Discipline and punish? Strategy discourse, senior manager subjectivity and contradictory power effects

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Abstract

Responding to calls for a more localized and dispersed conceptualization of power in the study of strategy discourse and its power effects, this paper examines how such effects undermine and contradict each other in a mundane, routine interaction: a research interview between a corporate elite actor and one of the authors. Using a Foucauldian inspired discursive psychology approach to provide a critical analysis of brief stretches of talk in a research interview, we expose the inherent instability and contingency of strategy discourse as it is used to construct accounts of corporate success, failure and senior manager subjectivity. Our core contribution is to show that resistance to strategy discourse is discernible not only through how lower level or other actors contest or undermine this discourse, but also by observing the efforts of corporate elites to manage temporary breakdowns (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2011) which disrupt the background consensus which ordinarily provides strategy discourse with its "taken-for-granted" quality. Resistance, we argue, is not only an intentional and oppositional practice but inheres within the fine grain of strategy discourse itself, manifested as a "hindrance and stumbling block" (Foucault, 1978) in the highly occasioned and local level of mundane interaction.

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Studies of strategy as discourse have proliferated over the last several years, making significant contributions to the strategy as practice (S A P) literature by drawing attention to how strategy discourse constructs specific objects (such as accounting techniques) (Ezzamel and Willmott, 2008) and subjects (such as strategists) (Laine and Vaara, 2007; Samra-Fredericks, 2005); confers legitimacy and power to managerial prerogatives and those managers authorised to act as strategists (Ezzamel and Willmott, 2008; Mantere and Vaara, 2008); and produces resistance from collectives and individuals who refuse to be colonised by the notions of subjectivity promulgated through the various versions of strategy constructed through discourse (Ezzamel and Willmott, 2008; McCabe, 2009; Hardy and Thomas, 2013). Although these studies have developed considerable insights into the material and symbolic effects of strategy discourse, some scholars have argued that the relationship between power and strategy discourse has not been adequately addressed or theorised, largely because power tends to be conceptualised as a commodity (Hardy and Thomas, 2013; Ezzamel and Willmott, 2010). As a consequence, while much of the strategy as discourse literature very effectively focuses on power effects, this has tended to be in terms of how senior managers or other elites utilise strategy discourse and its material manifestations to attempt to discipline or shape the behaviour and identities of lower level

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actors in the organization (Laine and Vaara, 2007) or to influence or seize control of the strategic direction of an organization (Samra-Fredericks, 2003). Less attention has been given to understanding how power operates from within strategy discourse itself, which is important because as Foucault (1978: 101) argues:

"We must make allowances for the complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines it and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it".

Taking this argument as our point of departure, in this paper, we examine how the different power effects of strategy discourse contradict and undermine each other within mundane and routine processes of accountability, generating points of instability within the discourse which expose its fragility and contingency. We use a discursive psychology approach informed by Foucauldian ideas of power, knowledge and discourse to perform a critical analysis of interview data conducted between one of the authors and the Vice President (VP) of a subsidiary unit of an American MNC.

We chose a discursive psychology approach for the following reasons. First, discursive psychology is distinctive in that what people say is not seen as representing the contents of their minds (i.e. what they are "really" thinking or what they "really mean"), but as a highly occasioned and context specific response to interactional demands. In this sense, attitudes, feelings, mind, and various versions of reality are understood primarily as resources that individuals can use as they navigate interactional demands. In turn, interactional demands are understood to proceed from the nature of the relationship subsisting between the interactants

which may include, as we discuss below, institutionally prescribed positions (such as researcher and interviewee) and power relations.

Second, we were keen to address some of the criticisms that are regularly targeted at discourse studies regarding their tendency to imbue discourse with the power to do things to people and other objects in the world (Speer, 2005). The danger with this sort of approach is not only that discourse is treated as a self-perpetuating phenomenon with an autonomy of its own (Al Amoudi and Willmott, 2011), but we may underestimate the extent to which individuals use discursive resources, such as "discourses of strategy" to creatively and flexibly produce credible and coherent representations of self and the world for highly occasioned and context-specific purposes (Potter, 1996). As Alvesson and Karreman (2000: 1132) argue *"the ways in which subjects relate to discourse may be Teflon-like: the language they are exposed to or use, may not stick".* We therefore chose a discursive psychology approach because of its focus on examining power as produced endogenously within interactions rather than something that is externally imposed on the representations of the world offered by participants. This we see this as the primary point of departure between a discursive psychology approach and a more traditional Foucauldian discourse study such as, for example, Laine and Vaara (2007).

Using this approach, we illustrate how, as the VP attempts to draw on strategy discourse to account for the organization's success and failures, he encounters "temporary breakdowns" (disruptions to the "flow" of discursive practice) (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2011) which are brought about by contradictions and tensions that are immanent to the discourse of strategy. In doing so, we respond to calls to incorporate a more dispersed and localized conceptualization of power in which it is seen to operate through a complex and shifting web

of power relations (Ezzamel and Willmott, 2010) while also illustrating that although strategy discourse invests senior managers with the authority to speak and enact strategy, at one and the same time it renders this group highly visible and vulnerable. The points of instability and fragility within strategy discourse that we expose in our analysis illustrate what constitutes power "..at its extremities, in its ultimate destinations, [at] those points where it becomes capillary" (Foucault, 1980, p.96) and thus illuminates the potential for transformation as the taken for granted is rendered problematic.

Strategy discourse and power effects

Knights and Morgan (1991) were the first scholars to problematize what Ezzamel and Willmott (2010) refer to as "rationalist" approaches to strategy, in which it is seen as an attribute of an organization which has a more or less linear relationship with specific outcomes, usually performance. Instead, they argue, strategy represents not an objective attribute of organization but is rather a linguistic construction of an organization's activities with specific historical and cultural conditions of possibility. From this perspective, strategy discourse does not simply reflect what an organization does or is, but rather produces specific categories of action and experience that act, recursively, to shape action and experience. Knights and Morgan's (1991) Foucauldian analysis of strategy as discourse was intended to draw attention to how taken-for-granted categories of experience such as for example markets, competition, profit margins and strategists are not pre-given or objective categories but are brought into being by the discourse of strategy and therefore, like any other discursive formation, subject to contestation and potential transformation.

