differentiated account of the social construction of self and knowledge is needed. Such an account needs to be able to explain why direct experiences of human geography fieldwork can have an important transformative impact on the values and understanding of some students, but not others.

Student Experiences of Human Geography Fieldwork in the Western Isles of Scotland

The examples I draw upon in this section are from a second-year undergraduate module entitled *Sustainable Community*, a core component of which is a 7- to 10-day residential field trip to Lewis and Harris in the Western Isles of Scotland. My module focuses on the theory and practice of sustainability. Prior to the field visit students explore definitions and models of sustainability and examples of good practice. Particular attention is given to how sustainability challenges us to think in a holistic way, and to the contested nature of the concept (Pearce *et al.*, 1996).

The field trip to the Western Isles is intended as an opportunity to develop a deeper understanding of these theories and concepts through an extended 'real world' example. Students are introduced to the issues facing these islands prior to the field visit, including de-population, the decline of Gaelic language and culture, economic stagnation and the tension between environmental and socioeconomic versions of sustainability. Care is taken to situate these issues within a critical historical and geopolitical context.

The focus of the field trip is a structured series of encounters with 'key actors' who are involved in different ways in ensuring the sustainability of these Western Isles communities. The encounters are arranged prior to the field visit and typically involve representatives of agencies such as the Comhairle nan Eilean Siar (the Western Isles Council), Scottish Natural Heritage, economic and Gaelic development agencies as well as community workers and members.

The encounters take a variety of forms ranging from formal presentations and guided field visits to more informal question-and-answer sessions and a barbecue. Students are encouraged to interview these 'key actors' to help them gain an understanding of the issues facing the island communities and their sustainability. One aim is that students will become more skilled in interacting with 'professionals' and gain insight into the jobs they do. In the most recent version of this field trip, students were asked to produce a video that explored some aspect of the issues facing the islands. Students interviewed the 'key actors' as part of the video production process, the intention being that they should engage more directly and actively with the people and issues they encountered.

The video presentation is one of three items of assessment for the module, the others being a course essay (in which students evaluate the sustainability of the island communities), and a reflective essay. The latter gets students to critically review the experiential aspects of the fieldwork event. Prior to the field trip students are introduced to models of group interaction and learning and set themselves a number of goals they hope to achieve over the course of the field trip. This could be the acquisition of particular technical skills (such as mastering video production software) or interpersonal skills (such as becoming more confident in staff-student or student-student interactions). Students keep a diary over the duration of the field trip and afterwards reflect on whether they have met these goals. They are encouraged to apply to their experiences the various models of learning and interaction they have been introduced to.

The field trip has run three times since 2004 with a year off in 2006. Typically around 10 students and two members of staff have participated each time. Since 2004 I have conducted an action research project on the student experience of this module and I have used 'pre' and 'post' fieldwork questionnaires to gauge the impact the fieldwork experience has had on student understanding. In addition I have carried out a number of 'post' fieldwork interviews with selected students and conducted an analysis of student coursework, experiential essays and end-of-module evaluations.

As we have seen, Nairn supports her argument with evidence from a study of student attitudes to disadvantage and difference in post-colonial New Zealand. The communities of the Western Isles also have a colonial history. Many would link the problems currently faced by the islands to a history of absentee landlords, land clearances, persecution of Gaelic language and culture, and distance from the centres of political power in Edinburgh and London (Hunter, 1991). What is often considered to be the timeless culture and traditions of Highland Scotland is in fact a reflection of these relatively recent social relationships (McCrone, 1992).

Rather like the students Nairn quotes it is clear that a number of those on the Western Isles field trip, at least at first, assumed the islanders to be rustic, backward, and geographically and socially marginalized. These communities were 'other' to the modern and progressive world the student themselves inhabited. For example, one student in her final course essay talked of how in the long term these island communities are unsustainable because:

... they are living in the past. Their traditional ways of life are stopping them taking part in the modern world. If they cannot adapt and pay their way then the communities should be left to die. (Jill, Course Essay, 2004)

Jill's is an essentialist position because the causes of the problems these communities face are to be found within the communities themselves and in particular in their traditions that exist in opposition to 'progress' and Modernity. Jill wrote her essay after the field visit and it may be that the direct experiences she had on the field trip acted to reinforce her preconceptions in the sorts of way that Nairn describes.

