

# Using “Positioning” Theory to Analyze a Female School Teacher’s Experiences with Care Work during COVID-19 in India: Towards Decolonizing Feminist Research

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*The past few decades have been marked by growing awareness about the need to move beyond Anglocentric/Eurocentric epistemes, to instead engage in intellectual projects that effectively (re)present the voices and consciousness of marginalized populations (Manion & Shah, 2019). The term decolonizing research methodologies has thus come to acquire a central place within feminist research in the field of Comparative and International Education (CIE), with rallying calls to foreground the complexities and uniqueness of the lived realities of women through non-hierarchical and non-dichotomous modes of meaning-making (Lugones, 2010). However, methodological literature on decolonizing feminist research is largely linked to the data collection phase, with limited engagement with how to effectively analyze data once it is collected. This study demonstrates the use of positioning theory, a form of discourse analysis, as a decolonial analytical framework to investigate the micro details of a female school teacher’s experiences with care work during COVID-19 in India. The analysis revealed the shifting, often contextual nature of the identities that the participant claimed for herself throughout the narrative, such as a pampered daughter, critical observer, adjusting daughter-in-law, guilty mother, and strategic choice maker. The study ends by making a case for the potential use of positioning theory towards decolonizing feminist research because of its ability to draw attention to the multiple and/or contradictory identities that participants claim for themselves throughout the discursive interaction.*

*Keywords: COVID-19, care work, positioning theory, discourse analysis, decolonizing feminist research*

Even before COVID-19, women across the globe were performing a majority of the care work at home, with Indian women spending maximum hours globally, next only to Mexican women (OECD, 2018). The pandemic pushed billions of students out of school, intensified the care work needs of old members, and placed an inordinate burden on health services; exacerbating the already high burden of care work on women across the globe (Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19, 2020; Power, 2020). This intensification of care work had an impact on the nature of women’s participation within the formal economy, with many dropping out of the workforce (Jorge, 2019), and for those who continue to work from home during the pandemic, the responsibilities of juggling work and family simultaneously is an arduous task (Alon et al., 2020).

While the pandemic exacerbated women’s care work responsibilities, the sudden transition to online teaching with limited professional development had a huge impact on

the millions of school teachers working across the globe. Studies from across the globe reported burnout, exhaustion, increased frustration, lack of support from the organizations, and internet issues, such as lack of access and/or limited connection, as some of the challenges that school teachers faced (Arora & Srinivasan, 2020; Joshi et al., 2020; Niemi & Kousa, 2020; Onyema et al., 2020; Pellerone, 2021; Pressley, 2021; Van der Spoel et al., 2020). Female school teachers were subsequently pushed into a space where they had to navigate the increased care work burden inside their homes with the sudden transition to online teaching. This study reports the findings based on a “positioning” analysis of the narrative of a female school teacher’s experiences with care work during the pandemic in India.

The aim of this study is twofold. Firstly, it seeks to go beyond a dichotomized understanding of the identities of women from the so-called “Global South”<sup>1</sup> as victims and/or rebels (Mohanty, 1988) to instead explore the dynamic and contextual nature of their identities, with specific reference to a female school teacher’s experiences with care work during COVID-19 in India. The study is subsequently guided by the theoretical framework of decolonizing feminist research, which goes beyond categorical, hierarchical, and dichotomous modes of knowledge-making (Lugones, 2010) pervasive within Anglocentric/Eurocentric episteme to instead explore the complexity and uniqueness of a female school teacher’s experiences during COVID-19.

Secondly, the study seeks to demonstrate how *positioning* theory, a form of discourse analysis, can be used as a viable methodology towards the aim of decolonizing feminist research within the field of Comparative and International Education (CIE) because of its emphasis on the multiplicity of ongoing, fleeting positionings during the discursive interaction (Deppermann, 2013, p. 4). Narratives within positioning theory are seen as imaginative spaces where participants exercise agency in drawing up their own position vis-à-vis the master narratives (pre-existing socio-cultural forms of interpretation) that seem to position them (Bamberg & Andrews, 2004b). Positioning theory thus provides a useful analytical lens to investigate the “micro details” of the participant’s identity as it is shaped from moment to moment within her narrative (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005, p. 591). The specific research questions that the study seeks to answer are as follows:

1. How does a female school teacher from India position herself and others when narrating episodes linked to care work during COVID-19?
2. How is the participant’s identity as a caregiver expressed in the narrative she tells about the pandemic?

An understanding of how the teacher positions herself, as well as those around her, will not only contribute to limited existing knowledge about the impact of the pandemic on care work responsibilities of female teachers but also draw attention to the micro-details of the identities that the participant claims throughout the narratives (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005), instead of a singular, monolithic understanding of it.

