



# Misrepresentation of Marginalized Groups: A Critique of Epistemic Neocolonialism

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## Abstract

I argue that meta-ignorance and meta-insensitivity are the key sources influencing the reoccurrence of the (un)conscious misrepresentation of marginalized groups in management and organization research; such misrepresentation, in effect, perpetuates epistemic neocolonialism. Meta-ignorance describes incorrect epistemic attitudes, which render researchers ignorant about issues such as contextual history and emotional and political aspects of a social problem. Researcher meta-ignorance can be a permanent feature, given how researchers define, locate, and make use of their epistemic positionality and privilege. In contrast, meta-insensitivity is a special issue that arises when researchers miss multiple opportunities to capture valuable aspects of marginalized groups' voices or their life experiences and expectations. The problem of meta-insensitivity during fieldwork is more serious because researchers—despite their apparent willingness to be innovative—fail to understand how to be sensitive toward marginalized groups. The perpetuation of these elements' misrepresentation contributes to long-lasting negative consequences for marginalized groups. To counter this, I introduce and conceptualize the idea of oppositional views which researchers can mobilize to address misrepresentation of marginalized groups and challenge epistemic neocolonialism.

**Keywords** Postcolonial theory · Critical philosophy · Epistemic injustice

## Introduction

In recent years, fieldwork focusing on issues of social injustice, poverty, and sustainability and their implications for powerless persons and groups in developing countries has become increasingly common in management and organization studies (MOS). Powerless communities, stigmatized population and labor forces with low income are defined as marginalized because they are dominated by powerful actors, such as multinational corporations (MNCs) (c.f., Gramsci, 1971) and elite non-government organizations NGOs (Spivak, 1999). These powerful actors exert considerable political and economic influence (Fuchs, 2018; Pasternak, 2015), as well as social and cultural manipulation (Dyer, 2018a; Spivak, 1988; Wright, 2018), to dominate marginalized groups (Asad, 1973; Lewis, 1973; Schumaker, 2001). Examples of marginalized groups include *Girmityas*, the sixty thousand indentured laborers sent from India to

Fiji to work on the sugarcane plantations from 1879 to 1916 (Harvard Law Review, 2021), child laborers (Basu & Van, 1988), borrowers of microfinance (Karim, 2011; Rahman, 2001), and the Rana Plaza victims of Bangladesh (Chowdhury, 2017a).

These groups are often further marginalized by MOS through (un)conscious misrepresentation (Prasad, 2005), which can be defined as giving the wrong account of a marginalized group regarding its norms, values, racial identity, sexual orientations, physical disability, class, history, culture, daily experiences, and other aspects. More specifically, misrepresentation occurs when management and organization researchers (MORs) interpret and present information regarding marginalized groups in ways that align with the norms and values espoused by powerful institutions (cf. Medina, 2012) and their dominant epistemic claims. Epistemic claims are specific conceptions (e.g., modern sciences can establish truths based on facts as scientific methods are value free and neutral) produced and defended by powerful institutions and actors. Such entrenched belief not only dominates natural sciences but also various branches of the social sciences (despite scholarly critique of such assumption; see e.g., Mills, 1959) and encourages Western academic

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institutions to train their researchers and students to think and act homogeneously. The result is that they (re)introduce and (re)produce colonial beliefs (Said, 1978) through sophisticated academic language and theoretical labeling and jargon which, in effect, simply fortifies Western-based knowledge production and provides various powerful actors with a set of tools for dominating marginalized groups. I term this entire process as *epistemic neocolonialism*. This epistemic neocolonialism by default excludes marginalized groups from the academic discourse (Chua, 1998; Douglas, 2003; Kim, 2008) as these groups are less aware of their representational rights and lack advanced education and capabilities; thus, they largely remain subject to misrepresentation (Schumaker, 2001).

Misrepresentation manifests through the repeated and updated creation and dissemination of scientific knowledge. In MOS, researchers study various conditions (e.g., cultural, socio-political, and economic) and aspects (e.g., racial, capabilities, skills, and functioning) of marginalized groups predominantly through quantitative research which never encourages deep interaction with them. Qualitative work, however, (which often requires fieldwork to engage with marginalized groups) has more opportunities to explore realities of marginalized groups even though it is not without its limitations. For example, MORs who are interpretivists are often forced by top academic journals to follow or mimic positivist types of research outcome in order to claim neutrality and value-free knowledge. This pattern in MOS has prevailed for advancing scientific inquiry where alternative thought processes and research works are impossible (e.g., Chowdhury, 2017b; Suddaby, 2018). Even when carried out by a few MORs, these types of work are largely seen as insignificant.

The above process perpetuates particularly during fieldwork. As part of knowledge production, researchers (un)consciously do not always ‘see’ (confer) their marginalized subjects with the same dignity and respect as would be the case with powerful actors, thereby affecting the ways that those marginalized individuals are considered, listened to, and interacted with (Jack & Westwood, 2006; Prakash, 1999; Prasad, 2003). This subsequently limits adequate representation of these groups in academic work (not only publications, but also various disseminating mediums, such as teaching, consultancy, and conferences). Such misrepresentation processes are then normalized over time in academic discourse, either in the absence of authentic accounts or voices (Alves, 2013; Muzanhenamo & Chowdhury, 2022a), or because the marginalized group could not find a fair and proportionate opportunity to contradict and challenge their misrepresentation by the researchers (Cruz, 2014; Mudimbe, 1988; Muzanhenamo & Chowdhury, 2022b). In the latter case, even if researchers have access to marginalized groups, they may choose to interview members without due

diligence (e.g., without capturing the special situation and circumstances of marginalized groups) and, thus, perpetuate epistemic neocolonialism (Muhammad et al., 2015).

The above argument, alongside its practical implications or negative consequences for marginalized groups, is substantiated by Chagnon’s (1968) controversial work on the Yanomamos (a Brazilian-Venezuelan tribe), which contends that the tribe was violent and that its members were liable to kill each other over the possession of women. Chagnon (1988) further stresses that Yanomami men who were killers had more wives and children than men who were not. He concludes that male aggression and violence is the principal driving force behind the evolution of culture. *The New York Times* contends that Chagnon’s assertion that Yanomami men live “in a state of chronic warfare” is the “most contested” phrase “in the history of anthropology” (Eakin, 2013). Meanwhile, Lizot (1985, p. xiv) emphasizes the need to “revise the exaggerated representation that has been given of Yanomami violence.” He adds: “The Yanomami are warriors; they can be brutal and cruel, but they can also be delicate, sensitive and loving. Violence is only sporadic; it never dominates social life for any length of time, and long peaceful moments can separate two explosions” (1985, p. xiv). Evidently, Chagnon outraged many scholars and organizations alike. For example, the Brazilian Anthropological Association (BAA) believes Chagnon’s work to contain “dubious scientific conclusions”, which, they warn, could have potentially terrible political consequences. The BAA is concerned that “Wide publicity about Yanomami ‘violence’ in racist terms... is being used by the powerful lobby of mining interests as an excuse for the invasion of these Indians’ lands” (BAA cited in Eakin, 2013).

Of course, it was not only Chagnon’s research that created significant controversy. For instance, works/roles of Margaret Mead and Rigoberta Menchú were very controversial (see Horowitz et al., 2019 in detail). Freeman (1983, 1999) accused Mead of having been ‘duped’ by informants in her pioneering ethnography work: *Coming of Age in Samoa*. Moreover, Stoll (1999) castigated anthropologists and historians by noting that, although the basic elements of Menchú’s testimony were true, a distorted narrative of the Guerrilla Army of the Poor (EGP) was given to fit with the Marxist ideology since Menchú held a similar ideology around that time. But, in this process, other indigenous narratives had been ignored as they did not fit well with those anthropologists’ and historians’ political agendas (Stoll, 1999). These examples illustrate the strong influence that academic output can have on policy and the role that powerful actors can play in the misrepresentation of the marginalized groups concerned, while taking advantage of their situation.