However, other students were able to move beyond essentialist assumptions they held before the field visit. Before visiting the islands Graham suggested that the problems they faced were because:

... they're away out there aren't they? They're so far from the centre of things that's why they've got their own thing going on, the Gaelic and church and that, and that is why all the jobs are going ... and the young people want to get out as soon as they can. (Graham, Interview, 2004)

However, in his post field trip course essay he argued that "the ... unique features (of the Western Isles) are the result of their connections with ... colonialism and ... the global economy ..." (Graham, Course Essay, 2004).

Graham's 'direct experience' of the island communities played an important role in encouraging this shift in attitude. He remarked:

I'd read about the depopulation problem but to be honest I hadn't paid it much attention ... but when we met Jenny and she told us about her children going to university on the mainland and never coming back, and I saw how sad she was, it really brought it home to me. They became real people I suppose ... (Graham, Interview, 2004)

Graham's direct encounter with Jenny and others challenged his initial preconceptions and encouraged him to re-contextualize these and his fieldwork experiences within a wider set of ideas relating to globalization, post-colonialism and the social construction of Scottish identity.

Another student, Grace, commented on how the field trip encouraged her to actively engage with the people and issues and how this benefited her learning:

(B)ecause we had to interview people (for the video) ... it meant you couldn't hide ... You had to get your questions ready and then talk to the people. It really made it stick. (Grace, Interview 2007)

These direct encounters were not solely of an 'academic' sort but came also from the challenge of living in close proximity to other staff and students over the course of a week. Thus for example, Fiona expressed the annoyance she felt at being told the correct way to wash and rinse dishes by another student. She said:

I had to restrain myself from hitting him over the head with the pan. I was quite proud that I didn't. Knowing how to choose your battles is something I've learned over the years. (Fiona, Interview 2005)

Daily encounters with other students and staff were a not-always-welcome opportunity to develop interpersonal skills. For another student, Karen, the experiences of the field visit encouraged a feeling of being part of something bigger. For example, Karen talked of the importance of "being invited into people's houses and hearing their stories ... seeing how it mattered". She went on to talk of how this made her aware of "what the place has meant to people ... the cycles of nature, history ... (and how it) makes you feel small ... but part of it ..." (Karen, Interview, 2005).

Karen's experience contrasted with that of Joyce, who at the last moment was unable to take part in the field visit. She participated in the rest of the module, was given additional tutorial support and was assessed using an alternative means of assessment that reflected this mode of delivery. In comparison with Karen, Joyce felt less engaged with the Western Isles and its problems and articulated this in terms of a lack of a 'face to face' encounter:

Unless it happens on your front door you won't care about it—you don't care if it's not in your face. If I saw it I would understand people's point of view—their stories touch your heart. If you witness things first hand it affects your view ... (Joyce, Interview, 2005).

She went on to say:

I know the others are really into it but it feels like I'm trying to write about something that you feel you should feel a passion for but don't. I haven't seen it—so why should I care? It's just a module—I just want to get a good mark. (Joyce, Interview, 2005)

Joyce lacked the sense of connection that Karen felt and understood this to be because she had not had the direct encounter of the field visit.

To some extent Nairn's argument is confirmed by the experiences of these students. Jill for example was unmoved by the field trip and her initial preconceptions remained unchallenged and were perhaps reinforced. However, other students had quite different responses and these support rather than undermine the claims made in the literature regarding the pedagogical benefits of fieldwork. For some students the direct encounter of the field trip encouraged a positive affective response that helped them link theory and practice and deepen their understanding of the issues facing the Western Isles. For others the field trip gave opportunities for active engagement with these issues and this aided the development of knowledge, understanding and interpersonal skills.

These points suggest that what is needed is a more differentiated account of the self and knowledge than the one Nairn provides: one that is able to take into account Nairn's

findings but also do justice to the experiences I have presented here and the more general claims within the literature regarding the pedagogical value of fieldwork. In the next section I put forward an alternative and use this to defend the view that the value of fieldwork lies in the link between direct experience, affective response and deep learning (Higgitt, 1996; Fuller *et al.*, 2006; Boyle *et al.*, 2007).