Since the publication of this paper, the idea of strategy as discourse has been taken up by a multitude of scholars, frequently within what Ezzamel and Willmott (2010) refer to as

"interpretivist" approaches. Here the focus is on strategy not as a noun (what an organization is or has) but as a verb; what strategy does. This strategy as practice (S A P) literature has used the idea of strategy as discourse to examine how dominant ideas about strategy come to influence how it is enacted in organizations. Mantere and Vaara (2008) for instance, looked at how different strategy discourses operate to produce certain groups of actors as those with more or less authority to speak or act as strategists, tracing how dominant discourses, which tend to imbue senior managers or organizational elites with most authority in this respect, impact on the material and discursive manifestations of strategic actions. Other studies have examined how specific practices, such as accountancy practices, that are the products of strategy discourse, act to re-constitute the meanings of the roles occupied by particular categories of employees, investing them with more or less legitimacy (Ezzamel and Willmott, 2008) and to produce particular conceptions of what "good" performance entails (Whittle and Mueller, 2010). There has also been work examining how strategy discourse is used to legitimise and naturalise particular actions, activities and artefacts such as airline alliances (Vaara, Kleymann and Seristo, 2004) or strategic plans (Vaara, Sorsa and Palli, 2010). Samra-Fredericks (2005) has examined how actors can use rhetorical skills to position themselves as knowledgeable in terms of strategic planning, enabling them to obtain power and authority.

In addition to these contributions, an important focus for study in this field has been an examination of resistance to strategy discourse, particularly where this is used by senior managers as a resource to promulgate particular ideas about what employees should be like, how they should behave, or what the raison d'etre of the organization should be. Ezzamel and Willmott (2008) for instance, examined how employees in a global retailer engaged in a variety of tactics to subvert the organization's attempts to promote team-working as a key

strand of strategy. McCabe (2009) explored how groups of employees exploited the ambiguity inherent to strategy discourse to produce interpretations and enactments of elements of the organization's strategy which enabled them to maintain their existing practices despite the CEO's call for "radical change". Laine and Vaara (2007) focused on how middle managers and project engineers in an engineering company resisted the strategic imperatives of senior management, which included attempts to redefine their professional identities and remits. More recently Hardy and Thomas (2013) explored how various actors both external and internal to a technological organization, resisted and contested core principles underpinning a recent strategy initiative, illustrating that resistance is demonstrated not only by collectives but also by disparate individuals whose motivations for resistance do not obviously proceed from threatened interests or identities.

These studies have provided significant insights into how strategy discourse can be used not only as a resource to constrain and control employees in organizations, but also how it operates to produce categories of employees and templates for action that provide resources for resistance from a wide range of groups within and external to organizations. Moreover, these studies illustrate that despite senior management's apparent authority to speak and enact strategy, other groups of employees are critical to how it actually plays out in an organization, providing a much better understanding of why some strategies (or elements of strategy) work while others fail to take (Hardy and Thomas, 2013).

Nonetheless, arguing from a Foucauldian perspective, Ezzamel and Willmott (2010) point out that to fully realise the potential of using discourse to analyse strategy, scholars need to be mindful of the fact that senior executives and elites are not only those with positions of power from which to promulgate particular versions of strategy but are themselves "entangled in a discursive net of power relations" (page 97). For instance, while strategy discourse can be

understood to discipline actors, including senior managers, such that it "constitutes [their] subjectivity….as particular categories of persons who secure their sense of reality through engaging in this discourse and practice" (Knights and Morgan, 1991: 263), as McKinlay, Carter, Pezet and Clegg (2010) argue, at the same time it provides "new ways for individuals to fall short of the standards demanded, or imagined" (p 1019). Likewise, while strategy discourse does indeed authorize organizational elites to be that category of actor best suited to developing and enacting strategy, at the same time, corporate governance systems mean that this increases the accountability of this group (Hardy and Thomas, 2013). This is especially the case in contexts where corporate performance is judged through financially driven coercive comparisons which produce "an authoritative and powerful "field of visibility"", in which the competence and attributes of senior managers are seen as the central mechanisms explaining success or failure (Roberts, 2001: 1552).

Hence, while we agree with Carter, Clegg and Kornberger (2008) that strategy need not necessarily entail intentional actions driven by senior management, the fact that it is frequently characterised in this way through dominant strategy discourses means that this group, more than any other, is vulnerable to accusations of incompetence or worse should corporate strategy fail to produce the promise expected of it. This draws our attention to the point Foucault makes in the quote above: discourse is an instrument and effect of power and it is this which imbues it with an inherent instability. From this perspective therefore, resistance is not only an oppositional and intentional reaction against managerial power, but is also a product of this inherent instability which may be played out at the level of subjectivity; a stumbling block that can be a starting point for an alternative understanding of how the world (including organizations) can be understood and experienced.

In this paper, we ask, how do the power effects of strategy discourse produce points of instability within the discourse itself? What is the transformatory potential of these sites? We address these questions using a Foucauldian informed discursive psychology approach to analyse an extract of a research interview conducted between one of the authors and a senior executive in charge of the Irish subsidiary of an American MNC. We illustrate how different power effects of discourse are exposed through the routine and mundane process of accounting for corporate success and failure and, using the idea of temporary breakdowns (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2011), we illustrate points at which these effects undermine and contradict each other. These temporary breakdowns, we argue, pose interactional dilemmas (Billig, 1989; Potter, 1996) for the senior executive that need to be navigated in order to enable his account to flow, a process that involves the re-establishment of the background consensus that is disrupted due to the various contradictions we identify.

Methodology

The data for this paper were drawn from a broader project undertaken in the subsidiary unit of an American MNC, which we refer to by the pseudonym, Computerco. The unit is located in Ireland. The original project was designed to explore how HRM practices diffused from HQ to the subsidiary unit, and to assess the levels of standardization and adaptation manifested. The method of data collection was semi-structured qualitative interviews with a cross section of subsidiary staff which included senior management, middle management and operational personnel. We conducted a total of 17 interviews in Computerco between May 2001 and March 2005. Interviews were conducted with all of the top management team, plus a cross section of middle and front line managers/team leaders and lower ranking employees. Consistent with the traditions of naturalistic inquiry, the sampling method of selecting participants on the basis of their particular knowledge about the phenomena under study, with

the aim of maximising the information that could be obtained, was considered appropriate (see Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

Each interview was conducted by a minimum of two interviewers, tape-recorded and transcribed. Interviews lasted between 45 minutes and two hours with the average interview being in the region of one hour. Almost all interviews were conducted on-site, in the subsidiary unit. The interviews were based on a semi-structured interview schedule, which covered a variety of issues related to the adoption of HR practices. The interview upon which this paper is based took place in the VP's office. The tone was relatively informal and on the surface the interviewee seemed relaxed and comfortable. The office was relatively bland and uncluttered with simple furnishings and the VP was dressed relatively informally in line with the business casual dress code of the organization. The interviewee and interviewers remained seated at a round meeting table throughout the interview.

