Discourse as a Strategic Resource

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Abstract

In this paper, we explore how discourse can be used as a strategic resource. Using an illustrative example of Mère et Enfant, an international NGO operating in Palestine, we show how an individual brought about strategic change by engaging in discursive activity. We use this to outline a model of how discourse can be mobilized as a strategic resource. The model consists of three circuits. First, in circuits of activity individuals attempt to introduce symbols aimed at connecting objects to particular concepts. Second, for circuits of activity to be successful, they must intersect with circuits of performativity i.e. the concept is grounded in a period and context in which it has meaning; the subject position of the enunciator warrants voice; and the symbols used possess receptivity. Third, circuits of connectivity occur when the new discursive statements “take”.

Key Words: Critical discourse analysis, strategy, organization theory

Introduction

Traditionally, the literature on strategy and the literature on discourse have largely ignored each other. Recently, however, writers have started to examine the links between the two, as a result of which two divergent views have emerged. One stream of research treats discourse as an infinitely pliable variable that can be used to produce any desirable strategic outcome (Eccles & Nohria, 1993; Hamel & Prahalad, 1994). Another body of work suggests there is little scope to manipulate the discourse of strategy, in which academics and practitioners alike are trapped (Knights & Morgan, 1991; Inkpen & Choudhury, 1995). While coming to different conclusions, both approaches view strategy as discourse. We argue that it is important to differentiate strategy from discourse and to explore the role of discourse as a strategic resource which individuals can access as part of their efforts to enact strategy.

Discourses are created by the aggregation of actions and statements of many individuals and organizations over time, and are not created by the instrumental actions of individuals working in isolation (Phillips & Hardy, 1997). While it is sometimes possible for individuals to access different discourses to generate new meanings that help — or hinder — the enactment of particular strategies, discourse is not infinitely pliable. Strategic actors cannot simply produce a discourse to suit their immediate needs and, instead, must locate their discursive activities within a meaningful context if they are to shape and construct action. As a result, a complex relationship emerges as the activities of actors shape discourses, while those discourses also shape the actions of those actors.

In this paper, then, we seek to explore this relationship between discourse and strategy by viewing discourse as a strategic resource. Using an illustrative example, we show how an individual engaged in discursive activity in attempts to bring about strategic change. We explore this activity in detail to identify both its scope and its limitations, and to suggest the components linked to the successful use of discourse in a strategic context. In this way, we ground theoretical discussions of discourse in an empirical study of strategy and develop a model of discourse as a strategic resource.
This paper is organized as follows. We first examine writings on strategy that adopt a discursive perspective. We then consider the broader body of literature on discourse theory and provide an overview of processes of discursive production, drawing primarily on work from critical discourse theory. Third, we describe the case study on which this paper is based. Fourth, we develop a model of discourse as a strategic resource from this case. Finally, we draw some conclusions for research and practice.

**Strategy and Discourse**

While discursive approaches are not common in the strategy literature, recently, a number of writers have started to consider strategy from a discursive perspective. Two divergent approaches can be identified. First, from a more practice-oriented approach, Eccles & Nohria (1993, p. 88) consider strategy to be a particular kind of rhetoric that provides a “common language used by people at all levels of an organization in order to determine, justify, and give meaning to the constant stream of actions that the organization comprises.” They argue that strategy does not merely reflect an organizational reality but actually creates it. Thus strategy has become an important new rhetoric which makes sense of, legitimates and produces certain activities. Second, from a more academic-oriented approach, other writers also see strategy as discourse but arrive at this position by drawing upon the insights of postmodern approaches (Knights & Morgan, 1991), Giddens’ (1981) notion of structuration (Whipp, 1996) and narrative theory (Barry & Elmes, 1997). They argue that “strategy” — like “environment” and “organization” — is a construction that serves to make sense of the world, and which is reproduced by a variety of texts and practices. We only know about a strategy because we talk and write about it, and because some activities get talked about as strategy, whereas others do not.

