Disabled in the field: navigating fieldwork as a disabled scientist

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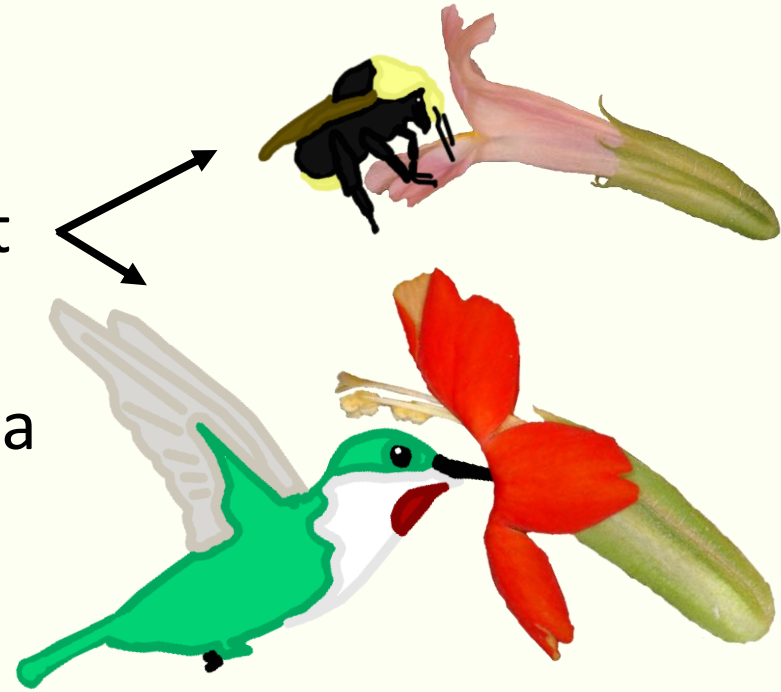
@plantpollinator

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John Innes Centre

Unlocking Nature's Diversity

Who am I? How do I identify?

- Group Leader, John Innes Centre, Norwich, UK
- Research: plant-pollinator interactions, floral scent
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- I identify as:
  - Multiply disabled
  - Agender (any pronouns are fine!), assigned female at birth (AFAB)
  - Asexual
  - Queer
  - Otherwise carrying plenty of privilege (white, scientific family, etc.)
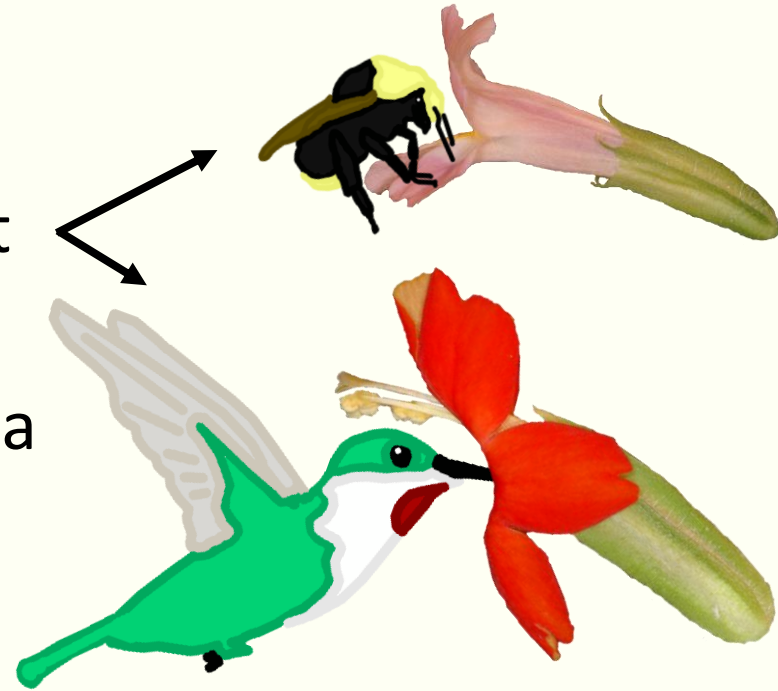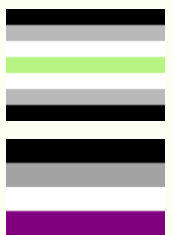
What do I mean when I say "disabled"?

