

## Mothers and Sisters

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MCA focuses on central categories in talk-in-interaction. It involves enumerating the activities, attributes, and inferences (*category-bound predicates*) associated with a category, and, based on the category and its category-bound predicates, makes a connection with a social action. In this short paper, I will focus on the categories of ‘mother’ and ‘sister’ and the standardized relational pairs (SRPs) ‘mother-child’ (in this case, a young adult child) and ‘older sister-younger sister.’ I will now turn to a two-part excerpt which exemplifies what Stokoe (2012) calls “going categorical,” a term used when interlocutors explicitly name a category and, in some cases, its attributes. In the excerpt below, two categories are named: 1) ‘mother’ (also called ‘mom’); and 2) ‘older sister,’ a sub-category of ‘sister.’ Also, two attributes (obligations/rights) of ‘mother’ are named: 1) ‘caregiver,’ the person who does/takes care of *everything* for others; and 2) ‘order giver,’ the person who orders someone under her care to do something.

The following excerpt is taken from a longer troubles-telling segment with two female interlocutors, C and N. In this spate, C is telling N about a dinner party she is giving that night, and about all the work yet to be done in preparation. C lives with her two younger sisters and she is complaining about the middle sister, who has invited several of the dinner guests, and who does not help around the house:

### Extract 1: Cleaning House

- 06 N: but does she clean ↓house?  
07 C: she ↑shou::ld.  
08 N: well, she ↑should, a ↑course. jus’ cause  
09 → you’re the older sister doesn’t mean you  
10 hafta ↑do ever- ↑do everything.  
11 (0.4)  
12 C: °li-°↑Ma:ry doesn’t ↑do (0.4) anything.  
13 she doesn’t do (.) a thing=  
14 N: =na- na- now let’s jus’ wait a minute about  
15 → that because m- my son didn’t do anything  
16 either until he was absolutely ↑forced to because  
17 I forced him, because (.) that’s the only ↑way.  
18 C: → you’re a ↑mo:ther, I’m a sister. she’s gonna  
19 snap back at me.

In this excerpt, there is a complicated interweaving of ‘mother’ and ‘sister’ categories, as well as ‘mother-child’ and ‘older sister-younger sister’ SRPs, which all fall within the larger family membership categorization device (MCD). The first reference to the ‘older sister’ subcategory is in lines 08-10, when N states that an ‘older sister’ does not have to assume ‘caregiver’ or ‘person-who-takes-care-of everything’ responsibilities. The idea that the sister is not responsible for everything may imply, however, that as an older sister, C is in fact, responsible for some things. Perhaps N is implying that being a sister does not obligate C to take

on the same degree of responsibility (“do everything” in line 10) a mother would ordinarily take on as ‘caregiver.’ N’s utterance in lines 08-10 could be considered an assessment as inferred advice first-pair part. N’s assessment/advice is followed by a short gap (0.4 seconds) and C’s continued lament of her sister not doing anything, a dispreferred second-pair part (gap followed by non-acknowledgment). This, in turn, occasions N to bring her son into the conversation in lines 14-17, in which she uses the ‘mother-child’ SRP to introduce another attribute of the ‘mother’ category, that of ‘enforcer’ or ‘order giver.’ N implies that C could use this tactic, an attribute of ‘mother,’ with her younger sister, which contradicts her earlier inference that C is not a member of the category ‘mother’ but that of the stated ‘older sister.’ This seems confusing in that N, at first, implies that C is not a mother with ‘care-giver’ responsibilities, but then suggests that C take on the “mother” attribute of “order-giver.” This is further complicated when C agrees that she is the sister (only N is a mother), but not an equal-rights sister. Rather, she is a powerless sister who gets snapped at (lines 18-19). At this point, C portrays herself not as the ‘sister’ who is free of the responsibility of taking care of *everything* for her younger sister, as N suggests in lines 08-10, but as the *victim* of her sister. By presenting herself in this light, C is providing a rationale for not following N’s advice. C is not only ‘the person who takes care of things,’ but she portrays herself as a *powerless* ‘person who takes care of things’ (in effect, a victim who is taken advantage of. This powerlessness, or projection of victimhood, might be part of the larger act of C’s complaining and her search for comfort and support, and might possibly be added to heighten the drama of the situation.