Going forward, the paper has a specific structure. I start with highlighting the key theoretical and methodological aspects linked to scholarship centered around care work and women in the so called “Global South,” followed by an elaboration of the salient features of “positioning” theory and “decolonizing” feminist research. After that, I discuss the method used for data collection and analysis, followed by a positioning analysis of

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<sup>1</sup> The term “Global South” includes the regions of Latin America, Asia, Africa, and Oceania. It is usually used to denote regions outside Europe and North America that are politically and culturally marginalized (Dados & Connell, 2012, p.12)

five extracts from the interview. The study ends by arguing for the potential of positioning theory as an analytical tool towards decolonizing feminist research in the field of CIE.

### **Women and Care work within feminist scholarship: An Essentializing Account**

Care work refers to the non-market, unpaid activities carried out by individuals inside the households, and includes both direct care, such as feeding a baby, and indirect care work, such as cooking, cleaning, or fetching water (Jorge, 2019). According to a 2018 report by the International Labor Organization (ILO), globally women spend more time in unpaid care work than men, with the difference being the highest in Asia and the Arab states (Addati et al., 2018, p.58). This unpaid care work is closely linked to the sustainment of the formal, paid economy, as well as the household economy. Another 2019 report by ILO (Charmes, 2019) draws attention to how the provision of unpaid care work by women plays a key role in determining whether they can access employment, their progress within the job-market, as well as the quality of jobs they perform.

The gendered nature of care work and its impact on women's professional work has been a topic of interest to feminist scholars as early as the 1980s. However, the bulk of empirical literature on the intersection between care work and professional work in the 1980s focused on women's experiences within the Global North (Bundlender, 2007), with research on the Global South conducted mostly at the theoretical and/or conceptual level. For instance, Moser's (1993) seminal book *Gender Planning and Development: Theory, Practice, and Training*, which draws attention to the "triple burden" (p.27) of performing the productive, reproductive, and community roles faced by women in most low-income households within the Global South, is based on secondary literature and the author's personal experiences from working in the field of international development and does not include the voices of women that it claims to speak for.

While the Global North continues to be the center of production, as well as the subject of a majority of the empirical literature on the gendered nature of care work, there have been several studies on care work in the past two decades that focus on countries within the Global South such as India, Indonesia, Nepal, and Tanzania. Most of these studies are quantitative in nature, where authors synthesize data from existing national level time-use surveys to quantify the gendered nature of care work performed by women and provide recommendations based on the findings (Hirway & Jose, 2011; Floro and Komatsu, 2011; Fontana & Natalie, 2008). While providing valuable data about the division of labor between genders in terms of the relative hours spent on activities, these studies are limited in their ability to provide insight into the lived experiences of the female participants.

Even in the case of qualitative and/or mixed-methods studies, researchers tend to present an essentializing picture of women as oppressed victims of patriarchy who lack agency, instead of a localized and in-depth engagement with how they understand, experience, and negotiate with the essentially gendered phenomenon of care work. For instance, Chopra and Zambelli (2017) make use of quantitative surveys and semi-structured interviews along with a visual participatory toolkit with participants across sixteen research sites in four countries (India, Nepal, Rwanda, and Tanzania) to conclude that the "drudgery" of care work leads to the "depletion" of women's time and energy across all the four research sites (p. 42). Along similar lines, Marphatia & Mousie (2013) employ results from time-use diaries by men ( $n=48$ ) & women ( $n=106$ ) in Nepal along with discussions to draw attention to how societal norms push women into the "marginalized"

(p. 589) position of caregivers and nurturers, which in turn has a negative impact on their professional and personal lives.

The point being made is not that care work is not oppressive, but rather that the methodologies typically used to study women's experiences with care work provide limited engagement with how the participants experience and navigate the phenomenon. Instead, they tend to *colonize*—defined as the discursive tendency within Anglocentric/Eurocentric feminist research to present women from the Global South as a “singular, monolithic subject” (Mohanty, 1988, p. 66)—the complexities and conflicts that characterize the lives of these women.

In the specific context of female school teachers, studies in the past have drawn attention to the negative impact of care work responsibilities at home on teachers' professional lives (Erdamar & Demirel, 2014; Noor & Zainuddin, 2011). Of equal significance is the phenomenon of the extension of their care work responsibilities from the familial to the professional spaces due to the gendered expectation to perform proxy roles of “mothers” inside the classroom (Cortina and San, 2006). The pandemic not only revealed the extent to which the daily functioning of families, communities, and the formal economy is dependent on women's invisible work (Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19, 2020, p. 6), but also the central role played by female school teachers in providing a quality learning atmosphere to students (Falk et al., 2019).

While there has been renewed interest in exploring the intersections between women's unpaid care work responsibilities at home and professional lives during COVID-19, the majority of the existing empirical literature is based on real-time surveys conducted during the pandemic in the Global North (Andrew et al., 2020; Sevilla & Smith, 2020; Xue & Munn, 2021). Additionally, limited research exists about female school teachers' experiences with care work at home and online teaching. This study seeks to fill these two research gaps by generating new knowledge about the lived experiences of a female school teacher with increased care work responsibilities during COVID-19 in India. Through the demonstration of the use of positioning theory, the study also provides a methodological roadmap for feminist researchers seeking to explore the dynamic, contextual, and multifaceted nature of the identities of their participants.

