How Strategy Comes to Matter:

Strategizing as the Communicative Materialization of Matters of Concern

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Abstract

This article contributes to the discursive and interactional study of strategizing by drawing attention to the communicative practices through which strategy progressively materializes itself. Drawing on the interactions between the partners and members of a community-based organization participating in a strategic planning exercise, our study reveals that communication plays a key role in the initial formulation of strategy, i.e. in deciding which issues matter most for the organization. We identify four communicative practices through which concerns gradually become strategic: *presentifying, substantiating, attributing* and *crystallizing* matters of concern. The article contributes to the strategy-as-practice tradition by proposing that communication materializes strategic concerns, and that strategizing takes place through that materializing process.

Keywords: strategy, strategy-as-practice, interaction, materiality, communication.

The idea that strategy is a practice has been gaining prominence in the field of organization studies over the last two decades, as it offers a concrete entry point into the work of strategists as they shape their organizations (Jarzabkowski and Spee, 2009; Whittington, 1996). This perspective draws attention to "the myriad of micro-processes and practices that make up strategies" (Vaara et al., 2004: 2), featuring activities that can be conceptualized as "communicative practices." In this paper, we provisionally define communication as the exchange of signs through which people, documents and other 'things' act upon each other (Craig, 2017). Communicative practices therefore refer to the many ways we exchange such signs, mainly through talk and text.

In particular, strategy-as-practice research has emphasized the study of strategic texts: their production (Pälli et al., 2009; Spee and Jarzabkowski, 2011), their genre (Cornut et al., 2012), and their consumption (Abdallah and Langley, 2014). Researchers have also looked at the way these texts circulate by adapting to the local situations where they are deployed (Arnaud et al., 2016; Balogun et al., 2015). Yet, while recognizing that communication plays a role in strategy, strategy-as-practice research has yet to clarify how it participates in the *initial formulation* of strategy, i.e., in deciding which issues matter most. Currently, many communication-focused studies consider communication as the dissemination effort that takes place *after* a strategy is decided upon, thus underplaying its role in how strategy as such is formed and in particular in explaining "how things become strategic" (Gond et al., 2018).

We suggest that this lack of clarity comes from a continued tendency to speak of communication and materiality in separate terms. By contrast, in this paper we consider that communication *is* material – we use our bodies, documents, technologies, spaces and objects to communicate – but also that communication materializes certain ideas, values, expressions,

emotions or concerns (Cooren, 2018). Studies on the materiality of strategy have paid attention to how "(1) strategy tools; (2) objects and artefacts; (3) technologies; (4) built spaces; and (5) human bodies" (Dameron et al., 2015: S1) are used during meetings where strategy is formulated, but have often done so without expressly addressing their articulation with/in communicative practices (Leonardi, 2015; Paroutis et al., 2015).

Moreover, while some strategy-as-practice research has implicitly shown that communication is also material, it has not explored the idea that communication can materialize strategy. Communication's ability to materialize strategy is revealed when paying attention to the interactional and multimodal performance of strategy (Jarzabkowski et al., 2015). In this sense, our inquiry builds on a small body of previous studies that have considered naturally-occurring moments of strategizing and have taken into account not only the meaning of what is said and written, but also *how* it is said and written, and how documents and artefacts take part in interaction. Using various approaches to study interactional situations, these studies have shown that these concrete and observable aspects of communication play an important part in the sort of strategies they devise (Aggerholm et al., 2012; Jarzabkowski and Spee, 2009; Kwon et al., 2014; Samra-Fredericks, 2003).

Yet, we consider that it is possible to go further down the interactional path and ask *how communication practices materialize strategy*. More than just observe *what* happens during strategic meetings, we contend that the way conversations unfold – in what is said but also how, materially, it is said – makes what emerges from these interactions strategic or not. We hence explore, theoretically and empirically, what a detailed attention to communication can reveal about how some matters *become* strategic, while others do not, in the course of collective action.

We pursue this project through analysis of data from our ongoing action research collaboration with a community-based organization working in the field of housing in a large North-American city, the Tenants' Association, building insights from a strategic planning exercise that we facilitated (Cooren et al., 2015; Vásquez et al., 2018). Our analysis reveals a series of practices. As they engage in strategizing, participants voice their concerns through talk, evaluate their strategic relevance, explore and suggest different courses of action and, finally, choose one of them. In each of these practices, communication materializes strategy. It does so by (1) *presentifying* matters of concern, (2) *substantiating* them to support their strategic character, (3) *attributing* these matters of concern to the organization and (4) *crystallizing* a course of action in line with the matters of concern. As we will explain, we use the term "matters of concern" to capture how different things materialize in interaction – whether in talk or otherwise – and manifest themselves in more ways as they are taken up by those engaged in the interaction, thus becoming strategic for the organization. Furthermore, we suggest that, once voiced, these concerns *also* guide the progression of the strategizing effort, in what we will designate as "relative autonomy." We thus argue that a concrete avenue for the study of the *becoming* of strategy, then, consists in looking at the way matters of concern are expressed, negotiated and confronted through talk.