Direct Experience, Affective Response and Understanding

Direct Experience: A Differentiated View

One of the consequences of Nairn's argument is that the individual's inner world and experiences are treated as if they are less important than the social relationships that shape and structure them. What seems to be lost is a sense of the individual as a person: a 'subject-of-a-life' (Regan, 1983); self-aware, with their own thoughts, emotions and feelings.

For Burkitt (1991) such a view tends to see:

... the linguistic and cultural system (as) the organizing principle of social life and of the 'illusion' of 'individuality'; a state in which humans supposedly can exercise their own free choices and determine their own actions. Yet this is simply an illusion, for individuals are determined in every fibre of their being by the cultural system and the symbolic realm it generates. (Burkitt, 1991, p. 192)

There is, however, an alternative tradition that sees social life as the source of individual identity rather than its antithesis (du Gay *et al.*, 2000). Object relations theory, for example, shows that it is the loving relations between people that create the emotional 'solid ground' that is the basis of individual identity. For example Dowrick (1995) writes:

You make your discovery of self in the company of others. Through someone else's belief that you exist, and have the right to exist in your own way, you begin to find your own solid ground within. (Dowrick, 1995, p. 61)

It is through being loved and treated as valuable in our own right that one becomes an autonomous self. This 'solid ground' is the basis of the ability to directly experience the world beyond the self. Being loved gives a sense of completeness and sufficiency that allows us to be open and attentive to others, not as I want or imagine them to be, but as they are in themselves. John Macmurray (1993, p. 82) calls this "living in the full reality of the other" and he suggests that:

... it is our nature, as persons, to live in the world and not in ourselves; to have the centre of attention and realization outside ourselves, in that which is other than ourselves. (Macmurray, 1993, p. 82)

Growing up loved, the emotionally secure self is aware and attentive to others and is able to take pleasure in their existence. Thus our experiences are, as Nairn suggests, shaped by the social relationships we are part of, but these relationships do not inherently obscure the world from us. On the contrary they are a precondition of understanding the world beyond ourselves.

For Horney (1991) these social relations and forms of self are commonplace but not inevitable. Lasch (1985, 1991), for example, has shown how many aspects of the contemporary world make secure forms of self difficult to sustain. He suggests that:

... the prevailing social conditions ... blur the boundaries between the self and its surroundings (to create a narcissistic form of self that is) uncertain of its own outlines, longing either to remake the world in its own image or to merge into its environment in blissful union. (Lasch, 1985, p. 19)

Rapid social change, inequality and discrimination undermine self-esteem and self-worth and can mean that the self is unsure of its own boundaries and 'centre of gravity'. 'The other' is not experienced directly but instead disappears beneath fantasies that the self projects onto the world.

This is a more differentiated picture than the one suggested by Nairn. Certain types of social relations will shape the self so that it is less able to experience and be moved by others. However, other forms of social relationships are the basis of the capacity to directly experience the wider world.

If we accept these views then there are good reasons to believe that fieldwork will give at least some students direct experience of the real world. In my view these experiences are important because we care most for those we encounter directly, and it is to those who matter that we give our full attention and whom we consequently understand best. I develop these ideas in the remainder of this section.

Direct Experience and Affective Response

In a recent cross-institution questionnaire-based study of the experiences of 365 geography, earth sciences and environmental sciences students, Boyle *et al.* (2007) found that most of the students studied thought that 'fieldwork was good'. Fieldwork had positive impacts on the affective domain for many of these students.

I would argue that this is, in part, because of an important relationship between the directness of our experience of others and our emotional response to them. We care most for those we encounter directly. For Baillie:

Reality is what I come up against, what takes me by surprise, the other than myself which pulls me up and obliges me to reckon with it and adjust myself to it because it will not consent simply to adjust itself to me. (Cited in Beveridge & Turnbull, 1989, p. 96)

In a similar way Lingus (1994) stresses how it is not abstractions and generalizations that we care for (Humanity, The Third World), but 'the face' of particular others. We care when we are confronted with their reality, and this punches through the preconceptions and categories of thought we project onto the world:

He or she faces (us) not simply as another particular upon which the social categories are instantiated. What faces us (is a meaning these categories) cannot contain, an excess over and above the forms and their coded significance. (Lingus, 1994, p. 66)

It is when we directly experience others that they begin to matter to us.