### **Positioning Theory as a Tool for Decolonizing Feminist Research**

In her seminal article *Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses* (1988), Mohanty highlights the problematic nature of using the term “women” as a stable category of analysis within feminist analysis, and the subsequent tendency to conflate the category of “women” with subordination without paying attention to the socio-economic context within which they are located. With specific reference to care work, she draws attention to how concepts like sexual division of labor, family, marriage, etc. are used within feminist discourse without considering the local, cultural, and historical contexts in which they take place. Spivak (1988) echoes similar sentiments when she draws attention to how, when it came to the prevalent discourses surrounding the Hindu Indian practice of *Sati*<sup>2</sup> at the time, one never got to encounter the real-life testimonies of women's voiced consciousness. Their voices were either appropriated by the British colonizers to justify colonization, something that Spivak (1988) refers to as an instance of “White men

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<sup>2</sup> *Sati* or *Suttee* was a historical Hindu practice followed in India where the widow sacrificed herself by sitting on top of her deceased husband's funeral pyre. It was banned by the British colonial administration in 1829.

saving brown women from brown men" (p. 269), or by Indian nativists who essentially claim that "the woman actually wanted to die" (p. 297).

Decolonizing feminist research refers to a process whereby the researcher contextualizes, problematizes, and negotiates with the prevalent colonial discourses (master narratives) that position third-world women via the use of essentializing analytical categories, such as victims, dependents, and rebel. It involves going beyond analytical binaries that continue to predominate western feminist thought, to instead account for the "uncertainties, ambiguities, and contradictions" (Manning, 2021, p. 2) that define the existence of women from the Global South. And such a pursuit calls for new and nuanced research methodologies that enable the feminist researcher to accurately (re)present the voices of the female participants in the study without imposing subjective forms of consciousness on them.

Positioning theory's focus on conceptualizing identity as discursively constructed (Norton & Toohey, 2011) and an emphasis on how individuals engage in the social positioning of self (reflexive positioning) and one another (interactional positioning) within interactions, can be seen as providing a useful tool towards the purpose of decolonizing feminist research. Davies and Harré (1990) define positioning as the "discursive process whereby selves are located in conversations as observable and subjectively coherent participants in jointly produced storylines" (p. 48). Positioning can be seen as a metaphor through which a researcher can "compendiously collect" (Van Langenhove & Harré, 1999, p. 17) key information about a person's moral and personal attributes. Instead of essentializing accounts of identities as a zero-sum game via the use of macro-categories, positioning theory focuses on the "emergent" and "dynamic" nature of identities which are relationally constructed within an interaction. It rejects the notion of identity as a set of static and immutable traits inherent within the individual self (Nikolaou & Sclafani, 2018), and instead investigates the "micro details" of the participants' identity as it is shaped from moment to moment within interaction (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005, p. 591). Subsequently, self and identity within positioning theory are under constant revision and interactively renegotiated throughout the discursive interaction (Bamberg, 2004a)

Positioning theory can thus be seen as providing a de-colonial lens to understand a female school teacher's experience with care work during COVID-19 via a focus on how she positions herself, and those around her, linguistically throughout her narratives. In other words, the focus is on understanding the subject positions that she claims for herself throughout the discursive interaction, instead of the subject positions bestowed on her by the researcher and/or the society. As Burr (1995, p. 141) points out:

Discourses provide us with conceptual repertoires with which we can represent ourselves and others. They provide us with ways of describing a person... Each discourse provides a limited number of slots for people... These are the subject positions that are available for people to occupy when they draw on this discourse.

A subject position is created when people use language to negotiate positions for themselves (Davies & Harré, 1990), either from the available conceptual repertoires or invent new ones. Subsequently, participants can be seen as both positioned by existing discourses, as well as creators of new discourses throughout the interaction. This positioning occurs in reference to relevant ideological and cultural factors in addition to social and power hierarchies (Beeching et al., 2018). Positioning theory thus provides the feminist researcher with an analytical toolkit to make sense of how individuals (especially

from marginalized communities) position themselves in reference to the master narratives that define them through macro-categories such as victims, rebels, oppressed, passive, etc.

## Data and Analysis

### *Data Collection*

A specific form of narrative inquiry called *episodic narrative interviews*, which includes features from narrative inquiry, semi-structured interview, and episodic interviews (Mueller, 2019), was used to elicit “bounded stories” (p. 2) from a female school teacher about her experience with care work during COVID-19 in India. Unlike the typical question response mode within other types of qualitative interviews, narratives prioritize the storyteller’s perspective instead of the interviewers (Anderson & Kirkpatrick, 2016, p. 632). They are thus particularly suited for an explorative research study (Fraser, 2004) such as this one, which seeks to analyze a relatively under-explored research area to produce new ideas and hypotheses (Swedberg, 2020, p. 18). The episodic narrative interview lasted for an hour and a half via Zoom, and the audio recording was saved with the participants’ permission. Within episodic interviews, the researcher requests that the informants share small stories that are targeted and focused in nature, which helps mitigate the “anything goes” (Mueller, 2019, p. 2) approach standard within narrative research (For the interview protocol, see Appendix-I on p. 34).