Thus, it is crucial to explore how misrepresentation reoccurs and what MORs can do about it. Even though

MORs have shed light on consequences of misrepresentation (e.g., Anteby, 2013; Harding, 1991; Jack & Westwood, 2006; Prakash, 1999; Prasad, 2003; Trevino, 1992; van Maanen, 2011) and offer a critical perspective on conducting research on marginalized groups (e.g., Czarniawska & Höpfl, 2002; Westwood et al., 2014), they do not identify key sources of misrepresentations and associated mechanisms (that can limit the biasness in the knowledge accumulation) to ultimately challenge the perpetuation of epistemic neocolonialism. I posit that not all MORs are responsible for contributing to epistemic neocolonialism. Some can be less responsible; some are more; and others are simply complicit through their elite gatekeeping roles in academic systems (Muzanhamo & Chowdhury, 2021). However, complicit, active involvement, and silences help to perpetuate epistemic neocolonialism which, in turn, creates fertile conditions for reoccurrence of misrepresentation.

To address the issue of misrepresentation, I first examine its development in the social sciences and its implications in MOS. Second, I conceptualize two foundational sources (i.e., meta-ignorance and meta-insensitivity) that trigger, materialize, and encourage reoccurrence of misrepresentations (drawing from Median's 2012 pioneering work) with two specific published articles on garment workers and microfinance borrowers in Bangladesh and other sources as examples. These examples are utilized to substantiate my conceptual arguments as opposed to portray them as empirical findings. Third, I propose the idea of oppositional views (developed though Du Bois's (1903) masterwork) as a primary mechanism to address the issues of misrepresentation. The final section includes discussion and conclusions, highlighting the need to reinvent academic incentive structures not only for better representation of marginalized groups but also to make societies fairer and more equitable for such groups.

## Misrepresentation in the Social Sciences and its Implications for MOS

In contemporary social science there is significant concern “about how an emergent postmodern world is to be represented as an object for social thought in its various contemporary disciplinary manifestations” (Marcus & Fisher, 1986, p. viii). Marcus and Fisher (1986) defined this challenge as a “crisis of representation.” Their work is influenced by Said's (1978) influential book on orientalism. Said's literary work had groundbreaking implications, not only for the humanities, but also for the social sciences. He introduced the concept of orientalism, which influenced many social

scientists to rethink the way they conducted their fieldwork. According to Said (1978, p. 3), orientalism is

discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient—dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient.

Said's view on orientalism influenced social scientists to review how they had been interpreting their (exotic) subjects in a way that widened the power-knowledge (Foucault, 2008) imbalance (e.g., Schumaker, 2001), meaning that, historically, they had often located marginalized groups in disadvantaged epistemic states.

More precisely, the problem of misrepresentation or “crisis of representation” creates distinct concerns. This involves a complex relationship between ethnographers, their subjects, and their readers. These concerns extend to how the lone researcher consequently addresses issues of marginalization, inequality, and power imbalance (Clifford & Marcus, 1986), and how these influence his or her target audience. While in the past, social scientists often ignored such concerns, in the worst cases, ethnographers even influenced their colleagues to strengthen their collaboration with powerful actors in neocolonial planning (Pels, 1997). Such research predominately focused on colonialism in three ways. *First*, it took the view of universalism—i.e., the evolutionary progress of modernization—where the contributions of the Global South are highly disregarded. *Second*, it devised strategies for domination and exploitation. For example, a subtle type of exploitation would be devising colonial strategy based on anthropological knowledge, so that colonial struggles (e.g., race conflict and indigenous revolt) are avoided; meanwhile the desired progress is attained cheaply and without bloodshed [Malinowski's (1929) work cited as an example in Pels (1997)]. However, this still serves the purpose of epistemic neocolonialism as marginalized groups are controlled and managed through Western hegemony (Spivak, 1988, 1990). *Third*, it saw colonialism as the unfinished business of struggle and negotiation; therefore, how institutional or structural arrangements are developed by powerful institutions and actors still play a role in preserving the epistemic neocolonialism (Said, 1978). By adopting such perspectives, some researchers excluded marginalized subjects from their studies; one such example is Weiner's (1992) study on Trobriand society (which was the site of Bronislaw Malinowski's—considered to be the founder of anthropology—renowned studies on the Kula exchange). She found that women's contributions were highly significant, but largely erased from the record, because the cultural focus was on the distribution and exchange of valuables, rather than on their production.

More worryingly, the misrepresentation of subjects because of neocolonial anthropology often influenced anthropologists to depict marginalized communities as uneducated savages and promoted the dominant idea of development (Asad, 1973; Schumaker, 2001). However, the misrepresentation of communities (e.g., Douglas, 2003; Dyer, 2018b) is not only limited to anthropology; it is a widespread problem in the social sciences. For example, in the aftermath of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, some Western psychologists rushed to Sri Lanka to assist victims (Christopher et al., 2014). These Western-trained mental health professionals presumed that depression and suicide would reach epidemic proportions in tsunami-affected areas (Watters, 2010). Such insensitive views not only created erroneous expectations regarding psychiatric disorders; they were accompanied by Western-derived interventions, such as grief counseling and exposure therapies. During their time in Sri Lanka, despite their interactions with the marginalized groups, these psychologists failed to recognize local ideas about appropriate social interaction and local norms regarding privacy, dignity, emotional display, and family solidarity (Wickramage, 2006). Accordingly, some foreign psychologists organized group-based programs in ways that violated the parameters of segregation by caste, religion, and sex that underpin local social stratification and organizations. Although most of these violations were done unknowingly, sometimes they were deliberate, based on epistemic attitudes that this was an opportunity to educate the victims (Christopher et al., 2014). Such insensitive behavior evidently had negative consequences. Some people became associated with madness and mental illness, which was considered an embarrassment for them and their families (Christopher et al., 2014). Some were forced into public displays of emotion, which are taboo for many people in accordance with Hindu and Buddhist cultures (Christopher et al., 2014). Therefore, many victims encountered awkward social situations and experienced a violation of their dignity. Had the psychologists researched Sri Lankan and Hindu culture, taken the views of locals seriously by paying more attention, and not assumed that they knew best (which in effect only encouraged them to use neocolonial epistemic assumptions), the resulting psychological and physical damage might have been prevented.

Also, the way in which ethnography became a source of knowledge that enabled researchers to promote its traditional methodology and configuration of knowledge as power is called into question (Burawoy, 1998; Gouldner, 1970). In the past.

“the anthropology of colonialism is also always an anthropology of anthropology,” meaning that “in many methodological, organizational, and professional aspects the discipline retains the shape it received when it emerged from—if partly in opposition to—

early twentieth century colonial circumstances” (Pels, 1997, pp. 164–165).

The above concerns produced the idea of critical anthropology which was popularized in sociology (e.g., Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) and MOS as reflexivity (e.g., Alvesson, 2003). According to Alvesson (2003, p. 25), reflexivity “stands for conscious and consistent efforts to view the subject matter from different angles and avoid or strongly a priori privilege a single, favored angle and vocabulary.” From the 1980s onward, these ideas became structural and tried to create a balance of domination and marginalization (Adler & Adler, 2008). In MOS, this for instance helped critical management studies (CMS) to engage more prominently with marginalized groups’ issues. For instance, the early writings of Calás and Smircich (1991) on the marginalization provides lucid and specific examples of how women are marginalized in MOS. In a similar vein, Nkomo’s (1992) work on how race has been studied and Prasad’s (2012) writing on sexual identity illuminate how various marginalized groups can be better represented in MOS. Some of these earlier works encouraged more contemporary critical scholars (e.g., Chowdhury, 2021a, 2021b; Varman & Al-Amoudi, 2016) to study in greater depth how violence and injustice against marginalized groups occur in different (both overt and covert) forms.