Strategizing, communication and materiality

As mentioned previously, an important contribution of strategy-as-practice research is its demonstration that strategy is fundamentally dialogical and rooted in communication (Spee & Jarzabkowski, 2011; Vaara, 2010; Vaara et al., 2004). Yet, this interest in communication practices has mostly taken the form of a focus on the way people work in teams to sketch out strategic texts (Kaplan, 2010; Pälli et al., 2009) and how these texts are circulated in and around

organizations (Abdallah and Langley, 2014; Cornut et al., 2012). Besides texts, some authors

have also looked at the talk that strategists engage in, for instance looking at how people share

stories with each other about the organization's opportunities and threats (Fenton and Langley,

2011) or make sense of strategic decisions to adapt them to their circumstances and to their

managerial level (Arnaud et al., 2016; Rouleau and Balogun, 2011). These studies have for the

most part considered that communication plays a part in disseminating strategic decisions once

they are made, addressing the way people write down strategy into texts, persuade others of the

soundness of strategic decisions, or make sense of them and share that sense with others. While

relevant, these studies start at a moment when what is strategic is already known and assume that

what matters is to make sure that others in the organization learn about it, make sense of it and

adapt it to their local situation.

Yet, some scholars have pointed out that communication may be the place where strategy

emerges in the first place. Some researchers have focused on longer spans of time and used

interviews to look at how people deal with ambiguity and coexisting meanings around possible

strategic actions (Aggerholm et al., 2012; Spee & Jarzabkowski, 2017). Others have turned to the

study of interactions, in particular borrowing from ethnomethodology and conversation analysis

(Samra-Fredericks, 2003, 2005). This research recognizes the role of tools and other material

elements in constraining strategy-making and making it durable (Carlile, 2015). Of special

interest to us is research on how material elements play a role in meetings where strategy is

formulated (Leonardi, 2015; Paroutis et al., 2015). However, we note a tendency in these works

to distinguish between materiality and communication, rather than to study them jointly, a

tendency that has been referred to, echoing Whitehead (1920), as "bifurcation" (Cooren, 2015;

Latour, 2008). We believe that bifurcating materiality and communication may prevent strategy researchers from fully recognizing the part materiality plays in strategizing.

Indeed, as Beauregard (2012) shows in the case of urban planning, deciding on a course of action requires bringing into the interaction both the current state of the world and its possible future states. This is achieved among others with photographs, blueprints and models – and we could imagine other resources in the case of strategic planning, such as slide presentations or other workshop facilitation tools (Bourgoin and Muniesa, 2016; Garreau et al., 2015; Kaplan, 2010; Paroutis et al., 2015). An even stronger argument is that communication is not only complemented by tools, but that it is always a "multimodal" process that also relies on documents, bodies and spatial features (Jarzabkowski et al., 2015).

In particular, researchers adopting an interactional outlook have stressed that talk, gestures and other communicational practices are themselves material, and that beyond studying *what* is said, we must pay attention to *how* it is done (Cooren, 2018). For instance, Samra-Fredericks (2003) has suggested that ethnomethodology and conversation analysis may serve to look at "*how* it was all made to happen" (p. 152, emphasis original). Similarly, critical discourse analysis was used in the study of strategy-making to develop a "context-sensitive" approach to observe how strategy-makers create a shared sense of the issues they are faced with (Clarke et al., 2012; Kwon et al., 2014; Neyland and Whittle, 2018). Drawing on video-recordings, Cooren, Bencherki, Chaput and Vásquez's (2015) studied the progression of conversations during a community organization's board of directors meeting to describe how people "do" strategy even when they do not describe themselves as doing so, during "fleeting moments of strategy" (see also Vásquez et al., 2018). Strategizing, then, is not only something that happens in people's minds and is then shared with others. It is also a social process that people jointly achieve in

interactions, which can then be sequentially observed and analyzed, both by other participants and by researchers, precisely because it is material.

However, studies considering the material nature of communication to look at the initial establishment of what is strategic or not remain rare. Hence, analyzing what happens *in* and *through* communication appears as a suitable lens to delve into what is produced in interaction when people engage in an activity labeled as 'strategy making.'

The materiality of communication

In this article, we argue that communication is material, in both meanings of the word "material:" i.e., it *gives both substance* and *importance* to strategy. We argue that this is the case because communication *materializes* the seemingly abstract issues it allegedly refers to, and therefore makes them present in the situation at hand (Ashcraft et al., 2009; Cooren, 2015). In this sense, we extend studies on the materiality of strategy (e.g., Dameron et al., 2015) by considering that language use *itself* constitutes a materialization of strategy, in the way people talk and sequence their turns of talk, hence zooming in on communication and more specifically on talk, and revealing that the elaboration of strategy is a tangibly observable process.

We view each utterance, each objection or agreement, each counter-proposal, etc., as an occasion to materialize an idea, make it susceptible to probing and reshaping, vulnerable to opposition by other materializations or available to being picked up other utterances that grant it further materiality. Talking about strategy therefore corresponds to a collective effort to make some ideas gradually gain a strategic character as they are made more material, both by *making them matter* (gain in importance) and by *granting them more reality* (as more and more people espouse them and speak on their behalf, thus allowing them to make a difference in the

conversation). We therefore build on the idea that communication offers *sub-stance* to reality: it

"stands under" the realities it claims to describe, and thus materializes them, while at the same

time making them matter (Cooren et al., 2012).