For the purposes of this study, we focus on just one interview, with the VP of operations. For the sake of anonymity, we withhold biographical details, noting only that the VP is male. We selected this particular interview for analysis because it allows for a detailed examination of how accountability processes impact on how the VP constructs the strategy and strategic actions that are the focus of the interview at one point. More importantly, in the stretches of talk analysed here, strategy was oriented to by this participant as a relevant category rather than being imposed on the data retrospectively. This is a particular strength of discursive psychology approaches because, as Llewellyn and Spence (2009: 1436) point out, "The academic only has a warrant for speaking of some domain of practice [like strategy] if it can be shown to be demonstrably and accountably relevant for the things that organizational actors do".

Analytic technique

The interview extracts detailed below were analysed using a discursive psychology approach which borrows heavily from Thornborrow's (2002) work on institutional talk – defined as talk which has pre-inscribed and conventional participant roles (in this case, interviewer and interviewee); talk which demonstrates structural asymmetries in, for instance, how turns are taken and distributed; talk in which there are asymmetrical speaker rights and obligations; and talk in which the discursive resources available to participants are strengthened or weakened by the institutional position occupied by participants. The talk analysed in this study possesses all these features and allows a very detailed examination of what speakers do at the local level which thus represents one place where power exists in a complex and shifting web of social relations and actions.

Discursive psychologists see individuals as competent members of discursive communities who use "talk" as a primary social practice as part of their everyday, mundane activities (Antaki, 1994; Hepburn and Wiggins, 2007). The core concern of discursive psychology, is an understanding of how experiences and events are constructed in everyday interactions, such that individuals are able to work up an account of, say, "strategy" or "strategizing" (Antaki, 1994; Antaki and Widdicombe, 1998; Potter, 1996; Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Wetherell and Potter, 1992) in ways that make sense and are coherent within a given interaction. An additional feature of institutional talk which is significant for the purposes of this study is that it is goal oriented as opposed to orientated to establishing interpersonal consensus. In the case of research interviews, this means that actors are generally concerned with not only building a coherent and plausible account, but also with constructing particular versions of experiences, objects or selves that are aimed at producing a change of state in the

listener, in order to manage impressions or to promote or defend their interests (Alvesson, 2003; Kaufmann, 1992; Symon, 2005).

With respect to the latter of these goals, we suggest that the VP's self presentation in this interview is an example of what Fairclough (1993) terms "promotional discursive practice" which functions to advance a self-advantaging exchange (Wernick, 2001). Such practice encourages individuals to self-present in ways that are consistent with the "competitive imaging needs of [the] market" (ibid: 193), and are a consequence of cultural processes though which commodification and marketisation have colonised more and more aspects of everyday life (Featherstone, 1991). These processes have had profound influences on the identities of contemporary individuals who are increasingly, and in a variety of settings, exhorted to "sell themselves" in order to promote a particular identity likely to be attractive to and therefore "bought by" agents in the specific situation encountered (Wernick, 1991). Because the research team represent an external audience that will report the findings of the research in academic and other forms of written article, the VP was concerned to present very particular versions of both himself and the "reality" of Computerco's strategy as we will show.

In addition to understanding the goals that individuals may be pursuing in their talk, it is also necessary to identify how talk may be powerful. One way in which power can be detected in talk is by examining whose representations in a particular interaction get to be the dominant categories (Thornborrow, 2002). As we will illustrate shortly, the VP is able fairly unproblematically to assume control of this process but we also illustrate points at which he encounters interactional "trouble" (Potter, 1996) as his representations and categories pose problems for the flow of the interaction. Such troubles in an interaction are indicative of

ripples in the "common sense that organizes accountability and serves as a back-cloth" (Wetherell, 1998: 401) for the locally managed versions of reality that the participant is constructing. Such troubles are generated not only by what the other party to the interaction says or does, but by an awareness on the part of the speaker that his or her constructions could be contested or challenged. We view such interactional "troubles" as examples of "temporary breakdowns" (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2011) which involve a shift from "absorbed coping" in which actors are "immersed in practice without being aware of their involvement in it....spontaneously respond[ing] to the developing situation at hand" to "thematic deliberation" whereby actors start paying attention to what they are doing in order to enable them to continue. These temporary breakdowns enable us to see the significance of taken-for-granted distinctions that are not ordinarily visible to actors as they are engaged in absorbed coping, and alert us to how the research interview is a "productive network within which people are both the agents of power and affected by it" (Thornborrow, 2002: 137).

We see these temporary breakdowns and the efforts to repair them as products of how the institutional status of the researcher grants him or her the "power of representation", which inheres in the practice of disseminating research findings through written publications (Kauffman, 1992). In short, the participant is aware that how he represents Computerco will be re-presented by the researcher in some or other written form and it this, we suggest that explains the "promotional discursive practice" that is a core feature of the stretches of the VP's talk we analyse.

The accounts that we produce with this approach are neither coded, nor their content categorised. Rather, the analysis is oriented to understanding the fine grain of the interaction as it evolves between the interviewer and the research participant. While we have presented

the extracts in short lines as is typical in conversation and discursive psychology analyses, we do not use the Jefferson transcription convention. This is because the original interview audio transcriptions used traditional verbatim transcription and we no longer have access to the original audio-taped material. Nonetheless, despite this, we do not believe this has major implications for our analytical claims or concerns (see, for instance, Pollner, 1987; Smith, 1978; Whittle and Mueller, 2011; 2012).

Before we present our analysis, we provide some background information about Computerco, which we obtained from the local press in Ireland and from business journals. It should be noted that we are not making claims about the factual status of this information, rather that this illustrates some of the dominant representations of Computerco that were circulating at the time of the study. We see this as an important contextual backdrop to the interaction because it influenced the questions, responses and claims constructed in the interaction presented here.