The participant was recruited via purposive sampling, with the delimiting criteria being that she be a) female b) school teacher c) married with children, and d) her school transitioned to online teaching during the pandemic. The literature review revealed that once children are born, the amount of care work done by women increases substantially, leading to what Addati et al. (2018) refer to as the “motherhood employment penalty” (p. 38). Due to the limited scope of the study and the desire to focus on an information-rich case, a married female school teacher whose baby was born during the pandemic was selected for the study. While the interview was conducted in English, there were some instances of code-switching between English and Hindi by the participant. The teacher’s responses could be categorized into three broad categories of data types:

1. Big Stories: “A coherent temporal progression of events... A plotline that encompasses a beginning, a middle, and an end, conveys a particular perspective and is designed for a particular audience who apprehend and shape its meaning” (Ochs and Caps, 2001).
2. Small Stories: “An umbrella-term that captures a gamut of under-represented narrative activities, such as tellings of ongoing events, future or hypothetical events, shared (known) events, but also allusions to (previous) tellings, deferrals of tellings, and refusals to tell” (Bamberg, 2004a).
3. Participant’s reflections on aspects such as what being a mother and/or professional means for her.

### *Data Analysis*

The data analysis was divided into three stages:

**Translation and transcription of interviews.** Firstly, those parts where the participant made use of code-switching in Hindi were translated into English, following which the interview was transcribed by the author. Since the aim of the study was to understand and analyze how the participants position themselves and those around them via linguistic means, “edited” or “clean verbatim” transcription was used. Clean verbatim transcription does not capture

paralinguistic features of talk such as symbols and gestures, which were not needed for a positioning analysis of this narrative.

**Selecting relevant data.** As discussed in the previous section, the data received could be divided into three types: big stories, small stories, and participant reflections and musings on concepts such as caregiving, motherhood, being a female professional, etc. While all three types of data were analyzed, any data that did not deal with participants' experiences with caregiving (before or during the pandemic) was not included for positioning analysis.

**Analysis of selected data using Bamberg's (2004a) "Three-level positioning" framework.** Bamberg's (2004a) three-level positioning was employed to analyze the participants' narrative. Positioning level 1 within the framework addresses the question *Who are the characters and how are they positioned in the story?* The focus in this stage was on a fine-grained linguistic analysis of the means used by the speaker to establish the characters in their story. Positioning level 2 addresses the question *How does the speaker/narrator position himself/herself vis-à-vis his interlocutors?* and focused on the interactive work accomplished between the participants (myself and the teacher) during the interview. It seeks to answer the question of why a story is told at a particular time (Blix et al., 2015, p. 171). Finally, Positioning level 3 focuses on how the informants position themselves vis-à-vis the normative discourses around them (Bamberg, 2004a) and addresses how the episodes and short stories are "situated in relation to the social and cultural processes beyond the immediate telling situation" (Blix et al., 2015, p. 171). This can be seen as the final stage, where the researcher seeks to understand how participants answer the *Who am I?* question throughout the interview (Blix et al., 2015).

**Participant: Disha Sahni (Pseudonym)**

Disha Sahni is a thirty-three-year-old female school teacher who gave birth to a baby boy three months after the Indian government imposed a nationwide lockdown on 25 March 2020. At the time of the interview (June 2021), she had been married for three years and lived in a one-bedroom apartment in West Delhi with her husband, who is also a school teacher. She responded to a call I posted on social media soliciting participants for a larger study analyzing female school teachers' experiences with care work, COVID-19, and online teaching in India. She teaches Biology to Grade-X students at a government-aided school in New Delhi, which transitioned to online teaching as soon as the lockdown was announced. The approximate annual income of her family is INR 1,000,00, which can be classified as middle-income as per the *Pew Research Centre* (Kochhar, 2015).<sup>3</sup> Her school charges an average monthly fee of INR 3500 and caters to students from middle-income families.

Disha was on paid maternity leave and resumed teaching online classes in September 2020, three months after her baby was born. Prior to the pandemic, she had a house-help who came to her home twice a day to wash the utensils, clean the home, and do the laundry. However, the lockdown in India led to the mass exodus of migrants working in cities, such as Disha's house-help, to their native villages (Slater & Masih, 2020). In the

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<sup>3</sup> According to the Pew Research Centre, the annual income for a middle-income family of four falls in the range of \$14,600 - \$29, 200 (INR 1,022,000-INR 2,044,000) and the annual income of a low-income family of four falls in the range of \$ 1,920- \$ 14,600, (INR 1,34,00- INR 1,022,000) (Kochhar, 2015).

absence of her house help, Disha had to perform all the domestic chores, while also looking after her newborn and teaching online classes.

### A Three-Level Positioning Analysis

Given below is an extract from a big story that Disha shared, along with its positioning analysis. This extract has been chosen because of the light it sheds on how she positions her husband, immediate family (mother), as well as, extended family (mother-in-law), and friends across her narratives about care work and online teaching. Four additional extracts (Extract-II, III are short stories, IV is a big story & V is a participant reflection) are also referred to when carrying out the positioning analysis of Extract-I to provide additional corroborating evidence.