Contrary to studies that tend to *bifurcate* materiality and discourse, we rather consider

that talk is *itself* already material (Cooren, 2010, 2015, 2018). In broad agreement with

ethnomethodology and conversation analysis, we view discourse not just as a transparent vehicle

of abstract ideas contained in people's heads. The *way* we talk (and write) hence matters because

it is through talk that various elements of a situation can be made materially present in a given

interaction, and that they can, perhaps, count and make a difference.

The way different elements materialize themselves in interaction can be captured using

the term "matters of concern," a notion that was proposed by Latour (2004) as an alternative to

the idea of matters of fact. Rather than attempting to describe facts, in a referential attitude,

matters of concern draw attention to the pragmatic effects elements of a situation can have. In

other words, if they make a difference, then they exist for all practical purposes. Whether they

are true or not by some standard is a separate question from their ability to "matter" in a given

situation, in the dual meaning we have outlined.

Moreover, as it materializes, a matter of concern also gains "relative autonomy" and may

become, when it contributes to authoring the situation, a "matter of authority" (Vásquez et al.,

2018). By relative autonomy, we mean that a concern expressed in an interaction can be

described as almost having *a life of its own*. A matter of concern certainly needs to be taken up

and commented on by people in order to subsist within a discursive space (hence its relative

heteronomy). Yet, it also has relative autonomy given that it then starts to literally *exist* and

possibly *make a difference* in this space, freed from the intentions of the person who materialized

it first. If participants animate specific matters of concern in their discussions, it is also because these matters animate these same participants and can alter the course of the interaction.

These ideas have very concrete empirical implications, as they reveal how matters of concern animate people, make them do and say things, and are recognized as demanding, requiring, or suggesting specific conduct. In this sense, our study contributes to the line of inquiry opened by Gond, Cabantous and Krikorian (2018), who looked into the institutional work and practices needed to progressively recognize something (corporate social responsibility, in their study) as strategic, a process they called "strategifying." Contrary to their work, however, our case is not about "changing the boundaries of the 'realm of strategy' within organizations" (Gond et al., 2018: 264). Instead, our study reveals how, in interaction and through communication, what is or should be strategic emerges and materializes in the form of strategy. This allows us to recognize that concerns may become strategic within the context of a single conversation, and that the communicative practices through which this is done are concretely observable.

Methods

The empirical case we mobilize to explore these ideas was collected as a part of a multi-year action-research project during which we supported a community-based organization, the Tenants' Association, as it carried out a strategic planning exercise. Based in Montréal (Canada), the Tenants' Association has a mandate from various funding agencies to help tenants in a particular district engage in legal procedures, such as filing complaints to borough inspectors about severe problems in their building. The organization also offers legal advice and mediation in conflicts between tenants and their landlords, and generally advocates for more government

monies in housing-related programs, better application of existing laws and regulations, as well as more social housing units. The Tenants' Association has four staff members, a handful of interns in both social work and law, as well as a dozen volunteers.

The planning exercise we supported was critical to the organization's survival, as producing a five-year strategic plan was a condition to renew a key funding contract. The donor agency had expressed discontent at the apparent lack of an action plan for the coming years and the absence of formal intervention and collaboration with partner organizations. It had made it clear that it would cut funding altogether if it did not receive a strategic plan in due form.

In this context, the organization's management team asked the first author, Nicolas, who had already collaborated with them and was at that time a member of the organization's board of directors, to help them respond to the agency's request. Nicolas, in turn, contacted Viviane and Consuelo, who were not related to the organization. Together, we helped the Tenants' Association with this strategic planning exercise and facilitated the process. François joined us at a later stage. To better understand the organization, we conducted preliminary individual interviews with the founders and key partners (eight persons in total). A masters' student helped us comb through the organization's 40-year archives and prepare a timeline including some of the turning points it went through. We also carefully read the organization's annual reports and noted changes in its services, client demographics and other key indicators.

This preparatory work led us to organize a "reflection day" in which over 30 people participated, including current and past employees, board members, volunteers, and partners from both fellow community organizations and various government agencies. This workshop aimed at helping the Tenants' Association and ourselves with the elaboration of their strategic plan. The participants in our study can be viewed as "ordinary" strategists, rather than

consultants or top managers who would have received training in how to conduct strategy-making (see Rouleau and Balogun, 2011). All events that took place during this day were video recorded. Overall, we could draw from over 7 hours of observational video data, combined with over 6 hours of interview recordings and numerous documents.

As facilitators, we sought both to comply with the funding agency's request and to innovate to accommodate the specific needs of the organization and its partners and make the process meaningful to them. To do so, we combined recognizable strategy tools, such as a SWOT-inspired analysis, with specific elements such as a discussion about the partnership work being conducted in the district. The main opportunity for discussion consisted of 90-minute thematic breakout workshops on three themes: client's demographic characteristics, housing legislation issues, and the organization's knowledge and expertise. A plenary session followed to compare insights, prioritize concerns and consider the next steps for the Tenants' Association. Our analysis builds on excerpts selected from these breakout workshops for detailed analysis.