Direct experiences like these can become the basis of a wider sense of fellowship. They create “a sense of an imperative . . . that weighs on me” (Lingus, 1994, p. 27). This is not a command to ‘jump in and fix and save’ but to ‘be with’, and to ‘accompany’. Lingus puts it like this:

What the face of the other asks for is not the inauthentic . . . solicitude with which I substitute my skills for his, take over her tasks for her, view the forms and the landscape for him, formulate the answers to the questions in her stead . . . In seeking the support of my upright stand on the earth . . . (t)he other seeks . . . contact and accompaniment. (Lingus, 1994, p. 132)

For Levinas, this is an asymmetrical relationship. I care for ‘the other’, whether he/she likes it or not. The result is an ethical community, but not one characterized by ‘sameness’, where the things that community members have in common are stressed at the expense of their differences. Rather, as Bauman explains in his discussion of Levinas’s position, it is a community of singular, isolated individuals:

. . . a whole knit together, and continuously knit together, out of the commands that are given and received and followed by the selves which are moral subjects precisely . . . because their relations are *asymmetrical*. (Bauman, 1993, p. 48, emphasis in the original)

For Levinas direct experience is the starting point for a wider sense of fellowship—a fellowship of difference. It is my contention that human geography fieldwork, to the extent that it is a direct encounter with others, can give similar positive emotional experiences to those who participate in it.

Affective Response, Understanding and Action

The positive emotional impact of fieldwork has been linked to the development of deep as opposed to surface learning (Kent *et al.*, 1997). Boyle *et al.* (2007) argue that it is because fieldwork makes learning more enjoyable that deep learning is more likely to occur. In my view fieldwork is also linked to the development of deep learning because the active, direct experience it gives can generate an affective response that demands we give the other the attention she/he deserves. It is this new attentiveness that enriches understanding.

When we are drawn to attention by ‘the other’ two things happen (Armstrong, 2002). First, with a shock, I become aware of my limits; the things that I was so sure about turn out to be my misconceptions. Second, in re-evaluating ourselves we see ‘the other’ in a new light. Perhaps they have more to offer than we previously assumed? Perhaps we can never exhaust all there is to know about them?

This process of adjusting our own boundaries creates a space for others to exist as valuable in themselves (Armstrong, 2002). Humbled, we see them in a more charitable light and with a sense of mystery and wonder. We see them with a mind “that keeps open the possibility that one doesn’t know what goes on in another’s heart of hearts” (Armstrong, 2002, p. 115). Consequently we are more inclined to be attentive to “their own small way of being” (Armstrong, 2002, p. 51) and “to seek out good qualities

underneath the evident failings” (Armstrong, 2002, p. 152). In short we appreciate them more and want to understand them better.

For John Macmurray we are more fully attentive to others when we engage with them with our feelings and senses as well as in thought:

(When you are) appreciating and enjoying (the world) for itself, and that is all you want (t)his kind of knowledge is primarily of the senses. It is not of the intellect . . . Intellectual knowledge tells us about the world. It gives us knowledge about things, not knowledge of them. It does not reveal the world as it is. Only emotional knowledge can do that . . . This is not to disparage intellectual knowledge but only to insist that it is meaningless and without significance, apart from the direct sensual knowledge which gives it reality. (Macmurray, 1995, p. 43)

Deep understanding is a unity of thought, emotion and sensual knowledge. For Macmurray this is achieved ‘in action’:

(Scientific) knowledge belongs to the reflective life of the personality; . . . there is also aesthetic reflection . . . But it is the life of action that is primary, and in an important sense it contains and completes the reflective activities. (Macmurray, 1993, pp. 77–78)

When we act, we engage with the world with our whole self. We give it our full attention and achieve a deeper understanding that integrates thought, feeling and the senses. It is my view that human geography fieldwork, to the extent that it promotes an active engagement with others, can encourage attentiveness and deepen understanding in this way.