However, a debate between Marcus (2007) and Okely (2007) demonstrates that the problem of misrepresentation is still predominately unresolved. On one hand, Marcus (2007) introduced mechanisms such as multi-sited and collaborative imageries to address the problem of misrepresentation. On the other hand, Okely (2007) believed that traditional anthropological methods (e.g., immersion with subjects and doing longitudinal research) often used by sociologists and MORs represent subjects in the best way possible. However, both sociologists and MORs who adopt traditional approaches including ideas such as reflexivity often miss opportunities to see things differently regarding issues concerning marginalized groups (Burawoy, 1998; Prasad, 2005; Westwood et al., 2014) because even CMS researchers in MOS are also trapped into dominant institutional arrangements that mainstream social scientists/MORs fall into (cf. Spivak, 1988). Recent studies, for example, claim that business schools are racist (Dar et al., 2021) or highlight deeply embedded epistemic injustice and hegemony in MOS (Muzanenhamo & Chowdhury, 2021) which even complicates CMS’s claims of a critical worldview that they want to pursue. In other words, Whiteness, and White entitlement in MOS (it does not exclude CMS; see also Chowdhury, 2021b) endures. Moreover, a researcher’s reflexivity may depend on who they are (e.g., their privileges and socio-economic status apart from their racial identity) and how they are constrained by institutional biases and control. For example, leading academic

journals often conform to Western-centric knowledge production, which imposes major constraints to being reflexive through the development of biased ideas. More problematically, MORs often go through the research ethics approval process for permission to conduct fieldwork which also creates significant institutional constraints where MORs need to show that they adhere sufficiently to institutional conformity to conduct their fieldwork. Such commitment is—in effect—a commitment to Western-centric knowledge production so that anyone who wants to adopt alternative approaches to fieldwork is challenged or rejected by homogenous reviewers. These reviewers are often trained to conduct fieldwork in conventional manners. Since epistemic injustice, racial biases, and embedded Whiteness play significant roles in shaping and arraiging how MORs can/should do research, we need to start examining the sources of misrepresentations to address them. In other words, while we have made some progresses, we need much more research and debate (e.g., Davis, 2015) to decolonize the mechanisms that are at the disposal of MORs. This can help to trigger a more coordinated challenge toward epistemic coloniality that is (un)consciously embraced in MOS and attain epistemic justice across (non)traditional approaches that MORs (can) use.

## Sources of Misrepresentations of Marginalized Groups in MOS

When MORs study marginalized groups, they can show insensitivity toward their subjects. According to Medina (2012, p. XI),

insensitivity involves being cognitively and affectively numbed to the lives of others: being inattentive to and unconcerned by their experiences, problems, and aspirations; and being unable to connect with them and to understand their speech and action.

When researchers are insensitive to their marginalized subjects, they are unable to represent them adequately. Building on these arguments and borrowing from Medina (2012), I will conceptualize (1) meta-ignorance, and (2) meta-insensitivity, which I identify as the key sources that influence the reoccurrence and perpetuation of misrepresentation in academic discourse.

I observe evidence of such reoccurring misrepresentation in the specific studies of garment workers and microfinance borrowers in Bangladesh. For example, in the aftermath of the Rana Plaza collapse, ironically, in Western academia, the Accord—an agreement that emerged in response to the Rana Plaza collapse—was described as a “game changer” (Rahman, 2014). It was mostly led by European MNCs, alongside a few Western NGOs, with some Western and Bangladeshi trade union involvement. I encountered such

claims via various Western platforms, such as academic seminars. My initial interpretation of such claims was that studies (e.g., Reinecke & Donaghey, 2015) that made such observations misrepresented the events that followed the Rana Plaza collapse in Bangladesh by limiting their focus to the Accord, which they claimed reformed the garment industry in Bangladesh and generally improved workers’ conditions. Similar arguments, one of which is that elite NGOs (such as BRAC in Bangladesh) improve the lives of the poor through microfinance, are also common (e.g., Mair et al., 2012). Such representation of the Accord and elite NGOs as means to institutionalize Westernized reformist ideas fits with epistemic neocolonial claims (Alamgir & Alakavuklar, 2020; Chowdhury & Willmott, 2019; Muhammad, 2015a, 2015b). However, generalized arguments (van Maanen, 1995), such as those suggesting that the Accord and elite NGOs reflect the voices of the marginalized groups in Bangladesh, can simply perpetuate misrepresentation. In the following sections, I aim to develop the ideas of meta-ignorance and meta-insensitivity through illustrations of the works of Reinecke and Donaghey (2015) and Mair et al. (2012) and highlight limits of traditional approaches that are generally adopted by MORs to carry out their fieldwork and, thus, have negative implications toward marginalized groups. I do not claim that these traditional fieldwork approaches are necessarily adopted intentionally by MORs to cause harms, but rather contend that these (un)conscious undertakings hinder decolonization of knowledge and perpetuate neocolonialism and elitism.

## Meta-ignorance

According to Medina (2012, p. 58), meta-ignorance is “wrong attitudes about epistemic attitudes—these are the meta-attitudes present arrogance, laziness, and closed-mindedness.” These attitudes enable researchers to remain ignorant about various issues, such as the contextual history of subjects, sideways issues (Burawoy, 1998; Nader, 1969; Stryker & González, 2014) that are somewhat unrelated to marginalized groups but still affect them (in)directly, and issues (i.e., emotional, political, cultural, and historical) that must not be detached from subjects because, often, context shapes the lives of marginalized groups.

In the above context, arrogance occurs when researchers think they are certain about which methods they need to adopt to interpret and represent their subjects. Arrogance persists when researchers become lazy about finding the alternative methods necessary to study their subjects. In other words, using conventional methods is compelling, as they are not generally challenged by the wider research community (Morris, 2015). However, deviating from them can mean reimagining and relearning methods or challenging the epistemic neocoloniality, which is more suitable to

study marginalized groups. Closed-mindedness occurs when researchers do not epistemically consider the importance of the voices of marginalized subjects as powerful counterparts for understanding a problem. In such situations, researchers often prioritize their engagement with powerful actors in their quest to ‘solve’ the problem of marginalized groups. This process restricts representation of marginalized groups in the public sphere because a skewed understanding of these groups is captured and disseminated by researchers in the first place.

Meta-ignorance of MORs can be a permanent feature, given how researchers locate their epistemic positionalities and its influence in their fieldwork. I refer to epistemic positionalities as researchers’ rationale for studying subjects or social problems in specific ways which are influenced by epistemic neocolonialism (Cruz, 2014). For example, with very few exceptions, quantitative researchers are even more likely to suffer from meta-ignorance by default. This is due to general design factors of quantitative research such as not engaging deeply with marginalized groups. However, in qualitative research, meta-ignorance can be present in the ways in which researchers engage with subjects or social problems and how they exchange their findings with subjects. Just take a generalized example of jet-setting MORs (Bate, 1997). When MORs interview non-marginalized people in developing countries, they often give draft or final versions of their work to their respondents, to make sure that they (the respondents) believe they are adequately represented. Researchers who fly to developing countries and regions (e.g., the Amazon in Brazil), only stay for a short period, and interview some indigenous people identified by elite organizations often do not return to follow up, or to show a version of the article to the marginalized respondents before publishing it. These MORs certainly may send their final drafts or consultancy reports to the elite organizations that assisted them, but not to the marginalized respondents. Or, let us presume that, even if elite organizations are not involved in supporting research or selecting respondents, it is often difficult to share findings with marginalized respondents not only logistically but also because these respondents tend not to have the skills or capacity to understand technical issues, scientific terminologies, or even the language game (Mauws & Philips, 1995) that MORs play in the construction of scientific work. They are difficult for well-educated respondents to comprehend, let alone marginalized groups. I identify two additional ways that meta-ignorance affects qualitative research.