I=Interviewer

// // - Overlapping talk

D= Disha

\* \*- Translation in English

...= long pause (more than 3 seconds)

#### Extract-I

This question was asked in response to Disha's earlier comments that she found it surprising that her husband regularly helped her with household chores, despite being married for three years.

I- Can you think of any incident when you were surprised (during the pandemic) that your husband did that, you know like just in terms of household responsibilities, can you think of any incident?

D-

1. *Maybe not during the pandemic but like it has been more than three years now...and*
2. *since the beginning he has a habit of doing household chores, and he is very good at*
3. *managing the responsibilities at home...like he is a perfect family man, you can*
4. *say and like before marriage, people used to like tell me... "बेटा अभी तो करते हैं सब*
5. *बोलते हैं, बाद में नहीं करते!" \*Child, before marriage, all men say that they will help the*
6. *woman but do not do it later\*. I never used to say anything because, I also...*
7. *was...like in doubt will he be doing it or not because I saw men usually don't do*
8. *before marriage they say, but then at the back of my mind somewhere I felt he had a*
9. *habit because... he had been staying alone like since childhood, he had a habit of*
10. *doing it like cooking, managing, and everything... he had a habit of doing it, so yes,*
11. *after marriage, it was a surprise for me that he is still doing it, In fact, he does it*
12. *better than me.*

I- //Laughs//

D-

13. *I was like, I was the youngest child at home, ok. I have an elder brother, so I was the*
14. *pampered one and my mother... she never forced me to do all this, so...in*
15. *fact I feel that people should have this habit because later on it was difficult for*
16. *me, ok...to manage all the household responsibilities...ok, but I am doing (smiles)... I*
17. *am happy doing it...I love doing it (slight laugh)...I love to keep my home clean and*
18. *everything is in place so I love doing that*

I-//Hmmm//

**Positioning Level I: Who are the characters and how are they positioned in the story?**

Her husband is the central character in the first part of Extract-I (Line1-12), as well as, throughout the interview. In this excerpt, all the other characters can be seen as either evaluating him (people who caution her, Disha herself), or are positioned in opposition to him (other men-Line 7). Through the use of positive qualifiers such as *very good* (Line-2) and *perfect family man* (Line-3), and the admission that she was *surprised* (Line-11) that he continued to do household chores even after marriage, Disha positions him as an unusual/atypical man. While *men usually don't do* (Line-7) housework, he had a *habit* (Line-10) of doing it since a young age and continued to help her throughout the pandemic. In fact, she says, he does it better than her (Line-12). The second prominent character in the story is herself. Through the use of the term *pampered* (Line-14), as well as the claim that unlike all the other men her husband is *better* at household chores, she positions herself as somewhat different than other girls when young, and also from other women when she gets married. The term *pampered* is also culturally loaded, and to Disha, the fact that her mother never *forced* her to do household chores is seen as being pampered. And in saying this, she positions her mother as loving and caring.

The third character in the story, who are referred to throughout the interview, are the *people* (line-4) who caution her about men's lackadaisical attitude towards care work after marriage. The fact that Disha characterizes them as *people* instead of giving them specific names, leads us to believe that there were several such individuals who come to occupy the abstract, faceless, and plural category of people. This faceless collective of *people* resurface throughout her narratives, imparting nuggets of wisdom and unsolicited advice, whether it is about men's attitude towards care work after marriage or how best to perform her role as a mother with perfection. At another point in the interview, when sharing her experiences with taking care of a new born baby during the pandemic, Disha commented:

**Extract-II**

19. People will say, that don't give bottle, it will spoil him, or they will be people (who
20. will say) give bottle! It will spoil him. There are both kinds of people...like you give
21. him bottle he will not be able to go to school and he will stick to you, this and that.
22. Like there were pressures from both sides

Throughout the interview, the abstract category of *people* are positioned as having more wisdom than Disha and playing the role of advisors. By *not saying anything* and having doubts about her husband (Extract-I, line 6), Disha aligns her positionality before marriage with those of the people. Like them, she also did not believe her husband when he said he will help her with domestic chores after marriage. She believed in what she *saw* (Extract-I- line 7), instead of what men *say* (Extract-I line 8) before marriage and in doing so, she positions herself as a *critical observer* rather than a *passive recipient* of the advice given by those around her. However, in Extract-II, these people are seen as a source of stress who put pressure on her from both the sides (which refers to her and her husband's extended family) and offer unsolicited advice on how best to raise a child.