However, both of these approaches pose problems for researchers interested in pursuing the connection between discourse and strategy. First, the more practice-oriented literature has not exploited the concept of discourse very fully, going only so far as to conceptualize strategy as rhetoric (Eccles & Nohria, 1993). In this regard, strategy making becomes largely the management of meaning. As such, this work is vulnerable to the criticism that it says little about how talk produces action (Palmer & Dunford, 1996; Hardy, Lawrence, & Phillips, 1998). There are, as a result, major questions concerning how thinking up or, to be more precise — talking up — a new strategy translates into organizational actions. As Mintzberg (1994, p. 281) has already asked: how can an organization transform itself simply by thinking up a new strategy? Second, if the practice-oriented literature has over-emphasized the managerial applications of a discursive approach, the academic-oriented work has largely ignored them altogether. As a result, we know little about how the discursive aspects of strategy might be managed or what are the practical implications that might result from such activities.

Our aim in this paper is to bridge these two approaches and to develop a model that does justice to the complexity of discursive activity. To do so, we draw on some of the extensive work that has been carried out in discourse theory and, at the same time, ground these insights in a case study that shows how discourse constituted a strategic resource in a specific situation.

**The Study of Discourse**

As van Dijk (1997a) points out, discourse as a field of study is “fuzzy”. In fact, it encompasses a number of approaches that are informed by a wide variety of disciplines. The role of discourse in organizations is equally difficult to define (Keenoy, Oswick, & Grant,
Despite divergent and sometimes conflicting approaches, it is clear that research on discourse is associated with the study of texts (although what constitutes a text is also a matter of some debate) and their use in particular organizational settings. Thus discursive analysis requires an examination of language, the production of texts and processes of communication, and the interactions between actors in the organizational and institutional setting (Grant et al., 1998).

Underlying this approach is the view that discourse plays a role in the social construction of reality (Condor & Antaki, 1997). Discourse does not merely describe things, it does things (Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Grant et al., 1998). Discourse is both socially constituted and socially constitutive as it produces objects of knowledge, social identities and relationships between people (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997).

In discourse analysis, “the communicative practices of members are examined for the ways that they contribute to the ongoing (and sometimes rather precarious) process of organizing and constituting social reality” (Mumby & Clair, 1997, p. 181).

Studying discourse is, then, a powerful way to explore processes of organizing and, particularly, the fragility of, and struggles within, organizational life. To fully appreciate the role that discourse plays, we are particularly concerned with two issues — power and context.

**Discourse and Power**

Studies on the political effects of discourse examine how discourse acts as a cultural resource. They reveal how people deploy discourses to pursue their plans and projects. They explore both how discourse is jointly constructed, and the local or institutional ends that the discourse serves (Wetherell & Potter, 1988; Condor & Antaki, 1997). While some writers argue that the power effects of discourse are beyond the control of individuals (Condor & Antaki, 1997), others argue that discourse can be used to produce outcomes (Grant et al., 1998). Our approach rests on the latter assumption — that discourse can be used by individuals in attempts to produce outcomes that are beneficial to them (Hardy et al., 1998). We do not, however, assume that discourse is infinitely pliable in this respect but, rather, that discourse is used in, and emanates from, struggles between different actors (Phillips & Hardy, forthcoming).

We draw explicitly from critical discourse theory (Parker, 1992; Fairclough, 1992; Fairclough & Wodak, 1997), which sees organizations “not simply as social collectives where shared meaning is produced, but rather as sites of struggle where different groups compete to shape the social reality of organizations in ways that serve their own interests” (Mumby & Clair, 1997, p. 182). We employ a critical model of discursive activity that has been developed and applied elsewhere (Phillips & Hardy, 1997; Hardy & Phillips, forthcoming; Hardy et al., 1998). It defines discourses as sets of texts — statements, practices, etc. — which bring an object into being (Fairclough, 1992; Parker, 1992). Discourse creates social “reality” through the production of concepts, objects and subject positions which shape the way in which we understand the world and react to it (Fairclough, 1992; Parker, 1992; Phillips & Hardy, 1997).

First, discourse produces concepts — categories, relationships, and theories — through which we understand the world and relate to one another. Concepts make up what Harré (1979) refers to as the expressive sphere: all of the conceptual ideas that make up our cultural
background. They exist solely in the realm of ideas, are more or less contested and are culturally and historically situated. Implicit in the production of discursive concepts are ideas of “rightness”, what Bakhtin refers to as the “accent” of the concept (Gardiner, 1992, p. 15). In other words, concepts carry with them a moral evaluation that is part of the ongoing discursive accomplishment of the concept.