Given our role in convening and facilitating the events we report on, we do not wish to erase or overlook our own involvement in the overall process. In line with scholars adopting an action-research approach (Robertson, 2000) and encouraged by recent studies assuming a similar posture (e.g., Bourgoin et al., 2019), we embrace our participation and approach it with a reflexive stance to account for our part in shaping the situations we describe (see Cunliffe, 2003; Macbeth, 2001). For instance, we appear in the video and audio data we analyzed, and pondered for a long time on how to account for our dual role (Brannick and Coghlan, 2007; Davis, 1973). It is only by being reflexive and careful not to bring one's prior knowledge of so-called "context" into the analysis of the data that it is possible to remain faithful to it (Pomerantz et al., 2018). In this sense, we worked actively to maintain a balance between "professional distance" and

"personal involvement" (Anteby, 2013), with a strong commitment towards analysis (Anderson, 2006). By conducting the research and writing this article as a team, and thanks to François' participation (he was not in the field), we could compare and test our experiences and feelings, thus mixing elements of collaborative autoethnography (Chang et al., 2012) with the insider/outsider team strategy (Bartunek, 2008; Evered and Louis, 1981). The many documents, pictures, videos, and audio files of all sorts we gathered also helped us validate our understanding of what was going on.

Our data analysis followed insights from interaction analysis (Cooren, 2007), which are based on ethnomethodology and conversation analysis (see Samra-Fredericks, 2003, 2005). Although we did not adhere strictly to the principles of conversation analysis data collection and analysis, our general sympathy with this approach led us to focus on the turn-by-turn achievement of each interaction, and to leave aside the temptation to supplement the available conversational data with our own prior knowledge of each situation (Pomerantz and Fehr, 1997). Video data allowed for collective and collaborative analysis, and was available to the "outsider" (François) directly, without the need for the "insiders" (in particular Nicolas, but also Viviane and Consuelo) to share with him their more or less reliable recollections (see Smets et al., 2014; LeBaron et al., 2018).

Portions of the video-recorded conversations were transcribed and then translated, as the event mostly took place in French. Both the videos and their transcriptions were used to identify the different matters of concern that express themselves through participants' talk. For each concern, we characterized the difference it was making within the interaction. In other words, we refrained from speculating about anything outside the *terra firma* of the interactional data as such. We hence considered what people were saying and doing as social action, asking, for each

turn of talk or gesture: what are people doing here? These actions were interpreted in the context

of what had come before and served as a context for actions to come. In other words, what

someone says or does in one turn of talk may be a reaction to what was said or done before,

which will provide it with its meaning, and may call for a further reaction: social action is thus

sequential and progresses from one turn of talk to the next.

This allowed us to observe the way matters of concern play against each other, some of

them gaining the ability to structure action and to attribute it to one entity or another. We looked

in particular for "fleeting moments of strategy," an expression that refers to "moments when

matters of concerns are presented, discussed, questioned and/or accepted in order to collectively

decide how to go about them" (Cooren et al., 2015: 365). We also looked for segments where the

conversation turned to themes that were "strategic" even by most conventional definitions of the

notion. Strategy involves answering the question "What are we going to do now?" (Spender,

2014: 4). In our data, we could witness "the determination of the basic long-term goals" and "the

adoption of courses of action" to reach those goals (Chandler, 1962/1990, p. 13). Specifically,

we looked for moments when participants identified strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and

threats (Spender, 2014: 49); and moments when they planned future action.

The four excerpts we present come from two of the three workshops. From our recorded

data, we identified excerpts that had thematic unity, where a clear topic was introduced and

discussed, and where some form of conclusion was reached (a decision was made, the topic was

dismissed, or the topic was changed). The four excerpts we analyze here were chosen based on

two criteria. First, they were long enough to be of analytical interest, but short enough to be

included in this article given space constraints. Second, and most importantly, they had to indeed

involve "fleeting moments of strategy." In these excerpts, the discussion revolves around three

themes. The first is how to get building owners and the city to make the necessary repairs to the

district's buildings, which are in many cases very seriously deteriorated (excerpts 1 and 3). The

second is about which client groups prioritize (excerpt 2). The third is how to take advantage of

the organization's expertise (excerpt 4). These issues may be described as strategic to the extent

that they occupy a central position in the organization's orientations and intervention methods,

and that they are related to the daily challenges members experience in carrying out the

organization's mission. However, rather than defining them as strategic *a priori*, we must also

see how they become so through participants' communicative practices.