- Disability is "a physical or mental impairment that has a 'substantial' and 'long-term' negative effect on your ability to do normal daily activities" (UK Equality Act 2010) and a disabled person is a "person who has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities" (USA Americans with Disabilities Act 1990)

- People with chronic illnesses and/or Deaf people do not always identify as disabled, yet are entitled to the same legal protections

- I say "multiply disabled" because I have multiple health conditions that "count" as disabilities and affect different aspects of my daily activities differently

A brief note on terminology

- Why do I say I am a "disabled scientist" instead of a "scientist with disabilities"?

- Identity-first versus person-first language

- Usage varies depending on specific disability community norms and personal preference (e.g. autistic folks generally prefer 'autistic' to 'person with autism' whereas professionals prefer the latter[1])

[1]Lydia Brown (2011) *"The Significance of Semantics: Person-First Language: Why It Matters."*

Which of these people is a field biologist?

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(me, no fieldwork yet)

(me, fieldwork-experienced)

Disability in the fieldwork setting

- Fieldwork often treated as "optional" or a "special case" but may be a *fundamental* part of a person's research – *or* a person is not hired because they are seen as "unable" to do the essential fieldwork for a job

- Assumption is usually made that a disabled person cannot do fieldwork, due to *inability* or *risk management/liability*

- Most fieldwork can actually be modified... with a little creativity and a great deal of communication and thinking ahead

What barriers and threats do disabled fieldworkers face?

- Environmental threats: inability to remove self from dangerous situations (wildlife, livestock), perhaps higher probability of injury, risks of lone working with some medical conditions (e.g. epilepsy, POTS)

- Communication threats: inability to communicate with the public **and authorities** if relevant disabilities present (e.g. person is d/Deaf/hard of hearing or nonspeaking/nonverbal, neurodivergence as well) – this also applies to language barriers in general!

- Assumptions about competence as a barrier: colleagues and fieldwork team leads assuming things about an individual's competence to perform fieldwork tasks
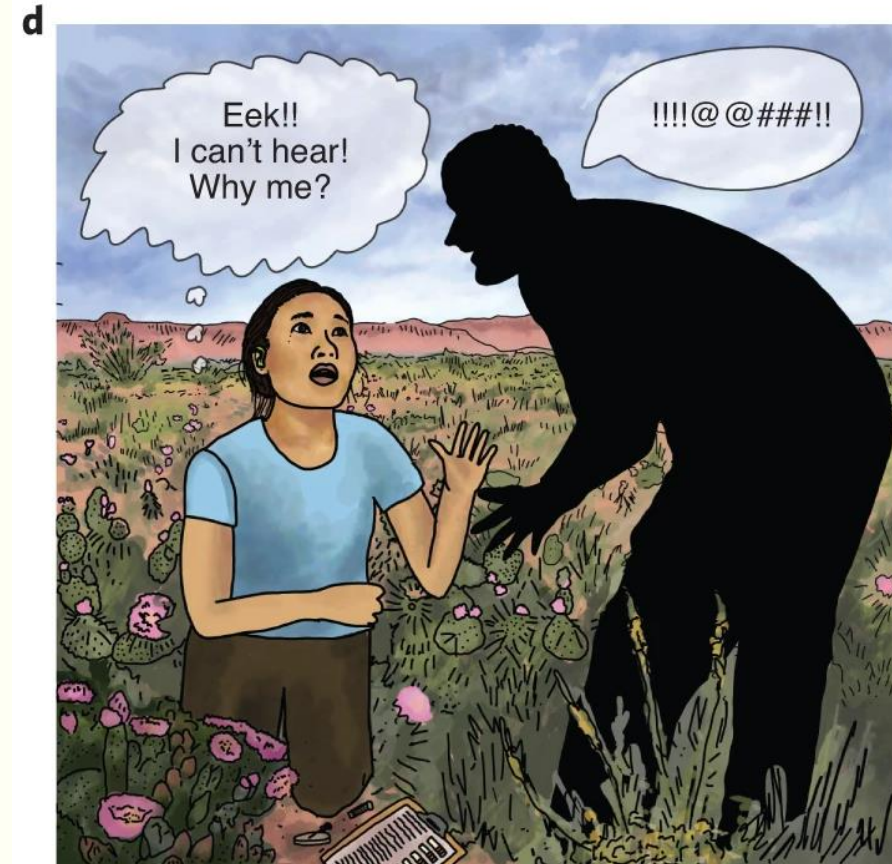

Figure: Demery & Pipkin (2021) *Nature Ecology and Evolution*

Questions when planning fieldwork

- What are the actual *fundamental tasks* involved?