Second, when concepts are brought into play to make sense of social relations or physical objects, the discourse constitutes an object. Objects and concepts are obviously closely related. The primary difference is that while concepts exist only in the expressive order i.e. in the realm of ideas, objects are part of the practical order i.e. they are “real” in the sense of existing in the material world (Laclau & Mouffe, 1987). But they only make sense in terms of the concepts that are applied to them: as concepts change, new objects are produced and, equally importantly, very different practices may be invoked (Phillips & Hardy, 1997).

Third, subject positions arise as subjects acquire rights to speak in the discourse, which Potter & Wetherell (1987) call “warranting voice” (also see Laclau & Mouffe, 1987; Parker, 1992). Theorists such as Foucault (1972) assert that limited numbers of positions exist within discourses from which individuals can speak and act. To be able to speak within a discourse requires the actor to take up one of the subject positions. Discourse also positions interpreters of a text. In other words, discourse has consequences for the speaker as well as for the various receivers of the text. In defining and circumscribing positions from which subjects can speak, act, and interpret, discourse captures producers as effectively as participants and audience.

In this way, discourses reproduce and transform institutional structures (Parker, 1992). As Fairclough (1992) notes, discourse theory does not suggest that the “realities” of the social world reside inside people’s minds; rather it argues that individuals are confronted with the concrete practices, relations and identities previously constituted in discourse and reified into institutions and practices. “Thus the discursive constitution of society does not emanate from a free play of ideas in people’s heads but from a social practice which is firmly rooted in and oriented to real, material social structures” (Fairclough, 1992, p. 66).

**Text and Context**

Our second interest lies in the context in which discursive activity takes place. Many writers argue that the study of discourse cannot occur in a vacuum (see Grant *et al.*, 1998) if we are to understand how they operate. To understand discourses and their effects, we must understand the meaning they hold. But discourses do not “possess” meaning. Instead, meanings are assigned to them, and these meanings are shared and social, emanating out of interaction, social groups and societal structures in which the discourse is embedded.

Discourse studies should deal both with the properties of text and talk and with what is usually called the context, that is, the other characteristics of the social situation or the communicative event that may systematically influence text or talk. In sum, discourse studies are about *talk and text in context*. (van Dijk, 1997a, p. 3)

If we want to explain how discourses operate, we cannot restrict ourselves to examining its internal structures, the actions of individuals, or the use of language. Instead, we must explore how discourse as social action is embedded within broader frameworks of understanding, communication and interaction. Discourse should, then, be studied as a constitutive part of its local and global, social and cultural context (van Dijk, 1997a).
It is for this reason we draw on an illustrative case study (described in the following section). In this way, we are better able to situate discourse in a dialectical relationship between particular discursive events and the circumstances and social structures that frame it (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997).

Discourse is not produced without context and cannot be understood without taking context into consideration ... Discourses are always connected to other discourses that were produced earlier, as well as those which are produced synchronically and subsequently. In this respect, we include intertextuality as well as sociocultural knowledge within our concept of context (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997, p. 277).

These contexts, like discourse, are not objective — they, themselves, are socially constituted. “They are interpreted or constructed and strategically and continually made relevant by and for participants” (van Dijk, 1997b, p. 16). By studying the larger context, our study becomes “three dimensional” (Keenoy et al., 1997) as we locate the discourse historically and socially in order to bridge text and context (Fairclough, 1995). This, in turn, helps us to ground our conceptualization of discursive activity in a larger picture and reveal its limits as well as its potential.

To summarize, our interest lies in how discourse is used as a resource by actors in their attempt to enact their strategic intentions. We are interested in power/agency — the scope for action — as well as the limits of action. To achieve our objectives we use two devices — a model derived from critical discourse theory and an illustrative case study. Or, to put it more simply, we are interested in “who uses language, how, why and when (van Dijk, 1997a, p. 2).

The Case Study: Mère et Enfant

Mère et Enfant is an international NGO, based in Europe and funded by a European government. It has a world wide mission to help children in need. Its charter commits the organization to work on behalf of the neediest of the world’s children, regardless of gender, race, nationality or other considerations. It works with children as members of families within the community, rather than as individuals. It emphasizes prevention and education, and is committed to sharing its knowledge and to empowering the community it serves. Our interest is in one particular “branch” of Mère et Enfant — Mère et Enfant (Palestine), which operates in the West Bank and Gaza and is funded primarily by its headquarters and the European government.