Materializing strategy through conversation

Our analysis of the excerpts in their interactional detail led us to identify a series of

common practices accomplished for each case. These practices follow an overall arc of growing

materialization: A) *Presentifying*: a concern first materializes, appearing in the interactions. B)

Substantiating: the same person or another person offers supporting or diverging matters to

confirm or dismiss the strategic nature of the matter of concern. C) *Attributing*: the matter is

attributed to the organization or not depending on whether the organization has the agency (i.e.,

ability to act) necessary to deal with it. D) *Crystallizing*: a course of action is suggested based on

that agency, which solidifies or not into a specific plan. Thinking of this general process in terms

of growing materialization – or, possibly, receding materialization – reveals that once a concern

is formulated, it begins to exist independently of its "author" and becomes available to be

scrutinized by others. In turn, others can either offer more substance to it by furthering its

materialization, or on the contrary by bringing into the interaction elements that shake up its

foundation. The excerpts we present below, and which are summarized in Table 1, illustrate

these practices, and attest to these different pathways as they unfolded in interaction.

[INSERT TABLE 1 HERE]

Excerpt 1: Are there small buildings in the district?

In the first excerpt, participants discuss the kind of pressure that they must exercise on

landlords, in an effort to make their interventions more systematic. Damian, who works at a local

refugee integration organization, is not as involved in housing rights issues, and suggests taking a

step back from what he sees as the other participants' ideological reflexes. He suggests that

smaller landlords, with more humble resources, should not be put in the same basket as large

property owners. In the transcripts, (.) indicates a brief pause, - a sudden stop, = that two turns of

talk occurred without a pause in between, [shows where two turns of talk overlap, and double

parentheses include a description of what takes place or a specification on our part.

1	**Damian**:	Well, one of the issues that we need to consider, I think, it's- it's what type
2		of landlord we're dealing with. Because I think there is a need to separate,
3		to divide, you know, because it's not the whole class in the same boat.
4		There are people who can work, they have the tools to do it. There are
5		others who must be put in the corner and we must work hard against them.
6		But we should not have an ideological position. I may be a representative
7		of that, with others around the table. Everything in the same basket,
8		because you realize, y'know, those who have small buildings, y'know,
9		four, five, six units, or a two-unit, they just don't have the capacity
10		sometimes to go ahead. So, it becomes an issue when you're working with
11		that landlord, he's got good faith, but no funding, no capital. So, we must
12		see how we can work with that.
13		
14	**Janice**:	But, in the district, do you know what it's like in the district? Is it more
15		small landlords, or do we talk about more…?
16		
17	**Damian**:	((Pointing at Janice)) Well, you know about that better than I do.
18		
19	**Mary**:	It's many companies ((looks at Tina who shakes her head approvingly; the
20		others look at them))
21		
22	**Janice**:	Because it's many big buildings, it's many companies in the district.
23		Because the apartments, it's not (.) it's rare that you will have two-unit,
24		three-unit (.) it's often big buildings with twenty-five, thirty
25		

26   **Damian**:   Yeah, you're right, especially down the hill, it's clear that Barker St.,
27   Goose St., these streets, it's big things.

Presentifying. This excerpt begins with Damian who states a concern or "issue" (line 1):

that while some property owners may be problematic, and worth working "hard against" (line 5),

those with smaller buildings may just not have the "capacity" (line 9) to renovate their buildings.

Substantiating: He then himself offers some substantiation for that matter of concern by

describing it as impelled by the apparent "ideological position" (line 6) that is embodied by

"others around the table" (line 7) as well as himself. He gives further substance to the need to

collaborate with small landlords by giving examples of small buildings: "four, five, six units, or a

two-unit" (line 9) and by apparently personalizing "that landlord" by using the third person

pronoun: "he's got good faith" (line 11). A further substantiation of his proposal may be seen in

the fact that he ends his intervention by repeating "working with" (smaller landlords) twice (lines

10 and 12) in his last two sentences. Janice then takes the floor and formulates a question that

may be read as asking for more substantiation on Damian's part (line 14). She picks up the term

"small landlords" that he uses, and asks whether there really are many of them in the district. Her

question is tentatively formulated – she does not actually finish her sentence – which may

indicate that she is not directly dismissing the matter of concern, but genuinely looking for

evidence that this is a relevant issue. Damian then points at Janice (line 17) and recognizes that

she knows the answer better than he does, which may be seen as a recognition that his proposal

was tentative and that the matter remains to be substantiated.

It is, however, Mary who then provides, on line 19, a clear statement to corroborate

Janice's hesitation. She therefore oppose Damian's proposal as a matter of concern – "It's many

companies" (presumably indicating that the district comprises larger buildings) – but she still

seeks Tina's approval by a gaze. Tina, indeed, shakes her head to indicate that she agrees, and

the fact that this situation is corroborated by both individuals strengthens the foundation of this

conclusion. Damian's recognition that the matter is unsettled, and Mary's and Tina's joint

answer, give Janice some confidence as she now formulates (line 22), in a statement rather than a

question, that the district mostly includes "big buildings." Following Janice's assertion, Damian

concedes that she is right (line 26), and then himself gives examples of streets with big buildings.

Conclusion to excerpt 1: In this first excerpt, the matter of concern that was initially

presentified turned out to be, literally, unsubstantial. It cannot substantiate itself through more

voices – even Damian recognizes it is founded on shaky grounds – or through more entities that

are invoked through those voices: there are not many big buildings in the district. This opposing

idea, for its part, takes on many materializations. Not only does Janice evoke it in the form of a

hesitant question, but also Mary expresses it in an unambiguous statement, Tina shakes her head

in approval, and Janice formulates it again in an affirmative manner. The process therefore stops

there, and the practices of attributing and crystallizing therefore do not take place.