Nairn seems to suggest that direct experience obscures our understanding of the wider structures and processes that underpin this experience. The argument in this section has suggested the contrary. Active, direct experience can act as a catalyst that deepens our emotional engagement with others and thus our understanding of the wider world. In the conclusion to this paper I link these ideas to the student experiences of fieldwork outlined in section 3, and in so doing draw out the broader implications of these arguments for fieldwork as a mode of learning.

Conclusion: In Defence of Fieldwork in Human Geography

As the Western Isles experiences of Jill and Graham show, different people can have different responses to the same field trip. There will be many reasons for this but one may be, as Object Relations theory shows, because people differ in their ability to be attentive and open to others, and thus to experience the world in a direct way. This point supports recent discussions concerning student learning styles and the value of multi-modal methods of teaching (Kennedy & Waddington, 2003). Fieldwork will not be an appropriate mode of learning for everyone and so should be developed as one of a range of teaching and learning strategies (Boyle *et al.*, 2003). Also, to the extent that fieldwork involves an encounter of the whole person (‘in action’ with his/her physical self, emotions and thoughts) with what can be challenging and unfamiliar situations, this argument reinforces the view that those involved in managing fieldwork have considerable responsibility to do so sensitively and safely (McEwen, 1996; Couper & Stott, 2006).

It supports in particular those who stress the importance of recognizing the personal and emotional risks and challenges of residential fieldwork (Nairn, 1996).

The ideas in the previous section also bolster the argument that fieldwork remains an important pedagogy precisely because of the direct experiences it gives students. Thus the change in Graham's and Grace's understanding of the Western Isles over the course of their field trip can usefully be understood to be the result of a vivid encounter that drew forth an emotional response and deepened their understanding. As Bauman (1993) claims, such direct experience can be linked into a wider sense of ethical fellowship and this may explain why Karen experienced a sense of being part of something bigger and Joyce, who didn't go on the trip, did not. As I have shown, this reinforces the link that others have made between fieldwork, affective response and deep learning (Higgitt, 1996; Fuller *et al.*, 2006; Boyle *et al.*, 2007). It seems that the depth of our understanding of others goes hand in hand with whether we feel they are worth the time and effort needed to get to know them. If the extent to which we value others depends in part on our direct experience of them, then fieldwork can have a role in drawing forth this affective response and thus deeper understanding.

This argument also adds weight to the other claims concerning the pedagogical value of fieldwork with which this paper began:

- It supports the suggestion that fieldwork, particularly residential fieldwork, remains valuable because it is a source of sustained 'informal' encounters which are often not overtly recognized to be part of the curriculum (Andrews *et al.*, 2003; Boyle *et al.*, 2003). If our understanding of self and other is linked to direct experience then, as Fiona demonstrated, residential fieldwork can be a challenging learning opportunity in which interpersonal skills (such as 'choosing your battles') are developed and reinforced by the daily encounters amongst students and staff.
- It backs up the view that 'active engagement' with issues and problems is pedagogically valuable for students, and fieldwork can play a useful role in facilitating this (Haigh, 1996; Kent *et al.*, 1997). As Macmurray (1993) suggests, it is when we engage with the world 'in action' (as Grace and her group did when producing their video) that we encounter it not just in thought but with all of ourselves. More open to the world in this way we may gain a deeper understanding of it.
- If understanding is linked to direct experience, this resonates with the claim that fieldwork can usefully support the development of 'the spiral curriculum' (Fuller *et al.*, 2006). Fieldwork can deepen and develop our understanding of knowledge gained in the classroom, by providing the opportunity to pursue it further in particular 'real world' contexts. Perhaps this is because, as it was with Graham (who more fully understood the significance of the depopulation of the Western Isles he had read about when he met people whom it affected 'face to face'), the linking of theory and practice in a spiral of learning is accomplished in action; action which "contains and completes the reflective activities" (Macmurray, 1993, pp. 77–78).

Fieldwork is important because at its heart lies a direct, active encounter with 'the other'—others who call us to attention with a jolt; who challenge us to rethink our preconceptions; who draw a sense of fellowship from us—and a new attentiveness that aids a deeper understanding. It is this direct encounter that makes fieldwork challenging and at times difficult and it is these features that, in my view, continue to make it a valuable mode of learning for human geography.

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