To conduct our research, we carried out interviews with the Delegate responsible for the West Bank and Gaza. He is an ex-patriate employee who manages 60 individuals employed by Mère et Enfant in this region, all of whom are Palestinian except for one British nutritionist. He was appointed to this position in 1993. We conducted interviews with at least one representative of all the organizations collaborating with Mère et Enfant. Interviews lasted between one and two hours, were semi-structured, recorded and transcribed. We had access to all of the external publications (news sheets, brochures, etc.) since the Delegate’s appointment, and to all the major internal reports (strategic plan, work plans, etc.).

The West Bank and Gaza

The Gaza strip is a small piece of land (365 square km) occupied by over 800,000 Palestinians, making it one of the most densely populated areas in the world. The Palestinian population growth rate is 4 percent and half the population is under 14 years old. Approximately three-quarters of the Palestinians in Gaza are refugees living in one of eight refugee camps. The West Bank covers an area of 5,500 square km. It is mainly rural with
about 400 villages and four major towns. Forty percent of the population are refugees, living in one of twenty refugee camps. The population is estimated to be over one million, half of which are less than 14 years of age. The infant mortality rate is estimated by Palestinians to be 50 deaths per 1,000 live births. Diarrhoea and acute respiratory infections account for more than half of all child deaths in Palestine.

Mère et Enfant has been operating in Gaza and the West Bank for over ten years and its main emphasis in this region is on child nutrition. Its aims to reduce the infant mortality rate, especially deaths from diarrhoea and diarrhoeal diseases; to identify and improve the nutritional status of children in the West Bank and Gaza; to offer nutritional rehabilitation to malnourished children; and to raise the level of consciousness of the citizens and professionals about the importance of good nutrition. It treats children directly by providing medical and nutritional services in Hebron (in the West Bank), Gaza and Khan Younis (in the Gaza Strip). It has an outreach program to provide community education and provides training in diarrhoea management, breast feeding, safe weaning, etc. in the community and among health care professions. It conducts research into the nutritional status and food security and other matters related to the health of Palestinian child. It provides information and education to both the public and policy makers about nutrition and poverty.

**The “Business” of Localization**

Since the appointment of the Delegate, Mère et Enfant has been in the process of “localizing” its activities in this region and recreating itself as *El Um Wa Al-Tefal.* Localization is a process whereby regionally based operations, administered and funded by an international NGO, are transformed into a local NGO. The localized organization has its own steering committee comprised of representatives from the local community; its own internal management structure; and is responsible for securing its own funding from a variety of sources on a sustainable basis. In this way, the localized organization is independent and self-sufficient, providing services demanded by the community in which it operates and competing with other agencies for funds.

NGOs like Mère et Enfant have engaged in localization in response to an increasingly complex external environment that has given rise to a multiplicity of pressures. First, funds for NGOs are always a scarce resource. The European government that funds Mère et Enfant has cut back on its support; at the same time “compassionate fatigue” has set in with many other potential donors. As a result, Mère et Enfant must explore more creative ways to support its work. Second, the governments and citizens of “developing” countries are increasingly demanding that international aid agencies devote more attention to empowerment. Instead of management practices that perpetuate the dependency relationship between an agency and its “clients”, there is a move towards establishing a development relationship in which knowledge and skills are transferred from agency to client. Third, major donors, such as the World Bank, are increasingly attracted to the idea of giving money to local NGOs rather than to international agencies. Fourth, global economic and political conditions, which affect the living conditions of children change dramatically and unexpectedly, creating new pockets of need for Mère et Enfant’s services in different parts of the world. If Mère et Enfant continues to use traditional methods of funding, its resources remain largely “locked” into particular countries, and cannot be easily switched to meet emerging areas of need, regardless of how great are these new demands. In addition to these factors, which shape Mère et Enfant’s global environment, changes in regional politics create an added momentum for localization in the West Bank and Gaza. During the Israeli occupation, the absence of a legitimate Palestinian authority meant that international NGOs
played an important role in the area. Following the Oslo peace agreement, the Palestinian National Authority was formed, which indicated its desire to exert more control over the NGOs working in the region and, in particular, to work with local NGOs.