**Positioning Level II: How does the speaker/narrator position himself vis-à-vis their interlocutors?**

Because an episodic narrative interview involves minimal to no interruption by the interviewer, except for providing prompts to help the participants share narratives or posing follow-up questions based on the narratives (Jovchelovitch et al., 2000), the bulk of the discursive interaction involved short and big stories shared by Disha. Nonetheless,

there were two instances where she positioned herself in reference to me. It is important to point out here that like her; I am also a married woman of color from India and have taught across schools in New Delhi for six years before moving to the US to pursue a graduate degree. In both instances, she emphasizes the similarity of our experiences as daughter-in-laws, mothers (or potential mothers), and /or wives within the Indian society. Given below is an excerpt where she talks about the challenges she faced in terms of division of household labor with her husband when her mother-in-law came to visit during the pandemic:

**Extract-III**

D-

- 23. *Also, my mother in-law was there in between and then uhh...obviously I cannot ask*
- 24. *my husband to do everything, although he was doing, but then you know how mother-*
- 25. *in-laws are?*

I- //laughs//

26. *Yes, I know*

D-//Laughs//

- 27. *So there was an increased pressure on me, although my husband said I am not*
- 28. *pressurizing you for anything, but then ... also there is a guilt. You know...*
- 29. *The guilt is very much there. When, like, if my husband is taking care of the baby all*
- 30. *alone, then it makes me feel guilty. I have to be there with him.*

The extract draws attention to how the shift in kinship structures for women after marriage in India have a negative impact on them because of existing power differentials between the mother and daughter in-law (Gupta & Negi, 2021). However, instead of discussing the specific challenges she faced with her mother-in-law, Disha relies on what she feels is our common experience as daughter in-laws within the Indian society. By stating, "You know how mother in-laws are?" (Extract-III, line 25), she universalizes her challenging experiences with her mother in-law, as well as extenuating her from any potential blame for the challenges she caused. To Disha, her mother in-law is like every other mother in-law in India, including my own.

Elsewhere, as she talked about her desire to look after her newborn son with minimal interference from the extended family, she added "You may also experience later on, you are planning no., to deal with your baby your way." Here, she places emphasis on the similarities of our identity as mothers (or a prospective mother in my case). It is interesting to note that, unlike the previous section where she positions herself and her husband as atypical, in this extract she places emphasis on the universality of her experiences as a daughter in-law and a mother when positioning herself in reference to me.

**Positioning Level III: How does the speaker/narrator position themselves vis-à-vis the normative discourses around them?**

Disha's narrative must be analyzed against the backdrop of the patriarchal and patrilocal society of India where marriage shifts a woman from her natal family to being a part of her husband's household (Gupta & Negi, 2021), and where women continue to shoulder the major burden of household chores (OECD, 2018). It should also be understood against the often essentializing image within western feminist discourse of women from the

Global South as victims of patriarchy in need of saving (Mohanty, 1988; Spivak, 1988). Disha's positioning of the self as *pampered* because she was not *forced* to engage in domestic duties as a child, her husband's positioning as *unusual* since he helps with household chores, and her mother-in-law's positioning as a typical Indian mother-in-law occurs in the specific context of the socio-cultural milieu that she inhabits as a daughter, wife, mother, and a daughter-in-law.

The normative discourse around Disha, as gleaned from what people tell her (Extract-I, Line-4) and official statistics, is that women perform household chores and men do not. And while Disha placed emphasis on her husband's help with domestic chores both before and during the pandemic throughout the interview, she also shared that at the end of the day, she was the one primarily responsible for taking care of the baby.

**Extract-IV**

31. *Of course, my husband was a big support (during online teaching)... Like he would*
32. *feed the baby, get up in the middle of his classes, you know. But still, when you are at*
33. *home your attention is divided, no matter how supportive your husband is... Like*
34. *there was incident when we had a mock exam and I made a slight mistake. I never did*
35. *that before because I cross-check everything. But then while I was conducting the*
36. *exam my baby was in front of me and I had to see him... So, I made a slight*
37. *mistake. I was crying because I never expected it. So yes, because of my household*
38. *responsibilities and with a small baby who has just started walking, crawling, it has*
39. *been difficult (to teach). But what can you do?... Ruchi, see, there are so many types*
40. *of work you do, you can, you know replace them with someone else, there is a*
41. *substitution. But here (looking after an infant), there is no substitution, ultimately it*
42. *will come to you and you have to take care.*

In this extract, Disha sets up a contrast between her past professional self before the pandemic, who never made mistakes and "cross-checks everything" (Line-35), and the present professional self whose "attention is divided" (Line-33) due to her baby. However, as opposed to her professional role as a teacher, where "there is a substitution" (Line-40), Disha positions her role as a mother as being irreplaceable. She views herself as the primary caregiver for the baby, a role that only she can perform in the world. Disha's rhetorical question "What can you do?" (Line-39), when talking about the blurring of her personal and professional responsibilities during the pandemic, serves two purposes. Firstly, it conceptualizes the challenges faced by professional mothers during the pandemic as inevitable because of the "irreplaceable" nature of their roles as mothers. And secondly, it betrays an almost fatalistic acceptance of the phenomenon of increased childcare responsibilities on professional mothers because of a child's increased dependence on them. Disha presents this increased dependence of children on mothers, as compared to fathers, as a universal truth not up for debate. Subsequently, she can be seen positioning herself as somewhat accepting of the normative assumptions surrounding the gendered division of labor among spouses, especially when it comes to childcare.