*First*, since researchers have epistemic privilege to study marginalized subjects, it is important for them to understand what affords them that right to research. I consider epistemic privilege as MORs’ freedom to choose contexts or respondents for their studies and to use (unchallenged) certain ideologies and intellectual lenses to study such contexts/

respondents (Schumaker, 2001). However, such a notion depends on how MORs think that their research will impact a problem space (Rainbow, 1977). In other words, the idea that someone (who is epistemically elitist) has the right to research any group of people *must* be seen as a problematic approach (Asad, 1973). Unless researchers see that they have “the social and cultural capacity to plan, hope, desire, and achieve socially valuable goals” (Appadurai, 2006, p. 176) and make best use of sensitivities, so that they are cautious about researching vulnerable subjects or problem spaces, they should not engage with marginalized groups. For example, research supervisors can discourage students with epistemic elitists views to attend any fieldwork on marginalized groups. This does not mean that we should only study ourselves; instead, we need to learn to be sensitive, understanding, and ethical, and take special care when we study marginalized groups (Fricker, 2010; Medina, 2012). Thus, MORs are expected to show awareness and humility with decolonized or sensitive mindsets when they study marginalized groups or their problem spaces.

*Second*, I suggest that the motives of researchers (cf. Biagioli et al., 2019; Merton, 1973), which are often influenced by epistemic neocoloniality, do matter. For example, researchers can conduct fieldwork that is beneficial to powerful actors. Boas (1919), for instance, wrote a fiery letter for *The Nation* that charged four American anthropologists (whom he did not name) with a claim that they had abused their professional research positions by conducting espionage in Central America during World War I. Similarly, if researchers are funded by corporations (or are consultants to specific corporations), they may be influenced to take a position that would (covertly) serve the purposes of the corporate interest (Fontanarosa et al., 2010; Zelizer, 2010). For example, research on the safety of cigarettes or second-hand smoking, funded by tobacco firms, can raise such concerns. These are examples of intentional attempts by researchers to misrepresent science.

However, misrepresentation happens in subtler ways when researchers are not able to recognize and prioritize the rights of marginalized groups. For example, theoretical contributions must not be beneficial to elites only; I argue that they need to primarily benefit the marginalized groups whose lives are affected by such contributions (Schumaker, 2001). If so, whether firms are competitive or adopting resource-based views (RBV) and dynamic capabilities to maximize efficiency and profits would become less relevant to these researchers. This is important because researchers have a duty to provide marginalized subjects with the scope to engage with such contributions and opportunities to contest the process of knowledge production and the output such research produces should they so wish (Medina, 2012). Thus, theoretical contributions which are communicated in public sphere must bring up the issues of marginalized

groups as a central focus rather than promoting competitiveness of firms or praising how powerful actors are saviors of marginalized groups through neocolonial concepts such as bottom of the pyramid (BoP), microfinance, and creating shared value (CSV). Such focus then can enable researchers to take a distinctive epistemic position, which I define as marginalized groups' right to be heard and respected in a dignified and serious manner by the researchers and, by extension, in the wider public sphere, compared to making contributions that would possibly only perpetuate epistemic neocoloniality. Hence, the epistemic privilege of researchers must influence them to engage with marginalized groups not only ethically but also innovatively so that marginalized groups are represented fairly and adequately in both private and public spheres (Cruz, 2014). This is crucial, because researchers' own epistemic privileges are hardly affected by their own behavioral patterns (instead, epistemic privileges or elitist behavior of researchers are often strengthened), such as perpetuated arrogance and closed-mindedness (Medina, 2012) that can compound the endurance of misrepresentation.

Therefore, researchers must try to deviate from any kind of epistemic neocolonial thought so that marginalized groups are not negatively affected. For example, one general perception in MOS is that economic growth and development are key factors that improve the lives of the poor in developing countries (e.g., Bhagwati & Panagariya, 2013). But radical views of heterodox economics, for instance, disregards such dominant epistemic thought; instead, it highlights the contradictions of capitalism and questions the necessity of economic growth (Lawson, 2006). Non-alignment with dominant epistemic thought is expected not only to widen the horizon of understanding when representing the problems of marginalized groups but also to generate interesting and useful theory (Morgan, 1980; Webb & Weick, 1979).

In the above scenario, if marginalized groups are willing to collaborate with researchers, their vulnerabilities must be noted in the best ways, so they are represented as adequately as possible. If such engagement, proposed by researchers, is not endorsed by marginalized groups, a study must be abandoned, or an alternative option must be found. In other words, when researchers lack moral approval or potential marginalized subjects reject being represented by them, such studies must be abandoned (Appadurai, 2006).

### Illustration of Meta-ignorance in MOS

To illustrate how misrepresentation occurs through meta-ignorance and meta-insensitivity, I primarily cite examples from the studies of Reinecke and Donaghey (2015) and Mair et al. (2012). I do so because both studies refer to and engage with controversial institutions such as Accord and BRAC which highlight that, when marginalized workers and

borrowers are studied in a conventional manner, their voices are lost and infringed in public discourse. At this point, I briefly outline the main arguments of the two articles. Reinecke and Donaghey (2015) describe how different powerful actors, such as MNCs, participated in the reform of the Bangladeshi supply chain governance through the Accord. They emphasize that MNCs came to restore the supply chain in Bangladesh, coordinated through the selected engagement of Western trade unions and NGOs. Consequently, this process reformed the supply chain and the conditions of marginalized workers in Bangladesh. Thus, in their representation of the Accord, they imply that reform is best performed when powerful actors coordinate among their elite circles and act accordingly. Meanwhile, Mair et al. (2012) argue that institutional voids are addressed through elite NGO intermediaries such as BRAC. By doing so, they highlight various programs, such as microfinance that BRAC adopts to alleviate poverty and empower marginalized groups. They conclude that the role of elite intermediaries is essential for alleviating poverty in developing countries. Such claims have been contested by several sociologists, anthropologists, and economists (e.g., Fernando, 2005; Karim, 2008, 2011; Mannan, 2009; Muhammad, 2015a, 2015b; Rahman, 2001; or by more contemporary work such as Radhakrishnan, 2015; Beck & Radhakrishnan, 2017). In the following sub-sections I highlight how specific approaches that are generally used in MOS were adopted by above mentioned studies and produced misrepresentations of marginalized groups such as garment workers and borrowers.

### Alignment with Epistemic Neocolonialism

Researchers cannot always have detailed or complete knowledge of the phenomenon or organization that they study (e.g., Levy, 1985). When researchers lack such understanding, prior to and during their fieldwork, they can consult various existing literature and public records, and ask a series of reasonable questions to uncover various aspects of a phenomenon or organization they want to study. For example, researchers may suffer as they struggle to gain access, may encounter hostile respondents, or may encounter prior literature that disregarded epistemic neocolonial thoughts (Gwaltney, 1993; Katz, 1993). These circumstances can trigger concerns or interesting perspectives. By examining the work of Reinecke and Donaghey (2015) and Mair et al. (2012), it appears that neither study engages neocolonial approaches adopted by Accord and BRAC to pursue workers' and borrowers' rights in Bangladesh. Neither of these studies engages with prior research or publicly available reports which were critical about Accord or BRAC and their controversial approaches to address issues of marginalized groups. Because of such non-engagement, these studies missed valuable research opportunities that could

have afforded better representation to marginalized groups. A sensible approach was needed to study those organizations and their activities to prevent researchers from falling into the trap of meta-ignorance. Henceforth, by not engaging with prior research that produced critical views, elite views automatically had influence over marginalized groups' representation. For example, the study on Accord (Reinecke & Donaghey, 2015) overlooks (or does not develop a contrasting view of) how MNCs and Western NGOs were involved in the Accord historically and ideologically, and how they claimed to be able to manage marginalized groups in Bangladesh (Chowdhury, 2017a). Although the Accord brings together various actors to lead the initiative, it can still be defined as an NGO. So, what ideology requires formation of such a powerful NGO, and to serve whose purpose? What are the roles of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in shaping trade deals that directly benefit MNCs through the weak enforcement of regulations (Alamgir, 2014; Fernando, 2005; Muhammad, 2015a)? It also means that these studies ignore substantial work on international labor regulations in Bangladesh, as well as various trade agreements between Bangladesh, the USA, and the EU, which are influenced by powerful actors such as the World Bank and the IMF (Berik & Rodgers, 2010; Compa & Hinchliffe-Darricarrère, 1995; Muhammad, 2015b; Rahman & Langford, 2014). More importantly, while trade unions may represent a good number of marginalized workers in some parts of Europe, some of the Bangladeshi trade unions affiliated to the Accord for instance have political association, which makes it hard to see how they are representative of the marginalized workers or how they can adopt a neutral stance (Nuruzzaman, 2006; Rahman & Langford, 2014; Shifa et al., 2015; Taher, 1999). For example, the six trade unions listed in the Accord were affiliated with either the ruling party or the main opposition party. Often, NGOs and trade unions in Bangladesh are formed to encourage popularity to protect political party and business interests, which are intertwined (Rahman & Langford, 2014; Shifa et al., 2015; Sumon, 2016). In summary, the Accord is incontestably situated in that context and cannot be examined without noting the exploitative logic behind it, which in turn indicates that the Accord offers no substantial means of enforcing regulations, nor does it have any legal authority to do so in Bangladesh (Muhammad, 2015b).

