The Global North-South Divide: Conducting Impact Work in the Global North and Global South.
Summary of the 12th Impact Scholar Community (ISC) event

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At times, routine ethnographic episodes have a way of suddenly changing the way we see the world and our place in it. One such episode occurred a few years ago when I surveyed a farming community in a North Indian village. My econometrician brain (at the time!) saw this place as a wonderful case of agrarian and industrial sectors growing together quite well. No more food and job shortages! But I also remember how swiftly my happy conception crumbled in a brief chat with a local farmer. He reasoned that all that I saw was not progress but was, in fact, many layers of destruction. He said this 'foreign' growth system eroded the province's social-cultural ties, greatly diminished water tables leaving animals and trees 'thirsty' and 'hungry', and the seemingly efficient monoculture approach reduced food security for their community. And then, he ended his short but intense speech with a casual remark about why I – a 'local' who was born in the same province as his people – start think like a foreigner. This question kept me up many nights.

Three years later, I shared these thoughts with the Impact Scholar Community, and together with Sylvia Grewatsch I organized the 12th Impact Scholar Community event **on February 22nd, 2023 entitled** "**The Global North/South Divide: How to Conduct Impact Work in the Global North and Global South**". We invited **Bobby Banerjee** (City University London), **Ralph Hamann** (University of Cape Town), **Joel Bothello** (Concordia University), and **Isabel Neuberger** (University of Southampton). And they directly tackled these issues using various theoretical lenses (Institutional theory, Critical theory), and having worked in different empirical contexts (Asian and African contexts) and societal regimes (informal and authoritarian societies).

The global north-south divide: four problematic pitfalls we experience as researchers.

In a semi-structured discussion with event attendees, our panelists shared insights and personal stories that shed light on a nexus of four problematic pitfalls that entrench the scholarly habit of imposing western perspectives on non-western contexts. These insights encouraged us to proactively unearth native truths, contextual assumptions and local vocabularies that may contradict our own westernized proto-typical 'lenses', thereby igniting a change in our thinking.

A-priori impositions: All our panelists began by acknowledging the tendency of scholars based in western institutions to come into non-western contexts to study what they think is important. One of our panelists, Isabel – who drew upon her own research in authoritarian contexts and western NGOs – noted that as scholars we can arrive into unfamiliar contexts with pre-existing assumptions about what is important to study in that context. She remarked, "for example…western NGOs can come (in non-western contexts) and say that deforestation is the important issue, when it really does not reflect the realities of people who are actually living in that space". This experience resonated with me and reminded me

of recent event I attended. In this event, a researcher informed me that when she traveled to India to study gender inequality, the 'whole village' would follow her – including men and boys – when she would interview women. She promptly informed me that this occurred because the men wanted to keep tabs on what women said (and this insight also went into her paper). Upon learning which village she went to, I informed her that in such a remote rural mountainous village, the presence of a blonde, white woman is an extremely rare occasion, and people will follow any newcomer in their village.

Essentialising contexts. Our panelists reasoned that the first problematic practice is often accompanied with a second practice that can be referred to as 'essentialising' a research context. Ralph described it as actions taken by researchers "…to uncritically assume that non-western contexts share the same characteristics as western contexts…which leads to the privileging of one context over another". This reminds me, of a recent and somewhat amusing conversation with a Japanese friend who spent a night lamenting that his western friends were routinely shocked on their first visit to Japan. His friends would come into Japan assuming that most Japanese people could speak English, that behaving and talking on the subway would be similar to their experiences of New York, etc. Coming back to the scholarly realm, Bobby mentioned this practice of essentializing is evident in our top journals that routinely publish papers on social problems in the east using interpretations of social hierarchies and inequalities from a western perspective.

Exclusionary research practices: Moving past the initial sensemaking stage of a research project, panelists revealed that the 'divide' between the 'East and West' grows in the very doing of our research projects. Joel explained that once researchers get stuck in their empirical contexts, they tend not to actually involve their informants or communities in those parts of the research process that actually matter (e.g. in making sense of the 'data') . Nor do researchers find ways to make their research output actionable/workable for the communities during the many years during which the researchers 'extract' from the communities. Drawing a parallel with my own 'second hand experience' of this process: a colleague told me that following her first publication at a top journal, she finally shared her research output with the community that she did ethnographic work with. But she immediately became discouraged from doing further ethnographic work for some time because the very same community rejected/contradicted the 'story' she had published. She also reasoned that she wished she had involved the community earlier in the data analysis and framing processes.

False generalizations (and dichotomies). Finally, our panelists spoke about the implications of research output that fails to adopt a 'native' perspective on organisational phenomena in non-western contexts. For instance, Bobby eloquently critiqued the very phrasing of the global north-south divide as a potentially false dichotomy. In his own words "…there are global north populations that reside in the global south and, global south populations that reside in the global north". Similarly, he commented that there can be a tendency in scholarship to regard 'any' voice from the global south as representative of the global south/a specific country as a whole. Bobby reasoned "the fact that a professor from the Indian Institute of Management in Ahmedabad, a premier institution in India, can be

considered as representative of India as a whole is absurd…". His words echoed insights from my own research where one of my informants lamented that the voice of his community is being 'hijacked' by someone who 'wears' the same skin as her people but does not actually share the lived experiences and societal obstacles faced by her own people.

In conclusion, it is important for us to whole-heartedly embrace these collective insights because we are, in many ways, telling stories and creating histories about our world that our future selves and colleagues will further build upon. This sentiment is perhaps better exemplified in the following quote: "History is a narrative; it's a collection of stories sanctioned by the ruling power, and reinforced through words and images that suit them. That was the whole point of taking on history painting: to authorize moments that have been swept under the rug for generations…."… – Kent Monkman (Cree artist, on why she chose provocative colonization art as a medium for storytelling)