Background information about Computerco

Computerco is generally considered to operate at the lower end of the information and communications technology (ICT) industry. It has not, for example, had a significant R&D presence in the past, and the focus is not on cutting edge technology. Computerco achieved phenomenal successes in its early years (In its first year of trading it grossed over US$70 million. Within five years it had 11 international operations and was widely recognised as one of the rising stars of the sector, and listed among the Fortune 500). This attracted a great deal of media and academic attention and Computerco's strategy was discussed at length in various academic studies and media reports. In general, both academic and media accounts agreed that the strategy utilised by Computerco to achieve its success was related to its

effectiveness in responding to the primary competitive factor of time, enabling the corporation to avoid the problems associated with ever-decreasing product life cycles and the costs of holding high levels of inventory in a context of rapidly increasing prices of electronic components. Its strategy was therefore built on a simple but effective "business model"[1]. Historically, historically success of subsidiaries was judged solely on this basis of financial performance. Given that the corporation saw the market for its products as global, it historically monitored the performance of subsidiary units through internal benchmarking practices that enabled the quantification of unit performance in areas such as productivity, labour cost, inventory etc. While, as the corporation matured and became subject of greater media scrutiny the importance of the image and reputation of the company came more to the fore (see **** paper by authors, 2011 to be added after review).

Computerco's first international operation was opened in Ireland within two years of the corporation's founding, while manufacturing began in the Irish plant three years later. The senior management team interviewed for this study had been in position for less than two years during which period, the Irish subsidiary had started, for the first time, to make a profit. The previous management team had been removed as a consequence of the subsidiary's poor financial performance and HQ had considered shutting the unit down completely. The Irish subsidiary was brought further into the spotlight internally owing to the greater focus on reputation identified above as the subsidiary enjoyed a poor reputation as an employer in the local labour market. Thus the Irish subsidiary had somewhat of an internal legitimacy crisis owing to relatively poor financial performance combined with a poor reputation with an employer which did not align with the emerging corporate focus. However around the time

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[1] There is much documented about of the nature of Computerco's business model and the extent to which this contributed to the corporation's success. However to preserve the anonymity of the company, these cannot be cited directly.

the data were collected this began to shift as the incumbent management team were perceived to be more credible by corporate while at the same time unit performance began to improve (again see authors, 2011).

Analysis

The following extracts represent two stretches of talk totalling around 120 seconds, containing 458 words out of a total of 8525. Despite the fact that the interviewer is posing the questions, which in interactional terms obligates the responder to reply (Antaki, 1994), the turn taking structure of the interview as a whole is asymmetrical with the interviewer providing remarks, follow up questions or receipt tokens which average less than 20 words per turn, after very lengthy passages of talk from the VP (the majority of his turns are approximately 150 words long, the longest being 450 words – around 2 minutes of uninterrupted talk). This suggests that the interviewee is occupying the more powerful institutional role in the interaction. As a comparator, a similar length of interview held with a middle manager illustrated far more symmetry in turn taking, with the average turn by the interviewee being approximately 75 words long, with the longest turn 163 words in length, approximately 50 seconds of uninterrupted talk. We illustrate further asymmetries in the interaction, in terms of speaker rights and obligations, shortly. First, however, we illustrate one example of interactional trouble which is generated by the VP's aim of constructing Computerco's success as a consequence of its strategy.

Extract 1

This first stretch of talk occurs within the first few minutes of the interview and is centred on a discussion of Computerco's position as a top 50 company in the Fortune 500 directory. The

VP is accounting for this position to the researcher who has asked him to explain what has happened in the Irish subsidiary in the 18 months since he was appointed. Although not made explicit, one of the core background features of this interaction is the fact that the Irish subsidiary had shown a drastic improvement in financial performance, a "fact" widely reported in both the business and local press. At this point, however, the VP is explaining Computerco's general success, which just prior to the extract we analyse here, he has been attributing to the "power of Computerco's business model", a representation that is aligned with what was being said in journal and industry reports at that time. In the following extract, he is explaining how the business model underpins the enactment of Computerco's strategy.

1. Yeah and Computerco's strategy in a nutshell is a) be direct

2. and b) the belief that everything eventually becomes a commodity.

3. That we not only create the commodity but we dominate that market.

4. And we bring economies of scale to everything.

    (13 lines omitted – discussion of the technical details of Computerco's products)

5. So they are two bits of our strategy and all we have to do then

6. in between is execute and tactically adjust based on market conditions.

7. So price up, price down, whatever. In that respect it is a very clear-cut organization.

8. On the other hand because of that it can be a bit rudimentary

9. and a bit less stimulating than you would like at times

10. because in some ways we don't have many problems,

11. it is only a question of execution.

12. So you are not asked as senior management to strategize about the future

In the first two lines of this extract, Computerco's strategy is nominalised in that it is presented as an agentless activity – who in Computerco has decided to "be direct" and to "commodify everything?" In lines 3 to 4, however, as the VP continues to elaborate on the strategy, he shifts to the inclusive pronoun "we". The use of this pronoun functions to signify identification, but also suggests collective responsibility for the actions detailed in lines 3 and 4. Moreover, the direct nature of the assertions in lines 3 and 4 "we not only create the commodity but we dominate the market and …bring economies of scale to everything", expresses a commitment to the truth and authority of these statements, presenting these as facts about actors at Computerco (Potter, 1996). This facticity is achieved with two conventional rhetorical formats: the three part list (we create the commodity, we dominate the market and we bring economies of scale to everything); and the extreme case formulation (everything). Three part lists often serve to make implicit claims about the generality of the assertions being made (Jefferson, 1991), while the extreme case formulation (Pomerantz, 1986) acts as a legitimizing device by, in this instance, suggesting that bringing economies of scale to things is not something that occasionally or accidentally happens, but is rather a normal and ubiquitous activity. These devices, therefore, do important work in terms of constructing the activities outlined as real and objective. The VP's commitment to the claims made in lines 3 and 4, illustrated by the pronoun "we", is additionally suggestive of confidence that such claims will be accepted or uncontested by the other party to the interaction. While in this case, this could be a function of the relationship between the researcher and the participant, as we will illustrate later, this confidence is not always apparent even though the interviewer does not contest or challenge what is being said. This relatively "untroubled" (Wetherell, 1998) account therefore, indicates that these claims have authority due to their normative associations (Speer and Potter, 2000), that is due to their more general acceptance (in this specific context) as "facts" about successful companies.