In many respects, the impetus for localization stems from challenges similar to those perceived by business organizations. Mère et Enfant’s environment is becoming increasingly competitive and turbulent and its point of reference is ever more global. The localized organization must provide services that are required and demanded by the “market” and which prove sufficiently attractive to secure funding from a variety of donor organizations. Internally, the localized organization must be able to carry out the services it has been set up to provide. It must have the necessary skills, resources, depth of management and governance structure. Under localization, an organization cannot afford to offer services simply because it always has done so; it is now competing for funds in an increasingly difficult environment. Unless its services are valued and unless it can “add value” where other agencies cannot, the localized organization will not receive the long term funding it needs to survive.

Localization marks a global trend in the voluntary sector as traditional methods of administering aid and development services come into question and as organizations struggle to deal with new environmental challenges. As a result, aspects of business discourses have started to permeate international aid discourses. Localization is considered to possess the potential to reinvent the international aid “industry” by creating flexibility on the part of the international organization and sustainability on the part of the localized organization. It is seen as a means to address harsh economic realities, while meeting the social and humanitarian obligations.

Localization at Mère et Enfant
The Delegate of Mère et Enfant took up his position in 1993. In preparation for localization, he undertook a number of steps to rationalize inappropriate or under-performing services. As a result of this some thirty people lost their jobs over a three-year period. Since some of these services had been problematic — for example, a children’s clinic had been closed after finding evidence of negligence towards the children in its care — the reputation of the organization was increased. The remaining services were enhanced and the financial situation was improved. He also established a number of collaborations with other organizations (summarized in table 1). By collaborating to secure funds, personnel, and equipment and to enhance expertise through training, the organization increased its access to scarce resources. Collaboration also helped to assert Mère et Enfant’s right to play a central role in the field of child nutrition. For example, had the University of Oslo (table 1) established its own nutritional centre in the region, instead of working with — and through Mère et Enfant — that right would have been contested and Mère et Enfant’s authority would have been undermined.
Médecins sans Frontières is an international NGO whose membership comprises primarily doctors and health workers who offer assistance to populations in distress from natural and man-made disasters. Médecins sans Frontières and M&E collaborated in the development of a mental health care program designed to address the psychological problems of mothers that were often associated with malnutrition among Palestinian children. Two psychologists, employed and funded by Médecins sans Frontières worked in M&E’s Hebron clinic for a year. As mothers came for nutritional advice, they were able to access counseling and other psychological support. In addition, the psychologists used M&E’s community outreach team to contact women who were unable to attend the Hebron clinic. At the end of the year, the project involved more than 200 families. In addition, the psychologists trained M&E’s staff in mental health issues and longer-term plans were being put in place to train a Palestinian community health worker to take over some of the work.

Care International

M&E initiated a collaboration with Care International, which delivers relief assistance to people in need and long-term solutions to global poverty, to help women in the community to develop income generation projects. Care first secured funding of $10,000 from the Australian Embassy for the initiative, and then helped train M&E personnel in setting up the projects, such as raising rabbits and goats or making clothes, with women in the community and then monitoring their success. The initial micro-credit scheme was modified during the course of the collaboration to become an income generation scheme in order to extend access to a wider group of women who could not repay the original loan and who had no previous experience of income generation.

University of Oslo

The University of Oslo’s School of Nutrition came to Gaza to offer its services to the Ministry of Health as part of an initiative with the Nutrition Council of Norway to develop a nutrition and food policy for the region. A collaboration was established with M&E to coordinate this initiative. A workshop was organized and hosted by M&E to develop strategies for food safety and control, nutrition, chronic diseases, clinical nutrition, and food security. The Oslo academics, the Ministry of Health and other NGOs and ministries participated in the workshop, following which plans were made to set up a new department to deal with food security and nutrition. These strategies and the subsequent policy were subsequently written up by M&E, with some help from Oslo, and approved by the Palestinian National Authority. The collaboration continues with a view to implementing the policy.

Peace on Earth

Peace on Earth is a Japanese charity that provided two Japanese trainees to work in the Hebron office. It paid the women’s salaries and donated two vehicles in exchange for their training by M&E employees. Peace on Earth also made representations on behalf of M&E to the Japanese Embassy, which resulted in $93,000 for a new building in Gaza. M&E also collaborated with Peace on Earth by hosting Japanese visitors interested in learning more about NGO work in the region and the situation facing Palestinian women and children. This, in turn, gives M&E access to other Japanese organizations and government agencies, which are becoming increasingly interested in funding overseas development.