The interaction between Damian, Janice, Mary and Tina (and others who remain silent in

this excerpt, thus also not offering substantiation to Damian's idea) shows how participants

jointly establish whether an issue is "strategic" in nature or not. This is important from a strategic

perspective in several ways. First, the excerpt shows that the idea of dealing differently with

small landlords and larger ones – and thus avoiding being "ideological" – is dismissed on the

basis of there not being so many small buildings in the district. The core of the issue is thus not

actually discussed: they do not address whether the organization does have an ideological

attitude towards all landlords or whether another intervention method should be considered for

the district's small landlords, as few of them as there may be. The fact that the issue quickly

materialized through the example of specific buildings, as soon as Damian's initial turn of talk,

led Janice to pick up this element and to probe it. As several people picked up Janice's initial

hesitation, through talk, ways of formulating statements or question, gazes and gestures, led to

this becoming a criterion to determine whether Damian's concern did matter or not.

While we observed a specific concern materializing through Damian's intervention from

lines 1 to 12, it progressively dematerializes from lines 14 to 27. Collectively, it ends up not

mattering anymore, meaning that its strategic import dematerializes too. In other words, this

concern does not pass the test of materialization, so to speak, and disappears from the discussion.

Excerpt 2: Should the organization prioritize immigrants or mental health issues?

In the second excerpt, participants are discussing populations that need to be prioritized,

in terms of intervention, by the Tenants' Association. This is again connected to the issue of

laying out intervention methods, but also ties in with the issue of establishing clear partnerships

with other organizations. During a conversation on prioritizing immigrant populations, Nicolas,

one of the researchers who was also a volunteer at the organization, proposes to create a flyer in

various languages to reach out to newcomers in the district. While this suggestion is initially

picked up as relevant, it then becomes problematic, before a new priority population is identified:

people suffering from mental health issues. It is not clear, however, whether the organization can

in fact do anything to help that population. The excerpt will be analyzed in two segments, the

first going from lines 1 to 20, revolves around the issue of immigration and language, the second,

from line 21 onward, concerns mental health.

1	**Nicolas**:	[…] Should we prepare a flyer, we cannot prepare a flyer for everyone, we
2		may choose a theme, for example "You are an immigrant person; what do
3		you need to know?" Or, "You do not speak either French or English," and
4		we can write them in Chinese, for instance, is that something we can do?

5		
6	**Susan**:	Well I think that's something that should be done, in any case, already.
7		
8	**Olivia**:	But writing in all the languages, it's…
9		
10	**Susan**:	Well maybe not in all the languages, but, you know, like those that you
11		can, because of course you must translate them.
12		
13	**Ann**:	But at the level of languages, we do a decent job uh, and we don't speak so
14		many, we speak four languages at the office, but there's always a child or a
15		friend or someone who can serve a little as an interpreter, all of that isn't
16		an obstacle that much.
17		
18	**Susan**:	Well, it's not an obstacle for the people who come and see you, but there
19		are people, when we were going around in the buildings, there are people
20		who would look at us and=
21		
22	**Lyn**:	=There was no communication!
23		
24	**Dylan**:	Does the public know that you speak so many languages and it's possible
25		to work it out?
26		
27	**Ann**:	I think they do, because Tina ((an employee)), all of the Bangladesh
28		community comes from all over Quebec I would say, the South Shore, the
29		North Shore, so…
30		
31	**Patricia**:	There's traffic, at least! ((laughs))
32		
33	**Mary**:	Well, I have the impression, as you said, that if we look at the majority of
34		the census tracts in the district, especially at the bottom of the hill, every
35		five years there's 50 to 60 percent of the population that changes, so when
36		people, when they're not happy with respect to their dwelling, they leave,
37		they go, so there are people who have the possibility to change, and they
38		change, but those who do not have the possibility of changing, and that's
39		especially mental health cases, they stay there, so I don't know if we can
40		start saying, if you're here in the district for ten years, you're a priority
41		more than the other who's been there two years, but I mean to say, what's
42		the right clientele if there's a prioritization to be made, well say those who
43		do not have the option to leave and find a better place, they would be a
44		priority clientele.
45		
46	**Susan:**	But with the mental health problems, we haven't got any, I mean, me, I
47		don't know, it's very hard for us, and I would say that it is a category
48		that's a priority, but it's hard to…
49		

50	**Nicolas**:	Maybe that's an expertise that you could go and get with social workers to
51		help you, exactly, it may be interesting?
52		
53	**Susan:**	But there's often the vision on the institutions' part that we are a
54		community organization, we're, you know, a bit like, I mean, no?
55		
56	**Nicolas:**	They're looking down on you?
57		
58	**Susan:**	Yeah, they look down on us, and we're not serious, and we you know, I
59		would say are not the public health administration, but the local health
60		center, legal aid (.) there's no one here from legal aid? ((looks around the
61		table)) legal aid, they didn't want to speak to us until recently, there's a
62		new lawyer who's doing an internship and he had already worked with
63		community-based organizations and he decided to reach out, but they're
64		like we don't know our rights, we do everything wrong, yes yes yes,
65		there's a lot of a snob attitude and of yeah.
66		
67	**Mary:**	So, there's a collaboration to be made there, but mental health, it's clear
68		it's not your mandate, but there's someone whose mandate it is, and it's up
69		to them.
70		
71	**Ann:**	But just above the office isn't there the organization…?
72		
73	**Susan:**	Ah, the Friendship Club […]

Segment 1: Are we doing a decent job with languages?