By contrast, research conducted by Karim (2008, 2011) on poverty and microfinance in Bangladesh reached some very different conclusions to those of Mair et al. (2012) concerning the ways in which large intermediaries—including the Grammen Bank, BRAC, ASA, and Proshika—function. For example, Karim (2011) argues that NGOs employ “honor and shame” by using police and courts to harass women and, thus, force them to repay debts. In Bangladesh, if a village woman is held in police custody overnight, she

not only brings shame to her husband, but also loses her virtue. More specifically, in one instance, Karim (2008) observes that when 50% of the chickens involved in an operation that was set up with the assistance of BRAC died within a week, BRAC's managers blamed illiterate village women. However, it was BRAC officials who chose those women, although they knew that they had not received proper training and did not have the necessary facilities to run a chicken farm from a tin shed in their houses. Because Mair et al. (2012) did not engage with two decades' worth of research that was critical of the roles of NGOs and their primary activities, such as microfinance in Bangladesh (e.g., Fernando, 2005; Karim, 2008, 2011; Mannan, 2009; Muhammad, 2015a, 2015b; Rahman, 2001), their study unfortunately missed an opportunity to explore BRAC's activities in a different light.

It is also important to highlight that BRAC, one of the world's largest NGOs, runs banks, universities, hotels, restaurants, and other business ventures under the guise of charitable status. Henceforth, the apex court in Bangladesh has ruled that BRAC must pay Taka 404.21 crore (approximately US\$47,480,770) in income taxes accumulated between 1993 and 2012 (Shaon, 2016). A reasonable question this raises is why and how a court would make such a judgment against an NGO if it (the NGO) was running their activities under charitable status. Interestingly, BRAC even played a role to compensate victims as a consultant of MNCs (mainly through Alliance, a similar institution to the Accord, except that its members are mainly US retailers and involve elite NGOs such as BRAC) in the aftermath of the Rana Plaza disaster. This emphasizes that BRAC operates beyond its usual NGO activities (e.g., given that one can reasonably expect Rana Plaza victims to be served by the state and legal mechanisms so that they can be duly compensated) which influenced a court to deliver such a verdict.

### **Nature of Epistemic Positionalities and Privileges that Perpetuates Neocolonialism**

Explaining the epistemic positionalities of researchers can help them to recognize and highlight types of epistemic privilege that they had for their work (Cruz, 2014). For example, researchers could explain the negotiated realities that they encountered prior to and during their fieldwork. By “negotiated realities”, I mean, for instance, what types of epistemic privileges were used to convince elite actors such as Accord and BRAC to give researchers access to sites and respondents. Failing to clarify the negotiated reality means that such studies (i.e., Mair et al., 2012; Reinecke & Donaghey, 2015) did not conceptualize the problem spaces taking up specific epistemic positions (or ensure that the rights of marginalized groups were met) in order to better understand the ground realities as described above. If problem spaces were



well defined, the marginalized actors could naturally attain research focus because, in both studies, a significant focus on marginalized actors was unavoidable, given the nature of their chosen topics and contexts.

Since elite organizations, rather than marginalized actors, were their primary focus, these studies missed opportunities to envisage a collaborative relationship with marginalized groups. Therefore, even when the researchers concerned engaged with marginalized respondents on some occasions, they did so in an ad hoc manner (e.g., using elite actors as mediators for accessing sites and respondents, using translators, and other associated logistical help received to facilitate research). Thus, the epistemic positionalities of the researchers were more aligned with certain elite actors than with the concerns of marginalized actors. I refer to “some occasions” because, sometimes, researchers choose their subjects subconsciously in a manner that excludes marginalized respondents from their fieldwork. Unfortunately, this approach goes beyond the question of capturing nuances from marginalized groups (see the next section, where I discuss such issues in detail). Reinecke and Donaghey’s (2015) study relies on interviews with powerful actors—such as foreign embassy members in Bangladesh and executive members of the Accord—to represent the fundamental rights and safety issues of Bangladeshi marginalized workers.

### Meta-insensitivity

In comparison to meta-ignorance, the problem of meta-insensitivity (i.e., “a special difficulty in realizing and appreciating the limitations of their horizon of understanding” (Medina, 2012, p. 75) during fieldwork is more serious, because researchers—despite their apparent willingness to be innovative—often fail to ascertain how *not* to show a pronounced insensitivity toward marginalized groups. Instead, they can unconsciously be sympathetic toward the insensitivity of elite actors who design policies or affect policies for the marginalized groups. This occurrence is meta-insensitivity because researchers miss multiple opportunities to capture valuable aspects of marginalized groups’ voices or their life experiences and their expectations (while also missing the elite’s insensitivities toward marginalized groups). Instead, researchers prioritize things that align easily with the dominant institutional beliefs which, in effect, creates a problem with the genuineness and credibility of researchers during fieldwork when exchanging views and testimonies with their subjects. This fortifies epistemic neocoloniality since researchers actively (albeit often unconsciously) promote elitist or hegemonic policies to control the lives of marginalized groups.

I argue that meta-insensitivity frequently occurs during fieldwork when researchers are unable to see, feel, and engage with subjects and issues that need deep sensitive

attention and interpretation. It is a process during fieldwork when researchers fail to recognize the different ethical, emotional, cultural, and political nuances, or the behavior of actors (e.g., marginalized groups) in terms of their ideology, historiography, beliefs, values, feelings, experiences, and native language. A Fijian elder (cited in Katz, 1993, p. 294) sums up what such meta-insensitivity entails during fieldwork: “People do not understand the unseen, which is the reality of our lives; they do not realize its power. They look only at the seen, which is illusion.” The fundamental problem is that illusion creates interpretative difficulties; thus, misrepresentation of marginalized groups become more embedded.

Undoubtedly, MORs need to comprehend the significance of subtle nuances, such as physical and emotional expressions during conversation, in conjunction with various elements of cultural and political contexts (Razavi, 1993). Understanding subtle nuances is key to unpacking multiple interpretations of a marginalized group and avoiding misrepresentation (e.g., Goffman, 1989; Marcus & Fischer, 1986). If subtle nuances are not recognized, MORs fail to comprehend the deeper meaning of conversations conveyed, for instance, through the various forms of language and other means of expression (e.g., emotional, physical expressions). They are unable to interpret the implicit norms and values that are embedded in the work, ideology, and ethics of a marginalized group (van Maanen, 2011). Researchers in such situations are unable to sense and interpret, and therefore, neglect, the “unseen,” “emotional truth” (Hereniko, 2000).