UNICEF, Australian Embassy, British Consulate

UNICEF is the United National Children’s Fund, which is dedicated to providing children with better health and nutrition. It collaborated with M&E on a joint training program whereby M&E’s employees developed the expertise to train breast-feeding counselors. M&E thus became qualified to carry out all the training of hospital personnel responsible for teaching mothers to breast-feed their infants, following which UNICEF would register the hospitals as “baby-friendly.” This “training of trainers” was a new activity for M&E. UNICEF contributed $1,500, equipment and personnel to the joint training program, as a result of which UNICEF learned about nutrition and about the region from M&E. (UNICEF did not have a nutritionist or a field office in the region prior to the collaboration. Following the collaboration, a field officer was appointed). Further funding to enable M&E to implement training programs in two hospitals was secured from the British consulate and the Australian embassy.

World Food Program

The World Food Program is the food aid organization of the United Nations. It collaborated with M&E to distribute food to M&E’s 100 neediest families in a way that ensured food security (preventing food being sold on the black market) and combined the provision of food with nutritional education (e.g., women were taught how to cook and use the food). M&E employees selected the families and distributed the food. Both partners participated in the evaluation to discern methods of targeting families, ensuring secure food distribution, and to combine food distribution with nutritional education.

Oxfam

Oxfam is an organization dedicated to the relief of suffering in terms of both emergency relief and community development. Oxfam and M&E collaborated on developing a nutritional survey. Oxfam contributed $5,000 towards the costs of developing the survey.

Pharmaciens sans Frontières

Pharmaciens sans Frontières contributed medicines worth approximately $13,000 p.a. enabling M&E to dispense medication to children suffering from malnutrition and related illnesses.

World Heath Organization

WHO approached M&E to collaborate on a nutritional survey. However, when a new WHO delegate arrived, his predecessor neglected to inform him that WHO had initiated the collaboration. As a result, WHO did not secure clearance from the Ministry of Health to conduct the survey, thinking that it was M&E’s responsibility, while M&E thought it was WHO’s responsibility as the initiator of the project. The Ministry refused permission for the survey to go ahead because the proper approval procedures had not been followed, as a result of which M&E lost $50,000 and the survey was never conducted.
In other words, a number of actions were taken by the Delegate over a three year period to prepare the organization for localization by bolstering its sources of power in the form of critical resources, authority and legitimacy (Hickson, Hinings, Lee, Schneck, & Pennings, 1971; Pettigrew, 1973; Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978; Pfeffer, 1981; Astley & Sachdeva, 1984; Phillips & Hardy, 1997; Hardy & Phillips, 1998). For the most part, however, the activities and personnel of the organization remained the same, if somewhat reduced in number. Despite the increasing use of the Arabic name, in late 1996 the organization was still seen by members of both the organization and the community as an international NGO.

To be constituted as a legitimate, local NGO, \textit{El Um Wa Al-Tefal} would require, among other changes, its own steering committee of members of the local political and professional community to take management responsibility for the newly devolved organization. Typically, these are people with the relevant management and clinical expertise and/or political connections. The steering committee planned for \textit{El Um Wa Al-Tefal} by the Delegate included the Minister of Health and the Director-General for Primary Care — both of the Palestinian National Authority — as well as other professionals from the Palestinian community.

The committee held its first meeting in September 1996 although, at that time, decision making remained under the control of the Delegate and the Mère et Enfant (Palestine) remained part of the larger organization. The following month, the Delegate announced the layoff of 15 employees. The Delegate had originally intended to complete this round of organizational changes before establishing the steering committee. However, a visit from an evaluation team from headquarters, which wanted to see evidence of localization, prompted him to move more quickly than previously planned in setting up the steering committee. The announcement met with demonstrations by employees and members of the local community. Having been constituted, the steering committee met to discuss the matter in the absence of the Delegate, and decided that the employees should be taken back. The matter then escalated when disaffected employees went to the security forces and made allegations against Mère et Enfant and some of its Palestinian staff members. The security forces then became involved and exerted considerable pressure on two Palestinian managers, threatening imprisonment and torture unless they reinstated the employees.