Presentifying: Nicolas begins by mentioning the idea of creating a flyer and ties it to the question of prioritizing client groups, by saying that "we cannot prepare a flyer for everyone" (line 1). It is therefore the very materiality of the flyer, which can only exist in so many versions, that makes his proposal relevant for the current topic of prioritization. For those flyers that would be made, he uses direct reported speech (lines 2-3) to continue presentifying the flyer by mentioning what the future flyer's titles could look like. He is thus revealing that it would target immigrant populations, and then offers another quote (line 3) to specify that it would focus on people who may not speak either French or English (the two official languages of Canada). He then gives the example of Chinese as one of the languages in which the flyer could be written,

before concluding by asking "is that something we can do?" (line 4), which suggests (as was the case for Damian in Excerpt 1), that the matter of concern remains to be substantiated.

Substantiating: At the next turn of talk, Susan supports the idea by saying that it is something that should have already been done (thus offering substantiation to the idea as an ethical concern; line 6). Olivia then picks up on the materialization suggested by Nicolas – in the form of concrete flyers directed to speakers of other languages – by raising apprehension over whether it is possible to write in "all the languages" (line 8). Again, it is thanks to the materialization that Nicolas presentifies that Susan can relieve that apprehension by clarifying that the flyers would be written only in "those [languages] that you can" (lines 10-11), and again substantiating this by invoking the concrete toil it would take to "translate them" (line 11). The three turns of talk thus seem to establish the relevance of the matter of concern Nicolas identified. This relevance appears established by probing the practical possibilities afforded by the materialization of immigration and language issues in a concrete flyer.

However, Ann then offers (lines 13 to 16) a series of alternative elements that oppose substantiating Nicolas' idea. She notes that the organization does "a decent job" at the level of languages, which she substantiates with the fact that the staff speaks four languages and that "there's always a child or a friend or someone" (lines 14-15) who can do the job of interpreting, thus offering a concrete embodiment to this opposing idea. She concludes (or attempts to already crystalize the conversation) by stating that "all of that isn't an obstacle that much" (lines 15-16). Susan then picks up the term "obstacle" (line 18) to specify that while languages may not be an obstacle for those who do come to the office, there may be people out there for whom it is an issue. The very words that Ann uses to bring closure to the debate are thus used to formulate criticism and therefore substantiate immigration and languages as a matter of concern.

Supporting Nicolas' proposal, she materializes the existence of language issues through her own lived experience: she went "around in the buildings" (doing outreach work; line 19) and she witnessed people who "would look at us and=" (lines 20) – the sentence is in fact picked up and completed by Lyn, who explains that "there was no communication" (lines 22). In addition to embodying the matter in those "people", Susan and Lyn's co-construction of the problem of speaking with people in the buildings offers in itself a substantiation of the matter of concern.

Dylan then outright asks, on lines 24 and 25, whether the public is aware that it is possible to get service even when not speaking English or French. This question is stated in such a way that it substantiates Ann's position by also stating, in an unproblematic manner, that it is, indeed, possible to get service. This makes the concern revolve around awareness of that fact rather than the existence of a problem in the first place. Ann formulates her answer, from lines 27 to 29, first as a direct answer, "I think they do," but then substantiates her position embodying it specifically in Tina, an employee of Bangladeshi origin, and then in using what Pomerantz (1986) refers to as an extreme case formulation, stating that "all of" the Bangladeshi community comes from all over the province of Quebec, and further materializing the extent of the organization's popularity by referring to the North Shore and the South Shore (Montreal being an island). Ann leaves the end of her sentence trailing, which seems to give an opportunity for Patricia to jump in (line 31) and offer what could be described as a crystallization, as she laughingly concludes that "there's traffic, at least," perhaps suggesting that there are enough people even if everyone isn't reached.

Conclusion to segment 1: As in the case of Excerpt 1, Nicolas' potential matter of concern appears to be ultimately dismissed, which means that attributing and crystallizing practices do not take place explicitly. Nicolas' long-term engagement with the Tenant's

Association and the fact that many of the participants in this conversation know him personally makes him here play the role of the insider. The concern that he raised, and that were finally dismissed, echoes previous conversations with members of organization. In this case we can say that Nicolas' stance is that of a member, more than a researcher's. Arguably, Ann's defense that the organization is doing a "decent job" could be read as a form of attributing in the sense that she evaluates Nicolas' proposal from the perspective of the organization's agency. She seems to be saying that they do not need to be attributed that problem simply because they are already taking care of it – the attribution is already done, so to speak. Patricia's laugh and suggestion that there is already quite a lot of traffic may seem as a crystallization, but also appears to confirm that Ann's defense consists in saying that the problem exists but is already being taken care of.