If researchers want to understand and interpret the unseen and emotional truths, complex processes are involved (cf. Chodorow, 2001). This is because, for instance, if researchers interact with their marginalized respondents in front of elite representatives, they might hear what is acceptable to the elite representative. Hence, it is not sufficient to just try to understand certain clues (and cues) (e.g., different types of expressions in the faces of both the elite representative and the marginalized respondent) to make sense of these diverse actors when both the elite and marginalized people are situated in a time and space. In such a space, despite their personal beliefs about the situation, researchers may need to figure out ways in which they can talk with marginalized respondents independently and delve deeper into constraint-free conversations to better understand what is really going on, to capture the subtlety of the conversation. Therefore, researchers must perform hermeneutical responsibilities. These responsibilities can be defined as interpreting marginalized groups (including during first-hand interactions) in a way which ensures that one’s personal beliefs and experience of the respondents is cross-examined in an independent space and time (Fricker, 2010); thus, a subject is not unfairly disadvantaged by their capacity to describe an experience. However, a significant challenge remains to mobilize

hermeneutical responsibilities because mere cross-examination of data sources or deployment of mixed methods are not enough to ensure that MORs take their responsibilities seriously. Mair et al. (2012), for instance, tried to overcome such problems using various data sources (e.g., interviews and secondary data). However, their study's method led into problems such as biased site selection and failure to address historical, contextual, and language issues adequately.

### Illustration of Meta-insensitivity in MOS

I now analyze specific examples of meta-insensitivity that appear in MOS, arguing that these are missed opportunities to capture a better understanding of marginalized groups' voices.

#### Linguistic Difficulties and Contextual Misunderstandings Generate Epistemic Biasness

As mentioned above, one striking feature I observed in studies that investigate marginalized groups is that, often, MORs rely on interview partners provided by powerful actors (e.g., the observations in Bernstein's (2012) study were made under the supervision of firms' top executives/managers) and fail to speak the same language as the marginalized respondents (e.g., Mair and colleagues relied exclusively on BRAC and interpreters). It is often riskier to talk with native respondents in English. For example, when I collected data in Bangladesh relating to the Rana Plaza collapse, I found that even highly educated individuals often felt uncomfortable speaking English because they did not use the language routinely [similar observations have been made by ethnographers such as Razavi (1993)]. Thus, I decided to conduct the exchanges in Bengali, so that interviewees could express themselves fully and talk freely. In other words, it is crucial for participants to be able to articulate their story in their native language (van Maanen, 2011).

Mair et al. (2012) noted that they used interpreters while conducting their fieldwork. However, interpreters can mislead a conversation because they may offer a poor or erroneous explanation of what the subjects wish to convey in their own terms. In addition, an interpreter may shy away from explaining comments that present a negative view of the focal organization (i.e., BRAC) or that might offend the researchers. Depending on who chooses the interpreters, the quality of data can be negatively affected in any study, particularly if the focal organization seeks to safeguard their own interests through their choice of interpreters. Therefore, any author should take necessary precautions to avoid the collection of responses biased by the influence of the organizations they study.

Notably, none of the marginalized respondents talked about any difficult issues relating to BRAC or the Accord; nor could I find any critical perspectives on BRAC or the Accord in the studies of Mair et al. (2012) and Reinecke and Donaghey (2015) which was surprising given the controversial discourse around these two dominant institutions (Fernando, 2005; Karim, 2008, 2011; Mannan, 2009; Muhammad, 2015a, 2015b; Rahman, 2001). It is not unreasonable to expect that these studies would report some critical views from marginalized respondents regarding BRAC's or the Accord's activities, but they did not. I consider this a missed opportunity to highlight some of the genuine voices of marginalized groups.

#### Missed Opportunities for Fair Site Selection

In a different article, Donaghey and Reinecke (2018) mentioned that, in the second phase of their study, they spoke with garment workers and managers during visits to six Accord- and Alliance-affiliated factories. However, no information is given about the conditions and the way in which the interviews were conducted, who chose these research sites (e.g., the researchers themselves or Accord/Alliance officials), or whether they could be representative of other Accord- and Alliance-audited factories. If Donaghey and Reinecke (2018) talked with workers in their homes or in other more neutral settings, marginalized workers could have had better representation.

Mair et al. (2012), however, indicated that they visited BRAC sites, which raises the issue of fair site selection (Warren & Rasmussen, 1977). It indicates that hermeneutical responsibilities were not considered adequately: Selecting sites belonging to an elite organization to study the poor and poverty does not guarantee adequate representation. BRAC was unlikely to choose badly performing sites or locations with disgruntled workers who were likely to speak negatively about it in interviews. Among the local population, it is widely acknowledged that when foreign donors and researchers, for instance, visit NGOs or governmental operations, high-performing sites are frequently selected. A fellow researcher who recently visited Bangladesh and asked BRAC to assist them with data collection mentioned that they were sent to sites with a BRAC official. They were not able to select sites randomly or talk freely with the people they visited, as representatives were observing their activities at all times.

It is increasingly common for leading firms to restrict what can be studied in their premises and what can be discussed in public. Firms often dictate how a proposal is developed and communicated to senior management, which influences the findings through a well-articulated vetting process (Welch et al., 2002). Such processes

significantly reduce the reliability of the findings and the strength of theoretical contributions.

### Missed Opportunities to Report Failings and Hostile Messages

MORs often miss opportunities to report any failings or hostile messages that they encounter during fieldwork. However, such reporting could create an opportunity for better representation of marginalized groups. Examples of failing reports are: (1) how they failed to secure interpreters independently and (2) not removing any influence that the powerful NGO's representatives posed by introducing researchers to marginalized respondents or by being present at the fieldwork sites.

An example of a hostile message is the way in which marginalized respondents may perceive or engage with researchers negatively. For example, Gwaltney (1993, p. xix) was told by a respondent who he reported in his work: "I think this anthropology is just another way to call me a nigger". While studying the Rana Plaza disaster, one victim claimed that I had come there to make money. She added that God would punish my wrongdoing, as she did not have any power to influence elite actors (including me). Such an accusation occurred because I could not offer the respondent an adequate explanation of how my research would help victims. My answer to her and other victims, to avoid false expectation, was that by the end of this study, I would produce some academic articles and a book. While I realized how useless I was in terms of helping the victims, some of them felt betrayed because I was not doing anything for them through my research (e.g., I was not helping them to receive legal aid or compensation or to better their lives).

### Development of Oppositional Views for Addressing the Misrepresentation and Challenging the Epistemic Neocolonialism

MORs frequently promote the idea of critical ethnography and reflexivity to avoid misrepresentation (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000; Thomas, 1992). These types of methodology aim to go beyond the mere description of a phenomenon, to speak on behalf of the subjects to empower them (Prasad, 2005). Such methodologies, thus, intend to understand the agenda of powerful actors, and the control mechanisms that they use (Jack & Westwood, 2006; Thomas, 1992). However, the critical ethnographic approach and the reflexivity that are adopted by MORs do not adequately solve the problem of misrepresentation (Weick, 1989). While these approaches ask MORs to be self-aware and critical, these do not clarify for *whom*, *why*, and *how* these critical

approaches are beneficial and how such criticality can be embedded into the old fieldwork methods (c.f., Chia, 1996; Gruenberg, 1978) which are heavily influenced by epistemic neocoloniality. Therefore, MORs' epistemic positionalities often remain problematic; this influences the choice of their epistemic methodology in a repeated manner and fortifies epistemic neocoloniality. In other words, current approaches (materialized and dominated by powerful institutions such as top universities, academic journals, and research ethics committees) do not give MORs adequate guidelines to deal with the problems that they encounter in fieldwork (e.g., Pettigrew, 2013). Spivak (1990) complicates this argument by maintaining that researchers from Western universities visit developing countries for fieldwork and data collection to serve personal and institutional interests (a notion supported by, for example, Crewe & Harrison, 1998; Khan, 2001; Lal, 1996; Sylvester, 1995; Visweswaran, 1994). Spivak refers to this process as imperialistic "information retrieval" (Spivak, 1990, p. 59), wherein the developing countries become a "repository of an ethnographic 'cultural difference'" (Spivak, 1999, p. 388). Hence, all researchers need to be careful that they do not fall into this kind of trap where they become a controller of knowledge production or (unintentionally) complicit in institutional dominance.