In lines 5 to 7, we see further constructions of strategy as an object that has an existence independent of agents in the phrase "So they are two bits of our strategy, and all we have to then, in between…". Strategy is thus presented as something that that has a pre-given existence, and agency happens "in between" "two bits" of it in the form of execution. Strategy, then, is constructed as separate and distinct from execution, a distinction that is dominant in mainstream accounts of strategy (e.g. Lee and Miller, 1999). Furthermore, by using the phrase "all we have to do", the activities of execution and tactical adjustment are constructed as straightforward and simple endeavours. Also objectified in line 6 are market conditions, which are presented as factors external to the company. Thus by constructing Computerco's strategy and market conditions as pre-given objects, they are presented as independent variables that then cause the actions of "execution" and "tactical adjustment", which again, are illustrated with the use of a three part-list "price up, price down, whatever" (line 7).

In the statements, "In that respect it is a very clear-cut organization" and "On the other hand because of that it can be a bit rudimentary and a bit less stimulating" (lines 8-9), this use of the third person means that the attributes "very clear-cut" and "a bit rudimentary and a bit less stimulating" are constructed as further objective and real features of Computerco, and not as products of the perceptions or dispositions of agents within the organization. The modalizing terms "very" and "a bit" operate to also shift the VP's commitment to his claims from strong (very) to weaker (a bit). The hedging around the attributes "rudimentary" and "less stimulating" indicate that these are not preferred attributes (Edwards, 2007), confirmed by the qualifier "than you would like at times" (line 9). This dispreference, we suggest is a consequence of the (unstated) belief that senior managers generally enjoy performing

complex and challenging activities. This is supported by the claim in line 10 that "in some ways we don't have many problems". In line 11, the VP returns to his opening claim, that execution is the activity that is required from senior managers like himself, and that he is not asked to "strategize" about the future. This further reinforces the construction of strategy as an objective feature of Computerco and one that exists independently of execution activities.

What is achieved in this stretch of talk and why? First of all, Computerco's strategy is presented as both an agentless set of actions, "being direct" and "commodifying everything" *and* as an agentic, though collective set of actions, performed throughout the company, "creating commodities; dominating markets and applying economies of scale to everything". In both presentations, the actions comprising the strategy are constructed as determinate facts, which can therefore be understood to produce uniform effects – success for Compterco. Should its strategy be constructed as being a set of indeterminate actions carried out by specific agents, it would be much more difficult to attribute Computerco's success to its strategy, as it could be argued that any success achieved is contingent, partial or serendipitous. The VP's success in building the facticity of Computerco's strategy lies partly in the rhetorical devices that he uses, but also partly in the normative appeal (at least in this specific context) of the specific actions and objects presented (that markets exist and can be dominated by particular organizations, for instance). These normative associations, in and of themselves, provide adequate warrants for the claims that the VP makes, illustrated by the fact that at this point, the interaction proceeds in a smooth, untroubled manner (see Samra-Fredericks, 2005).

This success is also a product of the asymmetry in the interaction, with the VP able to unproblematically invoke standard representations of strategy and strategizing which are not

contested by the interviewer by, for example, the use of probing questions or by asking the VP about evidence from interviews with lower level actors (prior to this particular interview) which shed doubt on the effectiveness of the business model e.g. *"It's never right because Computerco build to order and you don't have a consistent linear demand. You have spikes and troughs and you're never right. A lot of Computerco's practices and habits are driven by its model. (In that model) because you have 13 weeks in a quarter and week one is going to be topping up, slow, slow, then down, down, down. And then you come to the last three weeks and it goes mad. So it's like crisis management."* **(Middle manager)**

In part, this asymmetry is a product of the institutional setting – the research interview itself - which, due to notions regarding the importance of maintaining neutrality and objectivity, often involves researchers withholding affiliative responses (e.g. expressions of agreement, surprise or sympathy) that typify more informal interactions (Drew and Heritage, 1992). However, as pointed out above, the VP's success at gaining access to a significant quantity of the discursive space available within the interview also contributes to his success at rendering his own representations of Computerco as the dominant categories, simply by virtue of how that space allows him to mobilise a rich array of discursive resources that are strengthened by his organizational position as VP of operations (Samra-Fredericks, 2005). We would point out however, that it cannot be assumed that his powerful position in Computerco can account for the power markers we have illustrated in this extract. As Thornborrow (2002) points out, positional power in an interaction cannot be read off any given account but must be seen as an occasioned and collaboratively produced outcome within an interaction. As we will discuss later, it is these contingent elements of positional power that provide potential opportunities for the transformation of strategy discourse.

Nonetheless, having successfully built this facticity, the VP simultaneously constructs the execution activities that he and the rest of the senior management team in Ireland do undertake as mundane. Here, the VP runs into some interactional trouble in the sense that he orients to this as an accountable matter (Potter, 1996). This is dealt with by indexing these activities as dispreferred, a device that works as a counter-dispositional (Edwards, 2007) in that the researcher is being helped to read the VP as a person who enjoys more stimulating activities and not as someone who is, perhaps, happy to simply react to market conditions by moving prices up and down. Note that this accountability is not a product of any questioning or response from the interviewer. Rather, the VP in using the counter-dispositional device, shows sensitivity to the possibility that he *could* be read as someone who does not mind performing mundane tasks. This sensitivity, illustrates a moment of temporary breakdown (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2011) – a shift in awareness which has the potential to disrupt the unstated background consensus that senior managers are those who routinely deal with (and enjoy the challenge of dealing with) complexity, an attribute that is, we suggest, part of the common-sense repertoire regarding the role of company executives in the strategy process. Thus while successfully using strategy discourse to account for the organization's success, the account at the same time undermines the VP's attempt to present as a prototypical senior manager involved in strategy. This reflects a contradiction between two of the dominant power effects of strategy discourse well documented in the extant literature: a means of a rationalizing management's success and failures and the constitution of managers as particular categories of person who secure their sense of reality through engaging in strategy discourse (Knights and Morgan, 1991). While successfully attributing Computerco's success to the objectivity of the business model, the VP undermines senior manager agency as an essential ingredient in this process. It is perhaps this eclipse of senior manager agency that provides the discursive resources used by the middle manager in the extract above to criticise

the business model. In this extract, we get the sense that Computerco does not use the business model agentically to obtain success but is a passive victim of its idiosyncracies.

Extract 2

We now move to a second stretch of talk a few minutes later in the conversation. At this stage, the discussion is centred on the "score card" which is the means through which the subsidiary unit is judged by HQ, as it provides a lot of metrics on the various aspects of financial and operational performance specified in the "business model". The VP has been explaining how the scorecard can alert HQ that a subsidiary has a specific performance problem, such as one related to quality.

1. **Interviewer:** In a way that is a reflection on the work that's

2. already gone into the company in setting those measures up?