At the end of the interview, I asked Disha the possible reason for the guilt she faces when her husband takes care of the baby in front of her mother-in-law, to which she replied

**Extract-V**

D-

43. *There could be two reasons, like why I feel guilty if my husband is doing all alone*
44. *and I am not there with him, I think it is more of it is...natural human tendency...it is*

45. *not based on gender...And second thing, uhh, like my mother in law, she...in fact my*  
46. *mother also, although I may not look at her with that perspective, but they have, like*  
47. *they are from a different generation and you may not be able to make them*  
48. *understand all those thing ok, which you from the current generation uhh...are aware*  
49. *of and understand...right?*

I-

50. *Yaa*

D-

51. *So it is better, what to say...to compromise maybe. To compromise and not going*  
52. *into that...changing the mindset thing...especially if your husband is supportive!*

Similar to the previous extracts, where Disha characterized the challenging experiences with her mother-in-law (Extract-III) and the increased child care responsibilities during the pandemic (Extract-IV) as a universal phenomenon, she conceptualizes the guilt she faces when her husband looks after their child as a natural human tendency and universal instead of being linked to her gender socialization as a woman. Further, when talking about her mother and mother in-law, she positions them as belonging to a different generation who lack the capacity to understand the perspective of those from the new generation like her. She makes a strategic choice to “compromise” (Line-39) with them instead of trying to change their mindset (Line-40), because of her belief that she will “not be able to make them understand” (Line-48), as well as her husband’s support (Line-52). She can thus be seen as “strategically” positioning herself as accepting of the normative discourses surrounding care-work and professional work to avoid conflict, even if she might not agree with them.

### Discussion

The paper set out to understand how a female school teacher from India positioned herself in her narratives about care work during the pandemic, as well as how her identity as a caregiver was expressed within the narratives. Bamberg draws attention to how, through the choice of discursive devices from existing repertoires, speaking subjects face an *agency dilemma* (2011a), which refers to “the apparent contradiction between the speaker as positioning him-/herself as agent and the societal, socio-cultural constraints seemingly ‘always & already’ at work positioning the subject” (p. 10). At one end of the continuum of this dilemma then, speakers choose discursive markers that tend to position themselves as less influential, powerful, responsible, and blame worthy, and at the other end of the continuum, they position themselves as *agentive self-constructors* through discursive markers that position themselves as strong, in control, and self-determined (Bamberg, 2011b).

When it comes to Disha’s self-positioning within the narratives, the distinction between the two ends of the continuum is constantly obfuscated. When she chooses not to speak up against the *people* who cautioned her about men’s lack of involvement with care work after marriage (Extract-I), or feels stressed out because of their unsolicited advice on how to raise a child (Extract-II), or accepts the gendered differential in child care responsibilities (Extract-III), or talks about not wishing to change her mother-in-law’s mindset (Extract-IV), she can be seen as choosing discursive markers (*not saying anything, feeling pressured, compromising*) that position herself as less influential and powerful.

However, she also positions herself as a critical individual who makes strategic choices that she views as benefitting her, instead of a powerless, less influential figure throughout the narrative. In Extract-I, she *chooses* not to speak out because as a critical observer she agrees with the assessment of those people, in Extract-IV she *chooses* to give importance to her role as a mother over that of a professional since she views the former as irreplaceable, and in Extract-V she *chooses* to compromise with her mother-in-law because of her husband's support, as well as what she sees as the futility of the endeavor. In all the cases, she can be seen as exercising agency, albeit of a somewhat different kind.

Mahmood (2011) draws attention to how the meaning and sense of agency cannot be fixed in advance but instead must be understood and interpreted in reference to the culture and society in which it is exercised. According to her, agentival capacity is exhibited "not only in those acts that resist norms, but also in multiple ways in which one inhabits norms" (Mahmood, 2011, p. 15). She also cautions social science researchers against using discursive markers as a gloss for universally shared assumptions but instead focus on how they are "constitutive of different forms of personhood, knowledge, and experience" (Mahmood, 2011, p. 16). Subsequently, it can be said that despite the use of discursive markers typically associated with being less influential and powerful, Disha positions herself somewhat as an "agentival self-constructor" who is in control of the choices she makes, even when these choices entail an acceptance of the normative discourses around her rather than challenging them.