To represent a marginalized group adequately, researchers can reveal the assistance they receive from research assistants and subjects, the epistemic positionalities they adopt, and report mistakes, errors, and misunderstandings they encounter/produce (since reflexivity or simplistic mechanisms such as sharing findings with marginalized groups are not enough). However, to represent such groups fully, I contend that MORs must develop "*oppositional views*" and mobilize such views to reduce misrepresentation of marginalized groups. I define "*oppositional views*" as one's self-consciousness about epistemic neocolonialism which influences them to develop a rejectionist perspective against hegemonic thoughts and beliefs—which may also help them to see why their current epistemic positions and privileges are problematic—and internalize such rejectionist perspectives. In this way, when researchers try to understand and discuss a social problem, they know that epistemic neocolonial perspectives affect marginalized groups adversely. This internalization can then help researchers to see the phenomenon of marginalization and marginalized groups in a different light. This in turn should make them more sensitive, caring, and ethical toward marginalized groups not only before or during the fieldwork but also when they write about or discuss marginalized groups in the public sphere.

A key reasoning for the adaptation of oppositional views is to make sure researchers do not cause identity or dignity violation of marginalized groups. When researchers interact with marginalized groups without sensitivity simply because their respondents are marginalized due to their gender, color,

religion, or any other such association, this constitutes identity violation. Such violation then can lead to stigmatized (biased) formulation of research strategy and methodology (Chowdhury, 2021c). This then perpetuates the marginalization process even though such marginalized persons deserve the same dignified treatment as any powerful person. When identity violation occurs, unfortunately, dignity violation follows, because insensitive interaction with subjects causes either mental trauma or psychological suffering and, in some cases, both. Therefore, researchers' ways of thinking and interacting with the subjects can have a significant impact (cf. Medina, 2012). While both identity and dignity violations are difficult to eliminate due to epistemic neocolonial embeddedness in dominant institutions, it remains a major task for any MOR to challenge and reject epistemic neocoloniality so that the further perpetuation of insensitive behavior toward marginalized groups is reduced or, better still, fully eliminated (Fricker, 2010; Medina, 2012; Mussell, 2021).

To ensure that MORs are capable of thinking of, adopting, and internalizing oppositional views, they may want to be aware about their subjects' "double consciousness". Du Bois (1903, p. 8) defines double consciousness; thus,

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.

In other words, Du Bois (1903) argues that double consciousness forces Black people to perceive themselves not only from their own perspective but also through the lens of the White world. As these two perspectives collide, Black people lead a double life. Their self-image is damaged by the perceptions and treatment of White people. Over time, they encounter stereotypical biases in mainstream culture. Although Du Bois' concept of double consciousness primarily analyzes how the identities of Black Americans are affected by their White counterparts, I argue that, irrespective of the possession of any specific identity, MORs can use this profound concept in two ways to mobilize their oppositional views.

*First*, the awareness of double consciousness gives MORs opportunities to recognize and ponder deeply how marginalized people or groups may think about themselves and researchers. This is because marginalized groups are aware that MORs may look down on them when talking or interacting with them, or may represent them in both private and public spheres in ways that are not favorable to them. For example, when Western-trained MORs conduct their

fieldwork, they can use the idea of double consciousness to understand how their subjects may feel (e.g., a subject's 'twoness') while interacting with MORs; such feelings or perceptions can then be contrasted better with the existing dominant or neocolonial thoughts that MORs bring with them to their fieldwork. Obviously, the degree and nature of double consciousness vary in different contexts (e.g., defined by geographical, physical, and mental boundaries. In addition, it can be the case that a marginalized person/group has already overcome their double consciousness) and MORs can adjust their oppositional views accordingly so that they do not misinterpret marginalized groups. However, these types of issues are much more complex if MORs interact with their subjects who already have a long history of suffering from double consciousness because of their historiographies. For instance, if studying Black mine workers in South Africa, MORs must recognize that these marginalized miners are subject to both colonialism *and* apartheid oppression which could easily multiply their sorrows, grievances, and how they (or their ancestors) have been treated in their own land. Therefore, the expressions and reactions of these miners toward MORs might be different (e.g., unpredictable, aggrieved) or noncooperative in nature. In such situations, one the one hand, MORs must develop a self-consciousness which is fully capable of rejecting oppression alongside a specific oppositional view which aligns with past to present conditions of marginalized groups; on the other hand, MORs must be capable of showing their sensitivity toward these marginalized group without hurting or ignoring these groups' inner feelings.

*Second*, MORs can use the lens of double consciousness to engage with diverse marginalized subjects (e.g., a group of disabled persons in a specific context can be marginalized irrespective of their skin color; or any lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (or questioning) + (LGBTQ+) person can be marginalized in a context that is hostile to them, irrespective of their skin color) with sensitivity. For this, MORs' *self*-consciousness as opposed to the *double* consciousness of their subjects needs to be clearly delineated so that MORs' epistemic positionality does not further perpetuate negative consequences of double consciousness of marginalized persons/groups. The ultimate goal of revised or decolonialized epistemic positioning is to work with marginalized subjects (if they give their consent to MORs) wherein MORs (a) do not see their subjects from a biased perspective and, (b) at the same time, MORs discuss their subjects in the public sphere in a way so that their subjects can overcome their double consciousness. Thus, societies have fewer options to stereotype marginalized groups based on MORs' sensitive and accurate reporting on those groups and their spaces/conditions.

The use of oppositional views I propose here is open ended because MORs with different epistemic positions may

study or interact with diverse marginalized groups in various contexts (e.g., Chowdhury, 2021d), which can change over time. Therefore, in different contexts, MORs can embed aspects of their oppositional views differently so that they challenge the sites (e.g., those controlled by powerful actors or influenced by neocolonialism) where they work; or the oppositional views can be specific to issue, metaphor, conflict, plot, story or allegory, and other imaginary modes (cf. Marcus, 1995, 1998). In this process, it is important to trace and understand the linkages between multiple marginalized and powerful groups, dominant institutional arrangements, and historiographies of the condition where diverse set of marginalized groups live, work, and fight for survival. This is because it affords an opportunity to see why and how powerful institutions dominate marginalized groups over time (e.g., in phases in relations to time or history) and deprive them of rightful representation in the public sphere. By doing so, I argue that oppositional views specific to each phase can be examined in depth, which then become a basis for MORs to interact with marginalized groups amicably, sensibly, and with dignity. This may be a laborious work, but this process can ensure more sensitivity to the issues of marginalized groups.

Based on the above analysis, I posit that while oppositional views can create thoughts about how to confer and neutralize researchers' privileges in representing others, it also generates further ambiguities and contradictions because it enables MORs to only be (more) aware of themselves (e.g., knowing specific advantages or privileges they inherit over their marginalized subjects), but also influences them to draw on such privileges to maintain the dignity of their subjects (Du Bois, 1935). Thus, oppositional views are set to raise the personal and professional consciousness of MORs (irrespective of their ontological and epistemological views), as researchers are more aware of their marginalized subjects in contrast to their selves and may feel unease about their own and institutional limitations and complicities that, in fact, often make marginalized groups just that: *marginalized*.