By this time, in the eyes of many Palestinians — including the security forces — the organization was now a local NGO with its own steering committee, which had recommended reinstatement of the employees. In other words, the international organization had been discursively re-constituted as a local one through the creation of a steering committee, a meeting of that committee, and a statement by that committee. These discursive acts “changed” the organization, particularly in the eyes of outsiders, as a result of which the environment also “changed” for outsiders and insiders alike. The organization “became” a local NGO even though it remained under the direct control of the Delegate and part of the international NGO. As a local NGO, its members were left without the political protection afforded by the status of an international agency, and were immediately subjected to all the norms and controls of the local environment.

In order to protect his employees from further harassment, the Delegate engaged in a number of activities designed to re-establish the status of the organization as an international agency with political connections and financial clout. He sent out a series of memos and letters in October and early November to a range of individuals and organizations, including heads of
other NGOs, members of the Palestinian National Authority, and members of the security forces, stating the following. “[W]ith immediate effect, the process of localizing its projects in Palestine — that is of handing over the projects of [Mère et Enfant] to new owners and managers is suspended.” He also let it be known that “line management responsibility for the projects of [Mère et Enfant] in Palestine will be assumed in totality by the Delegate and through him to [the government of the European country where Mère et Enfant is headquartered and funded].” He disbanded the steering committee to reinforce the statement that management of the organization no longer resided in local hands. He also met with the head of the security forces as well as prominent members of the Palestinian National Authority to consolidate his position as Delegate and the organization’s status as an international NGO. In doing this, he consistently emphasized the role of European headquarters in the management of the organization. For example, he maintained that the reason why workers were asked to leave the organization was the result of “changes in our working methods [which resulted from] an evaluation of our work by the [European] government and [our headquarters], our two funders.” By the end of November, the Delegate had received reassurances from members of the Palestinian National Authority that employees were safe from further intervention by the security forces and the organization once again “became” an international NGO.

A Model of Discourse as a Strategic Resource
By analyzing the events and experiences in the case from a discursive perspective, we are in a position to develop a model of discourse as a strategic resource (figure 1). This model consists of three discursive circuits: activity, performativity and connectivity. In circuits of activity, individuals attempt to introduce new discursive statements that will connect objects to particular concepts. Their activities revolve around the introduction of symbols, stories, metaphors etc. For these circuits of activity to engage other actors, they must intersect with circuits of performativity (Lyotard, 1984). In other words, some discursive activity will remain simply that — words and talk — unless it is “received” by other, relevant actors. This occurs when the discursive activity is grounded in a period and context in which the relevant concepts have meaning; when the subject position of the enunciator warrants voice; and when the symbols used possess receptivity and resonate with appropriate actors. Activity and performativity create a circuit of connectivity as concepts are successfully attached to specific objects. This means that the new discursive statements “take” (Srivastva & Barrett, 1988, p. 54) and, as result, new subject positions and practices emerge and discourse becomes sedimented into taken-for-granted practice and rhetoric. In this way, prevailing discourses are contested, displaced, transformed, modified or reinforced thereby affecting the context for future discursive activities.
We can analyze the case of Mère et Enfant using this model (figure 2). In this case, we are focusing on the discursive activities of the Delegate and their effects, primarily, on individuals outside the organization although, as is clear, there were significant indirect effects on members of the organization.
The Delegate attempted to manage meaning by making a new discursive “statement.” It revolved around the creation of the steering committee — a widely recognized symbol that signified a local NGO. This activity enabled him to associate an object (the organization known as Mère et Enfant) with a particular concept (of a local NGO). Previously, the organization had been connected to a different concept — that of an international NGO. This was the circuit of activity.

Activity alone does not, however, mean that other actors will necessarily associate the object (the organization) with the new concept (a local NGO). Consequently, we must look rather more deeply at how those activities were “received” and why. First, the concept — the local NGO — made sense in this particular period and context. Many NGOs were localizing at this time and the practice was known to individuals inside and outside the organization. Moreover the rhetoric was popular in both the wider international aid domain as well as in Palestine specifically. Second, the symbol — the steering committee — possessed receptivity. It was a commonly recognized symbol among the various actors, including members of the Palestinian community, members of the NGO community and the members of the evaluation team. Third, the subject position of the enunciator — the Delegate — warranted voice. He could make these statements and take these decisions in ways that some other members of the organization and the community could not. These factors thus comprised a circuit of performativity — the symbols, concepts, and enunciator “resonated” with the particular context and among the particular actors.