In sum, N gives C advice which, on one hand, implies that C should not take on the ‘caregiver’ attribute of ‘mother’ (lines 08-10), and on the other, proposes that C take on the ‘order giver’ mother attribute (lines 14-17). C orients to N’s turn as advice by offering an account which resists its implementation (“she’s gonna snap back at me” in lines 18-19). Perhaps the next excerpt can further untangle the attributes of the ‘mother’ category as employed by N and C:

### Extract 2: You’re Like the Mom

- 07 N: so she’s↑spoiled.↑we- well she’s figuring  
08 that you’re like, like the mom.  
09 C: yeah.  
10 N: → and the mom does everything, but you’re  
11 ju- you’re the sister. ↓see you just used that  
12 argument with me. yeah, but N, you’re the  
13 mom (.) but she thinks ↑you are.  
14 (0.4)  
15 C: → no no but I mean I’m saying you’re the mom  
16 so you can order him=  
17 N: =yeah, but if she thinks you’re the mom, then  
18 you hafta [be able to order]  
19 C: [ yeah, but I ] can’t  
20 [order ((*laughter*)) ]  
21 N: [yeah, I know, I know]  
22 C: → that’s the funny, I have to sacrifice  
23 [((*laughter*))]  
24 N: [°yeah° ]

Here, N explicitly names ‘mom’ as a category in line 08, stating that C’s younger sister views C as ‘mom.’ What this points to, as N explicitly states in line 10, and which was perhaps implied in lines 08-10 of Extract 1, is that moms do everything, highlighting the ‘caretaker’ attribute. Again, in lines 10-11, N makes it clear that C is not the mom; she is the sister and as such, does not have the same responsibilities as a mother has (“you’re ju- you’re the sister”). N then seems to take a different approach. In lines 12-13, she begins with a partial repeat of C’s words in the previous extract: “N, you’re the mom [quoting C] (.) but she [C’s younger sister] thinks you [C] are.” After a 0.4 second gap, C discovers that N is perhaps thinking that because C’s younger sister treats C as the ‘caregiver,’ C should take on another of the attributes of ‘mother,’ that of ‘order giver.’ C’s repair and clarification statement of “no, no, I mean ...” shows this. It seems that C misunderstands N momentarily, and explicitly states this second attribute of ‘mother,’ that of ‘order giver.’ N states what she meant in lines 17-18 when she says “if she thinks you’re the mom then you hafta be able to order.” The sequence ends with C resisting N’s advice, stating her inability to take on the attribute of ‘order giver,’ and returning to the role of powerless sister when she states in line 22, “I have to sacrifice,” which projects complaining and a feeling of victimhood.

Apart from the dance carried on between the attributes and obligations of ‘mother’ and ‘sister’ and the SRPs ‘mother-child’ and ‘older sister-younger sister,’ several social actions are performed. It seems that C complains in an effort to gain sympathy by projecting herself as reluctant ‘care giver’ and ‘powerless sister.’ N responds by suggesting a course of action to be taken, tapping into the ‘order giver’ attribute of ‘mother.’ C, by providing an account of why this course of action is not possible, seems to prefer to view the situation as hopeless: N is a ‘mom’ with mom rights; C, as ‘older sister,’ does not have those rights. C seems to seek help or advice, but perhaps she is really seeking a comforting, sympathetic ear. While she takes on the ‘caregiver’ attribute of ‘mother,’ which advances her action of complaining, she does not take on the ‘order giver’ attribute, which highlights her resistance to N’s advice. For N, category work is utilized in the service of offering sympathy and advice due to C’s being a member of the ‘older sister’ (not the ‘mother’) category. Although C’s difficult situation has not changed, and she voices her position as one of ‘sacrifice’ (an attribute often associated with ‘mother’), laughter, perhaps prompted by the category-bound predicates themselves, and commiseration at the end put a positive spin on this interaction.

## REFERENCES

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