Therefore, oppositional views can work as an antidote to reduce the degree of laziness, arrogance, and closed-mindedness that might be present in MORs. MORs must set high standards based on their epistemic anxiousness about the ever-present epistemic neocoloniality which makes them significantly conscious of the miseries of their marginalized subjects. Also, at the same time, these standards will help MORs to embed their true selves into their research as opposed to adopting a stance of *objective rigidity*. By 'objective rigidity', I mean that social science cannot be value free; thus, a vital task of any researcher is to find ways to avoid dominant institutional boundedness for perpetuating epistemic neocoloniality. This positive aspect of oppositional views is applicable for both foreign and native scholars, and

helps avoid the wider etic/emic debate (e.g., McCracken, 1988; Pike, 1967). To substantiate this argument, we can examine what Rainbow (1977) taught us a few decades ago through his famous fieldwork in Morocco entitled *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco*. In that context, Rainbow (1977) was a foreign researcher and did not have adequate language skills to engage with his informants. His curiosity and frustration helped him to overcome the language and site selection barriers and navigate the interpretative difficulties regarding colonialism and its legacies in Morocco. When he wrote his famous book, by revealing uncomfortable accounts, he made them too personal; subsequently, six university presses initially rejected his manuscript as not scholarly work. Retrospectively, research work such as that of Rainbow perhaps made the most significant impact, encouraging and enabling us to engage with our subjects more hermeneutically. If Rainbow (1977) had only relied on subjects' interpretations, rather than revealing deep personal views which emerged from his immersion into the context and the people he experienced or interacted with, he might not have been able to describe what really mattered in his chosen study. He may not have shown us how to overcome a power imbalance that affects the researchers and subjects in positive and negative ways and bring them to a point where both parties negotiate or compromise to align with each other's' realities, but that still ensures that specific facts are shared (rather than omitted) in the public sphere to more fully represent marginalized groups.

## Discussion and Conclusion

Reflexivity is an important first step to addressing misrepresentation. However, it is not adequate. For example, "Bunzel realized that she was exploring new methodological terrain, and did her best to articulate self-consciously her assumptions and assert her presence in the ethnography" (Kaplan, 2002, p. 220). At the same time, she recognized the uncertainty inherent in her work, noting that, in the practice of social anthropology, "there is no magic formula, but there are many paths to partial truths" (Bunzel, 1952 cited in Kaplan, 2002, p. 220).

The above point means that MORs do not want to end up in a situation where they would worry about everything they do (Scheper-Hughes, 1992). To counter this problem, we must go beyond reflexivity and find other issues that can address misrepresentation more profoundly. MORs need to find some practical mechanisms that they follow in contemporary postmodern environments (Prasad, 2005), because MORs may often want to receive representative feedback from marginalized groups but fail to do so because of their lack of a coherent mechanism with which to gather such feedback and distribute it in the public sphere. This situation

hinders opportunities for improving the representation of marginalized groups, despite the willingness of some MORs.

In the above argumentation, I identified two fundamental sources of misrepresentation—*meta-ignorance* and *meta-insensitivity*—to explain how misrepresentation reoccurs in academic discourse which helps to perpetuate epistemic neocoloniality. This is important because we often discuss misrepresentation without considering a robust framework for it which can guide us to an understanding of the deeper meanings, practicalities, and possible innovations that MORs explore. Although one can argue that, since in anthropology, the issue of representation is discussed in some length, it is important to emphasize that, unlike anthropology, MOS researchers reside in different backgrounds. Therefore, a common understanding about issues related to misrepresentation is urgently needed. In other words, I argue that the issues of misrepresentation are not only a problem of Western academia, but also a collective problem where Eastern, Western, and even hybrid researchers (e.g., Southern researchers trained in the West; Western researchers who live in the East) are possibly misrepresenting marginalized groups and, thus, may (un)consciously compound the miseries of marginalized groups. Hence, without a better understanding of meta-ignorance and meta-insensitivity we cannot solve this collective problem. From this perspective, I suggest that my conceptualizations of misrepresentation need to be further discussed, explored, and contested, as there is no one way to resolve our modern-day crisis of misrepresentation. Ignoring this vital issue would make our lives more difficult. Specifically, in order to resolve some of the colossal problems such as populism and climate crisis, there is no other option than knowing the very (marginalized) people we are often concerned about.

The above point is important because marginalized groups almost never read what MORs write about them (Schumaker, 2001) nor do they have frequent access to the public sphere. Therefore, it is almost impossible to receive feedback from marginalized groups that is relevant to their reality, to adjust MORs' views, and to rectify misrepresentational problems in traditional ways. Thus, I argue that MORs have a moral duty to be innovative and adopt practical mechanisms when they have real opportunities to do so by considering all the misrepresentational concerns, specifically when these fuel epistemic neocolonialism. This is crucial as Medina (2012) argues that even the most liberal and privileged White counterparts in Western societies need to be cautious about their claim to have a liberal attitude toward marginalized groups (as these types of privileged people often fail to recognize their shortsightedness and are unable to appreciate how they are ignorant of issues that are trivial to them but are vital for marginalized people). Therefore, my proposal and conceptualization of oppositional views that focus significantly on recognition

and understanding of marginalized groups (their possible double consciousness) embedded into any methodology and language, can encourage MORs to take measures to acknowledge and address their ignorance and insensitivities toward the lives of marginalized groups. Then MORs can make an attempt to decolonize dominant epistemic thoughts (irrespective of whether these thoughts are critical, mainstream, neutral, or radical) and over-reliance on their ontological/epistemological assumptions. As soon as MORs are serious about acknowledging and accepting the double consciousness of marginalized groups and are ready to work with these groups with their consent, whether MORs are privileged White, non-White, Western, or from the Global South would matter less (Frenkel & Shenhav, 2006) and reduce their burden to prove that their research is objective and neutral. In a way, oppositional views encourage researchers to be honest and admit their complicities with epistemic neocolonialities and, thus, at least relate (even partial) truths which do not obscure marginalized groups' realities and truth in the public sphere in the name of counterintuitive research findings, unique theoretical contributions, or so-called research impacts.

By considering misrepresentational issues and encouraging the adoption of oppositional views, academic institutions and journals that are mostly responsible for perpetuating epistemic neocoloniality, must contribute to their imperfect obligations. Sen (2004) argues that perfect obligations are duties that should be enacted in any situation. Conversely, imperfect obligations are ethical requirements that go beyond fully delineated duties. The difference between these obligations is illustrated by Sen's example of torture. When a person should not be tortured, this imposes the perfect obligation not to torture others. However, the right not to be tortured triggers imperfect obligations. A person who can stop torture can take measures to do so depending on their capabilities to do so. Someone at the top of a government ministry can do more to prevent torture than the fellow prisoner of the potential torture victim because a minister can issue strict orders and punish those who fail to follow them. In similar ways, academic institutions and journals have imperfect obligations to reduce a level of misrepresentation by enabling scholars to produce work innovatively or in a non-traditional manner so that marginalized voices are not prevented from being heard. The mere implementation of research ethics committees or peer-review processes or encouragement of sophisticated/complex figures and tables for data presentation and triangulations do not solve the problem of misrepresentation; these simply encourage extreme levels of language games (e.g., since pressure for tenure and promotion is disproportionately higher in elite universities) to sustain the epistemic neocoloniality from which dominant Western institutions largely benefit. This means that academic institutions and journals need to take

more radical stances to reform the production and dissemination of knowledge and, thus, consider alternative/non-mainstream views more profoundly if they envisage much fairer and more equitable conditions and lives for marginalized groups.

Moreover, I argue that marginalized groups reserve the right to influence their own representation in academic and public discourse. Publication methods need to change from a position that assumes that MORs are best equipped to represent marginalized groups. The development of new, open-minded, and indigenous methods of representation are necessary to give a genuine voice to marginalized groups. Knowledge production should not be bound by homogenous thought processes and methods; rather, it should be a process of free-thinking exploration where even a marginalized group has a role to play and can adopt their own oppositional views to challenge researchers, and where MORs can, thus, act as a consultant, helping to develop new theories and methodologies on the terms of marginalized groups which benefit the deprived populations of the world. If so, the incentives system (which only rewards and promotes academics or institutions to publish scientific work where primary ingredients are collected from marginalized groups or their networks and contexts) in academia needs to change so that voice of marginalized groups become a natural phenomenon toward a de-marginalization and decolonized knowledge from few to all. A paradigm shift is, therefore, necessary, not only to update the MOS philosophy of knowledge production and but also to equip those concerned with challenges to come: It is also true for institutions such as academia and journals, which have real power to facilitate change. In the end, reduction of misrepresentation is beneficial for all—marginalized groups included.

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## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** I declare that I have no conflict of interest.

**Informed Consent** All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

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