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Editorial: Fieldism

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# BioScience

## FIELDISM

As everyone knows, discrimination is running rampant in our society of equal opportunity. Discrimination might be defined as any systematic violation of the golden rule applied to individuals on the basis of their class membership—and it seems to appear almost anywhere one seeks it. Racism is the familiar form, but it is probably feminism that has led even more dramatically to the uncovering of the subtle mechanisms by which discrimination is institutionalized. Religious and racial minorities are hardly a challenge to the discriminating mind, since they can be isolated from controlling society so easily. Ever-present women, however, bring out the ultimate in clever mechanisms. The well-marshaled counterattack of the “libs” serves as a penetrating model for analysis of other forms of discrimination.

Suppose the college biologist wants to conduct a field study. His research area may be a 2 hours' or 2 days' drive from his office. His laboratory colleague may be able to schedule classes so as to allow 2 hours in the research laboratory, but such scheduling hardly profits the field worker. Why not “save up” those 2 hours per day and spend, say Wednesdays, in the field? Because Wednesdays are faculty meetings, that's why. And Tuesdays and Thursdays are class lectures. And Mondays are the department's colloquia, which everyone *has* to attend. And Fridays are when five of the seven committees meet.

The laboratory biologist would think it absurd to request permission of his dean to step across the hall in order to do research. Yet, in most institutions, if the biologist's field study area is outside the city limits, this is exactly what the field biologist is required to do.

When plans are laid for equipping the biology department, or a windfall of equipment moneys blows the department's way, is it not microscopes that are usually purchased? Who thinks of binoculars and telescopes? Perhaps it is fundamentally more scientific to magnify a small object nearby than a large one in the distance.

When the field biologist requests a professional portable tape recorder, he may be told to purchase the El Cheapo model for home-use instead. After all, it costs less than a quarter the price, so that the savings can be applied to the purchase of that 23-channel FM super-duper laboratory recorder for the physiologist on the next floor.

What about getting students and animals (or plants) together? Some universities grudgingly provide inadequate travel reimbursement for field trips, if that. However, it is little problem to obtain quadruple-injected fetal elephants for the laboratory. No expense is spared in bringing animals to students; none is incurred in bringing students to animals.

As in all forms of discrimination, there are rationalizations for practicing fieldism. Field biology is old-fashioned. Field biology is descriptive. Field biology is qualitative. Field biology is done by pedants. No doubt some impressive examples of such half-truths can be paraded, although one is hard-pressed to decide whether such cases are the cause or effect of fieldism. Yet, only the ignorant can fail to see the many modern, experimental, quantitative, and original papers being published on field studies.

It is difficult to escape the realization that the real basis of fieldism, as in so many other areas of discrimination, is purely psychological. When overt antagonism flares, one can sometimes observe those tell-tale slips that reveal underlying emotions. The plain fact is that everyone suspects that the field biologist actually *enjoys* his work—one of the true horrors in American society. An acquaintance once asserted that teachers should not be paid more, even if society could afford it, because they enjoy their work. Perhaps fieldism is another victim of the Protestant ethic.

Yet college courses in field biology are bulging, despite occasional dissuasions of some faculty advisors. Applications for graduate school to work in ecology, evolutionary studies, animal behavior and other areas of field biology are soaring; competent, important dissertations are emerging. And somehow the young professors of field biology are still managing to carry on their tasks despite the impediments.

Out into the field they go, keeping their appointed rounds just as if they had a sack of mail instead of a pack of optical, acoustic, or chemical instruments over their shoulders. If they use every moment carefully, working from dawn to dusk, they may return with the critical data in hand. Sunburned, scratched, weary, and perhaps even undernourished, the field workers do return. Leaning against the doorsill to greet them is the colleague from down the hall, dressed in his immaculate white lab coat, sipping a cup of coffee. He looks up, smiling, and says slyly “How'd your vacation go?”

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