And when it comes to the expression of her identity as a caregiver within the narrative, two contrary pulls are evident throughout. On the one hand, she talks about her relative inexperience in performing household chores and her partner's proficiency in the same (*In fact he does it better than me*, Extract-I), and on the other hand, she talks about the feeling of *guilt* when her husband takes care of the baby alone, as well as, the feeling that *she has to (always) be there with him (baby)* (Extract-III, Line 30). It would not be incorrect then to distinguish between two microdetails of her identity as a caregiver, i.e, her care work responsibilities as a wife and her caregiving responsibilities as a mother. In the case of the former, she positions herself as inexperienced and reliant on her husband's support, whereas she sees the latter as her prime responsibility. Even though her husband does not *pressurize her for anything* (Extract-III), she views herself as the one in charge of the baby's responsibility (Extract-IV). Further, she believes this feeling is universal for mothers across the globe, instead of being linked to her gender and/or socialization (Extract-IV & V). It can thus be said that while Disha's identity as a caregiver, as expressed by her, is seen as being of central importance when it comes to raising her child during the pandemic, it is not as central to her role as a wife. In the case of the former, it is the locus of her identity while in the latter, she assigns an equal status to her partner as a caregiver and care worker inside the home.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Since the findings of the study are based on the analysis of one female school teacher's experiences with care work during COVID-19, it is not possible to draw generalizations based on the findings. The participant's positioning of the self, and those around her, is linked to her specific circumstance and will be different from the experiences of other female school teachers from India and/or the globe. However, the aim of the study is not generalizability, but instead to demonstrate how positioning theory can be used as an analytical tool for decolonizing feminist research within the field of CIE.

## Conclusion

By rejecting the notion of identity as a set of static and immutable traits inherent within the individual self (Nikolaou & Sclafani, 2018) and placing emphasis on the temporary roles and orientations that participants assign to themselves and others throughout the interaction, the study demonstrates how positioning theory presents a useful analytical lens for feminist researchers within the field of CIE, as well as outside it, to understand the experiences of women with local and culturally contextual phenomena such as care work. The analysis revealed the shifting, often contextual nature of the identities that the participant claimed for herself throughout the narrative such as a pampered daughter, critical observer, adjusting daughter-in-law, guilty mother, strategic choice maker, and so on. Positioning theory thus helped problematize the tendency to essentialize women's experiences and identities by drawing attention to the multiple, sometimes contradictory identities that the participant claimed for herself (and those around her) in her life, a complexity that is often neglected within feminist research because of its messiness and lack of amenability to generalization.

At present, when there is a renewed interest in understanding the gendered impact of COVID-19 on women across the globe, as well as in the context of the continued hegemony of the western scholarly establishment in the production and dissemination of articles on this topic, it becomes important that researchers employ research methodologies that effectively re(present) the voices of their participants. Abu-Lughod, one of the leading feminist scholars in the Middle East, asks in an essay that how might feminist scholars effectively understand and represent women's experiences from other cultures without "misattributing to them forms of consciousness or politics that are not a part of their experience-something like feminist consciousness or feminist politics" (1990, p. 47). One of the ways to achieve this would be through a careful, locally-focused analysis of the discursive markers used by the participants throughout the narrative, along with how these markers express their identities across different contexts. The study demonstrated how such an analysis might look like for one female school teacher via positioning theory, and in doing so, contributes to the continued search for decolonizing research methodologies within feminist research. It has also contributed to positioning theory by drawing attention to its effectiveness as a methodology in (re)presenting voices of women from outside the Global North in a non-essentializing and nuanced manner.

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## Appendix-I

## Interview Protocol

### Phase I: Introducing the interview principle

My study deals with how you experienced care work responsibilities at home during the pandemic. During our interview, I will repeatedly ask you to recount situations in which you had to manage care work with online teaching during the pandemic, and how you went about it. As someone who also juggled family and work as a school teachers in India for six years, I am curious about how the pandemic impacted female school teachers in India and hence decided to conduct the study. I am interested in any stories, situations, and/or events that stood out for you.

### Phase II: The interviewee's concept of the issue, and his/her biography in relation to it

#### *II.i – High Level Overview of the topic*

1. What does being a wife, mother, and/or daughter-in-law mean to you?
2. What do you associate with these terms?
3. What does being a school teacher mean to you?

#### *II.ii – Prompts that help them recall specific episodes in connection with the topic*

1. When you look back and remember life before COVID-19, how did you navigate your personal responsibilities at home and professional obligations throughout your life?
2. Can you recall a specific episode in your life when reconciling care work at home with professional obligations became a matter of concern?

### Phase III: The meaning of the issue for the interviewee's everyday life

1. Could you please recount your day yesterday in terms of managing care-work at home?

### Phase IV: Focusing the central parts of the issue under study

1. Take me back to the day when you first heard about the transition to online teaching and ensuing lockdown. What were your thoughts?
2. If you look back to the pandemic, what has your experience been like with managing care work at home?
3. Could you please recount a situation during the pandemic when you were faced with the task of managing house-hold work along with professional work simultaneously?
4. Were there any instances when you faced challenges when reconciling care work with professional responsibilities during the pandemic? Can you think of a specific episode?
5. What strategies did you make use of during the pandemic to reconcile care work with professional responsibilities when faced with challenges?
6. Could you please recount a situation when you made use of these strategies?

### Phase V: More general, relevant topics

1. In your opinion, what impact has the pandemic had on care work and professional responsibilities of female school teachers?

### Phase VI: Evaluation and Small Talk

1. Thank you very much for your time. Was there anything that you think I should have focussed on and missed?
2. Are there any other specific episodes during the pandemic while managing your personal and professional responsibilities that you might want to share?