In this case, activity and performativity were associated with connectivity, linking concept and object in a meaningful connection in a specific situation. This resulted in the emergence of new practices and subject positions, such as the rather unsavoury practice of threats from the security forces, which was now a powerful new subject position. So, although the organization itself did not change materially in terms of the work it carried out, how it was structured, or the administrative procedures it used, in the space of a few weeks it nonetheless became a “different” organization in terms of how it was perceived and treated by external, local actors.

In this case study, the Delegate engaged in a discursive “counter attack” to address the actions of the security forces (figure 3). This represents a second round of strategic discursive activity aimed at re-attaching the object (the organization) to the concept (an international NGO). In this way, the Delegate hoped to protect employees from further harassment. First, the letters and meetings communicated a new (or, rather, old) story of an international NGO governed from Europe, while the disbanding of the steering committee removed a symbol associated with a local NGO. This initiated a circuit of activity involving new discursive statements designed to manage the meaning of the organization’s status by re-associating it with the concept of an international NGO. This concept still made sense in the Palestinian context as well as in the wider European context to which he consistently referred in his communications. The performativity of his actions were also aided by the continuing receptivity of the symbols and narratives he used (e.g., the story of the role of the European headquarters in the management of the local operation).
These discursive (re)statements of an international NGO “took” as other powerful subject positions were reintroduced (i.e., the European government). Other subject positions also emerged to warrant voice, particularly President Arafat and other prominent members of the Palestinian National Authority who were dependent on the international diplomatic community for political and financial support. These subject positions proved to be, relatively speaking, more powerful than the subject positions that had been enacted through the localization discourse (the security forces). Evidence for this assessment is based upon the fact that shortly thereafter the practices instituted by the security forces were stopped as Mére et Enfant once again functioned as an international NGO.

Whether aid discourses “localize” or remain “international” will depend upon the accumulation of individual strategic uses of discourse. If statements and practices converge around localization, existing aid discourses may be displaced as business rhetoric gains a greater foothold in the voluntary sector. If the events seen here are repeated elsewhere, existing aid discourses may return to dominance supported, no doubt, by stories of political corruption and the absence of democracy. More likely than either of these outcomes, however, is the continuation of discursive struggle and divergence as aid discourses remain a contested terrain.

Conclusions
The paper uses an example of a nongovernment organization (NGO) operating in the West Bank and Gaza to explore the links between strategy and discourse. The model presented in this paper outlines the process through which discourse becomes a strategic resource. In this model, the idea of discourse as a strategic resource is composed of complex linkages that can be broken down heuristically into a set of meaningful circuits, which identify the various steps through which discourse is engaged. These circuits display the power of the discourse i.e., the ability to move specific statements from rhetoric to practice.
We show how specific discursive acts re-presented a new object by linking it to a different concept. The case study shows how the interplay between broad societal discourses, specific discursive acts, and consequential practices changed an “organization” and its “environment”. We conclude that discursive activity only provides a strategic resource when appropriately grounded in the prevailing discursive context. In other words, actors must hold subject positions that warrant sufficient voice in the eyes of actors to initiate discursive activities, otherwise their activities/statements will be ignored. The symbols used must possess receptivity in the eyes of those actors and be both familiar and capable of dislodging existing symbols. Strategy making is not just a matter of using evocative language, or getting people to think up new possibilities: not all talk will turn into action unless it “hooks” into broader discourses, changing concepts to produce new objects and subject positions.

To conclude, this paper makes a number of contributions. First, exploring discourse as a strategic resource reveals both agency and constraint. The model takes us beyond simplistic conceptualizations that attribute excessive agency to strategic actors. It shows that discursive activities have to be located within a broader context and also that the outcomes of those activities cannot easily be controlled. Even when the discursive activity is “successful”, it may set a series of events in train which pose other difficulties. In other words, one can dissect discourses and their effects — discourses are complex, intertwining with other discourses and diverse practices. At the same time, discourses can be employed by actors wishing to create change — their actions are not totally determined by wider discursive structures. Second, this case study gives a graphic example of how an environment and an organization can be socially enacted. It shows that how an organization is “read” by outsiders has a dramatic impact on events inside. Finally, we suggest that while our analysis focuses on the impact of discursive activity on outsiders, future studies might equally concern themselves with mapping the impact of discursive activity on members inside organizations.
Bibliography


Notes

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2 This paper has been submitted for consideration by Human Relations

3 Names have been disguised.

4 Arabic translation of Mère et Enfant.