3. **VP:** Yeah but the local execution up till a year ago would have been a lot poorer.

4: **Interviewer:** That is what I meant.

5. **VP:** Let me jump to the central thing here.

6. The notion that some academics would have

7. and perhaps some of the public at large is that MNCs

8. – and I am talking about the three that I have worked with

9. and many that I have interfaced with - have a model.

10. First of all it is difficult to find a model. So Computerco is unique in that area.

11. In Computerco's case it has a model. [MNC A] has a model,

12. [MNC B] have a model. To take something and blueprint it the whole way,

13. stamp, stamp, stamp, without due recognition of local management

14. and to think it can be equally implemented in each area is a fallacy.

15. If you came here a year ago and if you interviewed [the CEO] two years ago

16. he would have said that we have serious execution problems in [Ireland]

17. We have serious competitiveness problems in [Ireland].

18. We basically have a benchmark problem in that [Ireland] is behind.

19. Certainly when I came in here and [Senior manager name omitted],

20. now we looked into it. An awful lot of it was just, sloppy implementation

21. of what they thought [HQ] wanted, but there wasn't a belief behind some of the

22. stuff. "Ok, we've got to do this, we've got to do that".

23. It was like, fill in the templates, do the report,

24. but there wasn't any gut-wrenching emotional attachment to it.

The opening question from the interviewer is an evaluative formulation (Antaki, 1994) of the preceding conversation. He appears to be suggesting that the metrics captured by the scorecard can be used to detect problems due to some property or attribute of the measures themselves (lines 1 to 2). Formulations usually work as the first part of an adjacency pair (Antaki, 1994), in that they will generally invoke a confirmatory or disconfirmatory response from the receiver. In this instance, we see a disconfirmation from the VP, when he prefaces the opening of his turn with "Yeah, but..". He then moves on to qualify the source of his disagreement by suggesting that the local execution at the subsidiary up until a year ago (i.e. 6 months after his appointment) was a lot poorer. Here we see that the scorecard has now become a focus of contention in the interaction, which can be detected in the Interviewer's repair in line 4, "That is what I meant". The VP appears to be orienting to the scorecard as contentious due to the researcher's proposition that performance problems are detectable as a consequence of the quality of the measurements revealed by the scorecard, and due to the fact that the scorecard is one of the tools used by HQ to assess the performance of subsidiary

units. Taken together, these two issues give rise to the possibility that the interviewer may infer that any improvements made as a consequence of the scorecard, are attributable to HQ's intervention. The rest of the extract is, we suggest, oriented to the possibility of this inference.

The VP begins his turn at line 4, with the phrase "Let me deal with the central thing here". This is an authoritative statement in which he is claiming to know what is the most important issue raised by the discussion of scorecards. This claim to knowledge is legitimised by juxtaposing his opening turn with references to "academics" and the "public at large" (lines 5-6) who the interviewer is being instructed to read as less knowledgeable and authoritative. This instruction can be inferred from the way the VP contrasts the "*notions*" that academics and the public at large have about MNCs "having a model", with his own *experience* of having "worked" and "interfaced" with three MNCs (lines 6-8). This part of the extract reveals asymmetries in the speakers' rights and obligations, with the VP putting much work into asserting his rights to speak the truth about Computerco, a right acknowledged by the interviewer's repair which is obligated by the interviewee's disconfirmation of the former's original formulation.

The VP then moves on to qualify his claim to knowledge by stating that "it is difficult to find a model" and that "Computerco is unique" in having done so (line 9). By using the verb "find" to characterise Computerco's acquisition of its business model, there is, again, a suggestion that such models exist as pre-given entities but, additionally, that these need to be discovered by organizations. Further, in suggesting that Computerco is unique in finding a model, he implies that the organization has special qualities that facilitated this outcome. These constructions instruct the interviewer to read Computerco's success as not attributable

to some formulaic process that could be achieved by any organization, but as a consequence of its unique abilities. This is an interesting contrast with the representation of Computerco in extract 1, where it is described as "clear cut" and "a bit rudimentary". Then, by grouping Computerco with two other very well known and "successful" MNCs that the VP has previously worked for (lines 10-11), he further establishes his authority as one who is able to speak knowledgeably about business models. Having established that Computerco's success is not attributable to the application of a widely available formula, we now see a shift in how the execution of the model is constructed in comparison to the first extract.

As discussed above, in the first extract, the interactional goal was to account for Computerco's overall, corporate success. To achieve this goal, the strategy was constructed as both an agentless and collective, though objective feature of Computerco. As we saw, in building the facticity of Computerco's strategy, the execution of it was constructed as mundane and straightforward. In this part of the extract, in contrast, the VP's goal is to persuade the interviewer that the success of the Irish subsidiary is attributable to the agency of himself and the rest of the senior management team, a goal, we would suggest which at least partly relates to the corporate governance context, whereby the taken-for-granted idea that subsidiary performance is contingent on the competence of senior management has, as outlined above, already resulted in the "removal" of the previous senior management team some 18 months earlier; a fact that the VP orients to in his account. Thus he needs to find a way to invest execution of the business model with some greater capacity for agentic action.

Here we see a sensitivity to or awareness of the contradiction he has created in his characterization of Computerco in extract 1 compared with extract 2. This is revealed by his attempts to navigate this contradiction, providing a further example of a temporary

breakdown that explains the work the VP is putting into working up his authority to speak the truth about Computerco's strategy. He has already paved the interactional way for this by suggesting that the model can be a difficult object for companies to "find". In lines 11 to 13 we see this issue capitalised on as the VP builds his arguments about execution of the model. First, he suggests that the business model cannot be simply imported into subsidiary units unproblematically, i.e. "blueprinted" , without "due recognition of local management". The idea that the model can be "equally implemented" is a "fallacy". This claim is emphasised by another three-part utterance, "stamp, stamp, stamp." To qualify and legitimise this claim, he uses an objectifying device to render it more credible: "If you came here a year ago and if you interviewed the CEO two years ago, he would have said.." (lines 14-17). By reporting what [he claims] the CEO would have said, therefore, the importance of local management is rendered factual and not subjective (Wooffitt, 1992). Note that he again uses a three-part list to construct the problems at the subsidiary as factual (execution, competitiveness and benchmark problems), which is further reinforced by his assertion that the "problems" were "looked into" (line 19). This instructs the hearer that these problems were not perceptions but were realities that required examination. These problems were mainly due to "sloppy implementation of what they [previous subsidiary management] thought HQ wanted" (lines 19-20). The capacity for agency in executing the business model is, therefore, built by positioning the interpretation of instructions/directives from HQ as pivotal, and execution is thus constructed as more complex than simple "tactical adjustment" (Extract 1). To successfully implement HQ directives, requires more than mundane and mechanical completion of "templates" and "reports". There needs to be "belief behind some of the stuff" and "gut wrenching emotional attachment". Again, note the contrast with the constructions in extract 1, where the execution of the model was represented as "less stimulating than you would like". Also noteworthy are the discursive resources that are used to construct the