- Does *every* individual need to perform *every* task?

- What *other extra factors* (accommodation, transport to the site) can be modified?

- How does *this particular individual's disability* affect their ability to do the fundamental tasks?

- What *accommodations can be made* to enable as much participation as possible?

Case study: Kelsey and the butterflies in the rainforest of Panamá: mobility disability

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Abled colleagues' view

- *Fundamental tasks*: hike into the deep forest, chase butterflies, catch butterflies, hike back to car

- *Every individual*: yes, must do it all together

- *Extra factors*: transportation involves hiking >1hr in deep forest

- *Particular disability* not considered/assumptions made about mobility

- *Accommodations* not considered – better to leave the disabled person behind

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Actual reality

- *Fundamental tasks*: catch butterflies
- *Every individual*: drop off Kelsey along drivable road, pick up later
- *Extra factors*: stay on drivable road
- *Particular disability*: butterflies come to focal plants so sitting in front of them works well
- *Accommodations*: pack a stool to sit on, plenty of water

How have I seen other disabled scientists work in the field?

- Adapted wheelchairs (FreeWheel, Mountain Trike, GRIT, etc)!

- Slates/tablets for communication (hearing/speech issues)

- Drones to observe areas one can't get to

- Note: all of these are existing technology!

- Self-advocacy and discussion around a person's individual abilities and limits

mountaintrike.com

Matt Lang/Smithsonian Institute

A. Romeo/ESA

Privacy and stigma and legal considerations

- Realize that not all disabled/chronically ill folks want to Tell The World about their situation – this may include telling trip leaders too!
- Don't solicit based on "disability" (& remember that not all folks identify as disabled) but instead ask *everyone* if there are accommodations that can make the work more feasible or enjoyable
- Ensure privacy is available for e.g. taking medication, managing stomas, sensitive communications
- Many medications may not be legal in many countries (e.g. ADHD meds, chronic pain meds) – v. important to check this in advance as it can vary from "you can bring enough for the trip" to "you must be a drug smuggler" – carry a copy of the prescription at all times
- Make sure health insurance covers pre-existing conditions

Fieldwork wellbeing plans/infosheets

- My group exchanges fieldwork wellbeing infosheets prior to fieldwork
- Items covered include:
  - Emergency contacts
  - Roles each person might take in the field
  - What each person needs during/after: driving days, field days, downtime
  - Preferred food, dietary constraints, opinion on alcohol
  - Physical and mental health conditions that might affect wellbeing
  - How best to address these if they come up
  - What support each person might need from field team leader
  - What worries each person the most about fieldwork
  - What is each person the most excited by about fieldwork
  - Any other comments

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- Educate yourself but don't assume Dr. Google/Wikipedia knows more about the person than they do – **treat the person as the authority on their brain and body!**

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- Make sure wellbeing events and signage are inclusive
- Educate yourself but remember that you know less about the person than they do – treat the person as the authority on their brain and body!

The #1 thing you can do to improve any underrepresented minority colleague's experience and promote their success is to <u>COMMUNICATE</u> and <u>RESPECT</u>: be open and listen respectfully to their lived experiences (even if they are negative ones), treat them as the authorities on those experiences, respect when they don't want to share/talk, and engage in a dialogue about how you can work together to improve everyone's experiences and success.

Summary: disability in fieldwork

- **Many barriers exist** to disabled folks' success in fieldwork and academic research in general

- Most of these **barriers are due to the *perceptions and attitudes*** of abled colleagues, supervisors, and administrators, rather than due to the disability itself

- **Accommodations** exist for many if not all disabilities to enable success, though not all disabilities can be accommodated in all situations

- Particular issues exist around **invisible disabilities, disclosure, and privacy**

- Important to consider **intersectional** identities/multiple axes of oppression