importance of senior manager agency to the execution of strategies which are vague and non-specific – "belief behind some of the stuff" and "gut wrenching emotional attachment". These are juxtaposed with the reported behaviour of the previous senior management team as mechanical and somewhat mindless. Here the VP is appealing to ideas in which psychological and emotional engagement with an organization's activities are assumed to be associated with superior performance, a product of dominant managerial theories currently in circulation (Illouz, 1997).

Whereas, in extract 1, execution of the business model was presented as a set of mundane activities that essentially connect "two bits" of Computerco's strategy, in this extract an element of complexity is introduced into these activities to enable the VP to purchase some agentic room for manoeuvre: the need to interpret HQ directives and requirements. Not only is this interpretive element constructed as something requiring particular competence on the part of local management, but also as requiring emotional engagement, attributes that are not easily reconcilable with the characterisation of execution as "rudimentary" and a "bit less stimulating". As in extract 1, the interviewer does not challenge the VP or contest the idea that the improvement at the subsidiary was indeed attributable to the VP and his team. Nonetheless, the VP shows sensitivity to the idea that the success could be attributed to mindlessly following the rules of the business model, and passively waiting for HQ approval or directives, an attribution that he carefully avoids in his construction of this part of the account.

The VP put a lot of work into building the warrants for his claim about the reasons for the financial improvement of the subsidiary. First, he focused on building his own credibility as someone who could speak authoritatively about business models, showing a concern with

building his entitlement of the category, strategy executor (Potter, 1996), even though this was not being contested nor undermined by the interviewer. Second, he used several rhetorical devices to construct the problems at the subsidiary unit as "facts" that occurred independently of his actions. One reason for the extent of the warranting work going on here is that, unlike his claims about Computerco in Extract 1, in which he was focusing on reasons for its general "success", here he is attempting a more complex attributional task. He needs to maintain the overall idea that Computerco is a highly successful company while, simultaneously, building the idea that this success is, in fact, sometimes contingent on senior subsidiary management. It is this complexity, we would suggest, that drives the more elaborate warranting process that we see illustrated in this extract.

More importantly, this warranting work is a consequence of the tension between constructing strategy as an attribute of the organization (extract 1) versus a process (extract 2). As Ezzamel and Willmott (2010: 85) argue, "to appreciate each representation of 'strategy' [as an attribute or as a process], whether by executives, other employees, gurus, consultants, or academics like ourselves, [we need to see them] not as an attempt to capture what strategy 'is', but as what strategy-as-discourse does." As our analysis shows, strategy as an attribute can work very effectively to account for overall corporate success but can be less successful when actors want to self-present as the architects of that success. Roberts (2001) argues that such self-presentations represent the disciplinary effects of "individualized accountability processes" which are the product of Anglo-American systems of corporate control which place emphasis on using accounting information (departmental budgets, cost and profit centres, and so forth) to judge corporate performance. Such systems provide a powerful "field of visibility" which acts as "…a constant reminder that the security of self depends upon being able to continually meet the standards of utility that accounting advertises. Whilst the

occasional sacking or take-over reinforces this for everyone, most of these disciplinary effects are however realized, in anticipation, within the self." (Roberts, 2001: 1553). We suggest, therefore, that this tension is a product of the VP attempting to persuade an external audience (the interviewer) who has "power of representation" (Kauffman, 1992) that the financial success of the subsidiary was due to how the senior management team executed Computerco's strategy, a goal that is related to the corporate context and to the specific local context of the interview which was responsible for generating the contradiction we have illustrated.

Discussion and conclusions

In this paper, we addressed two questions: how do the power effects of strategy discourse produce points of instability within the discourse itself? What is the transformatory potential of these sites? Our analysis not only illustrates how, in routine and mundane interactions (such as research interviews) in which participants are being asked to account for organizational success and failure, a number of power effects of strategy discourse are discernible (see, for example Samra-Fredericks, 2005), but also illustrates how these power effects can undermine and contradict each other as the interaction evolves. For example, we illustrated how strategy discourse was successfully mobilised to provide a convincing and coherent rationalization of Computerco's success but undermined the VP's identity as a strategist because of how it was used to construct strategizing as mundane and straightforward. While this particular problem may well be a consequence of the particular strategy discourse that was dominant in the organization, which bears resemblance to types of strategy discourse identified in extant literature (e.g. "technologization" (Mantere and Vaara, 2008) or "mechanistic" (Suominen and Mantere, 2010)), we would suggest that the problem is also a consequence of attempting, in routine interactions, to render the idea that strategy can guide operations independently of its interpretation (Ezzamel and Willmott, 2010)

coherent and convincing. The fact that the VP oriented to the incompatibility of these ideas (strategy as an attribute versus strategy as a process) as problematic in the absence of any input from the interviewer is indicative that this tension is highly dilemmatic (Billig, 1989), illustrating both a point of instability in strategy discourse and a discursive space that can be exploited by resistant voices, as we briefly outlined.

We further illustrated how the tension between strategy as an attribute and strategy as a process became even more problematic when the VP tried to convince the interviewer that the recent financial improvement at the Irish subsidiary was due to the strategy execution performed by him and his team, having established a few minutes earlier that strategy execution was straightforward because the business model "caused" Computerco's success. Here we argued that this attributional imperative was driven not simply by the demands of the interaction but also by the corporate governance context of Computerco whereby corporate success, defined in terms of financial performance, could place senior management in a precarious position as illustrated by the recent removal of the previous senior management team by corporate HQ. This "individualized accountability" (Roberts, 2001) may not only result in a "narcissistic preoccupation with how the self and its activities will be seen and judged" but may generate a further discursive space that can be exploited by resistant voices. We have argued, for instance, that the success of the VP's account was partly attributable to the institutional context – the research interview – and how the various interactional asymmetries that we illustrated enabled the VP's representations to become the dominant and accepted categories in the interaction. It would therefore be interesting to observe how such elites account for corporate *failure* in less auspicious (Wooffitt, 1992) institutional contexts such as, for instance, formal meetings with shareholders or, perhaps, union representatives. In such settings, it may be much harder for elites, irrespective of their

rhetorical skills, to persuade their audiences that their representations of events are authentic or valid (Whittle and Mueller, 2010). Indeed the considerable work that the VP put into working up an account of his strategic agency and the obfuscating discursive resources which went into these efforts and that passed unremarked in the interaction we analysed here, may be precisely those elements of accountability that could be exploited by more hostile audiences who want to question senior management actions. We agree with Carter et al (2008) that a critical approach to strategy would involve a more inclusive conceptualisation of what it is and how it could be accomplished. What we have illustrated here, however, is that it is in fact the exclusivity of corporate elites as strategists (as propagated in dominant strategy discourses) that, paradoxically, opens up the discursive space for resistant voices as these elites attempt to navigate the contradictions that the discourse generates as they invoke it to account for success and failure in ways that do not compromise their integrity as strategists.

Our analysis responds to recent calls for research into strategy discourse to incorporate more theoretically robust accounts of the relationship between discourse and power which can enable more critical accounts of strategy to be developed (Carter et al, 2008). Our Foucauldian inspired discursive psychology approach has shown how power operates at the local and mundane level to both produce and reproduce specific categories of identity and experience while at the same time operating to undermine and expose these categories as unstable and contingent. The strength of using this approach is that we have avoided investing discourse with "an autonomy of its own" in which the precise mechanisms producing its power effects are left untheorised (Al Amoudi and Willmott, 2011). Rather, we have illustrated that as actors respond to the specific demands of particular interactions, power effects emerge as a consequence of actors' attempts to achieve particular interactional

goals occasioned by both the nature of the interaction in a broad sense (e.g. a research interview versus a casual conversation) and a highly local sense (how the interaction evolves on a turn by turn basis). While our findings resonate with those of Samra-Fredericks (2005) we have considerably extended her insights by illustrating how points of instability inhere within strategy discourse itself which act to bring about temporary breakdowns in the flow of discursive practice. These breakdowns enable momentary glimpses into the precariousness and contingency of taken-for-granted categories and identities, opening discursive spaces from which and into which resistant voices can make incursions.

A further contribution of our analysis is to illustrate that the relationship between power and discourse cannot be understood simply as deriving from pre-existing relations of power such as those between corporate elites and researchers from academic institutions, but also cannot be understood independently of these relations (Thornborrow, 2002). The success of the VP's claims to authority derived partly from his positional power, but was also a consequence of the collaborative discursive work performed by both actors in the interview. While the researcher in no sense resisted the relation of power subsisting between himself and the VP, this relation was, nevertheless, disrupted at moments in which the VP showed sensitivity to some of the contradictions in his account, which unsettled the background common-sense consensus regarding, for instance, prototypical dispositions of senior managers involved in strategy execution, or the idea of strategy as an organizational attribute. We suggest that these sensitivities were at least partly surfaced by the researcher's facility to exercise a "power of representation" (Kauffman, 1992), i.e. the VP's awareness that the contents of the interaction were likely to be disseminated in documents available for public scrutiny. These contradictions had to be smoothed over (Heaphy, 2013) so that the interaction could flow, and the VP needed to put much discursive work into re-establishing his authority

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as one able to knowledgeably talk about Computerco's strategy. Thus, like Samra-Fredericks (2005) we have illustrated how power can be understood as locally produced within interactions, but we have also illustrated how power can be undermined in interactions, even in the absence of intentional oppositional practices.

We also believe our analysis raises a number of methodological issues which have major implications for studies of strategy that have critical and political aspirations. We argued that the VP whose interview was the focus of the analysis was able to commandeer substantial discursive space as a consequence of both his corporate power position (and how that was collaboratively reproduced in the interview itself) and because of the discursive conventions that typify research interviews, specifically, maintaining neutrality and objectivity by withholding expressions of disagreement, surprise or disapproval. One suggestion we would make therefore, is that researchers do not withhold such expressions but rather use their corpus of data to contest, where appropriate, the various representations of reality that senior managers may attempt to construct, especially given that such actors will be aware of the researcher's capacity to exercise their power of representation (Kauffman, 2011). For example, in the corpus of data we obtained in this research, there are many resistant voices to be heard, voices which not only questioned the rationality of the business model as a viable strategy for Computerco, but which constructed accounts of unpleasant and disabling experiences, such as working under extreme pressure and in an ever-intensifying set of financial pressures. With hindsight, we could have used this data to provide feedback to Computerco's senior managers. Of course, the danger with such an approach is that such feedback can easily be dismissed as lacking authenticity or relevance, but given that recent research indicates a thirst from lower level organizational actors to be involved in strategy

and strategizing (Mantere and Vaara, 2008; Hardy and Thomas, 2013) it may be becoming increasingly unwise for managers to dismiss such feedback.

A further suggestion concerns the process of collecting data to study discursive categories such as strategy which, we suggest, needs to incorporate more reflexivity over the influence of the researcher and the research method on the production of data (see Alvesson, 2003 and Kauffman, 1992 for discussions of this issue as it pertains to qualitative interviews). For instance, participants' routine use of any category (Al Amoudi and Willmott, 2011) like "strategy" may reflect the research questions and stated aims of the research (Potter and Hepburn, 2005), more than their own predilection to use the category spontaneously. One way of dealing with this is to follow the recommendation of ethnomethodologists and collect data from naturalistic settings, noting when and how participants orient to strategy as a meaningful category of experience. This is especially important given that critical scholars are calling for more reflexivity over what counts as strategy and the extent to which researchers' tendencies to reserve the category for describing the activities of elites is reproducing the structural inequalities that, it is argued, are reproduced through strategy discourse (McCabe, 2009; Thomas, 1998).

A further methodological consideration is the role of para-linguistic elements in the production of an account and what this may reveal about power processes. Tone of voice, voice quality, gestures and other elements of speaker display are gaining increasing analytical importance in fine grained discursive studies because of what they reveal, empirically, about participants' performance of particular subjectivities or representation of particular events (Edwards, 2007). Power for instance, is not simply about the colonization of discursive space but is displayed in forms of eye contact, in how individuals stand or sit, in the gestures they

make as well as in the physical arrangements and features of the room or location in which the talk occurs. Future research would therefore be much enhanced by incorporating both audio and visual analyses of participants' talk-in-interaction.

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