As we can see, the concern of whether immigrant populations are a priority is dealt with through a series of materializations, first in Nicolas' utterance of a proposal, that invokes another materialization: the flyers. This materialization concretizes the need to prioritize as the physical flyer cannot exist in an infinite number of versions. It is this materialization and the problem of writing that initially catches people's attention. To discuss this proposal, a series of embodiments are offered: employees who speak several languages and children who serve as interpreters; workers who do outreach work and meet people they cannot communicate with; an employee who is well-connected in her cultural community and therefore attract numerous members of that community. These materializations are instrumental as they offer an opportunity to negotiate whether the organization is doing a good job or not with a priority clientele. In this case, the conclusion appears to be, especially thanks to Dylan's reformulation, that languages as such are not an issue and that a sufficient number of immigrant people request the organization's service.

Segment 2: Are mental health issues our concern?

Presentifying: After the question of languages appears to be dismissed, Mary offers, starting on line 33, a different kind of materialization that appears at first to serve to substantiate Ann's dismissal of Nicolas' expressed concern, in the form of numbers: she cites statistics that seem to support the thesis that immigrants in fact rarely stay more than five years at the same address, and therefore can leave whenever they have a problem, they "have the possibility to change" (lines 37) – they are not, the numbers show, a priority. However, once these numbers materialize, they allow her to presentify a different concern following that same logic: those who should be prioritized are those who "do not have the possibility of changing" (lines 38), who are "especially mental health cases" (line 39).

Substantiating and attributing: Susan then takes the floor (lines 46-48) to produce a very hesitant answer, which semantically recognizes that people suffering from mental health issues are a priority, but also indicates, even in its form, that she (and the organization, as she switches from "I" and "us") doesn't know how to deal with mental health issues. She therefore offers a weak substantiation that mental health is a valid matter of concern, but clearly materializes in content and form (with many unfinished phrases and filler words) that she has little agency with respect to that concern, to the point that she does not even appear to know how to express that fact. When Nicolas (lines 50-51) suggests seeking help, Susan again formulates doubt about the possibility of obtaining help, both in content and form, as she seems to have trouble finishing her turn of talk (line 54: "we're, y'know, a bit like, I mean, no?"), thus embodying the lack of agency she describes. Nicolas (line 56) and Susan (lines 58-65) then jointly establish that the institutions that could offer help in fact look down on the organization, and their collaboration may be read as materializing the Tenants' Association's lack of agency on the matter.

Crystallizing: Interestingly, it is Mary herself, although she initially brought up mental health patients as a priority clientele, who offers on lines 67-68 what may appear as a crystallization of the absence of agency, by clearly stating that fact – "mental health, it's clear it's not your mandate" – and inviting participants to identify another organization which may be more relevant – "but there's someone whose mandate it is." The end of the excerpt is then devoted to jointly identifying another organization that may in fact have the agency to deal with mental health issues, thus effectively deflecting that problem to them.

Conclusion to segment 2: Mary's materialization of statistical data appears at first to serve as a substantiation of the dismissal of the concern over languages, but then also allows her to introduce a new matter of concern: the need to prioritize mental health patients. However, contrary to what happens in Excerpt 1 (with small buildings) and in the first segment of Excerpt 2 (with the flyers), Mary's materialization is not picked up by anyone. Instead, the matter of concern is immediately admitted as relevant, but Susan's formulation of a worry about her lack of knowledge of the issue – both in content and in form – makes tangible her inability to even articulate the issue of mental health. From Nicolas' question onward, the joint collaboration to identify partners to either help or to altogether take charge of the problem shows that this issue in effect does not belong to the organization. Susan's hesitation and the joint accomplishment of the attribution of the problem to another organization is instrumental as Mary's suggestion would have opened an entirely new line of intervention, mental health, which is neither expected by funders nor within the realm of the organization's work. Together, participants established that the problem belongs to others. In other words, agency is attributed elsewhere.

Excerpt 3: From pressuring the city to mobilizing tenants

In the third excerpt, as participants speak of the kind of interventions they could prioritize for effective results, the conversation moves to the pressures that could be put on the city administration. However, participants, including Consuelo, one of the researchers who acts as a facilitator, jointly realize that pressuring the city would in fact involve mobilizing district residents, since they are the ones who can file complaints.

1	**Janice**:	But that's it, to put pressure on the City so that they find funds to help,
2		help the landlords for the renovations, all that, but it's…
3		
4	**Consuelo**:	We can create programs…
5		
6	**Janice**:	Yeah, you know, and it's also the application of the housing code and of
7		city regulations, and more, so that there are more city inspectors that come
8		to the apartments.
9		
10	**Consuelo**:	With respect to the association, the role the association could- what role
11		could employees, volunteers, members, what role the organization could
12		play, the struggles we should fight for?
13		
14	**Janice**:	Well, it's to mobilize the population, to put pressure on the landlords.
15		Because now, it's sure the organization cannot put pressure on the
16		landlords, it has to come from the tenant. You can't file a complaint at- at
17		the city, it has to be the tenant who makes the complaint to the city, and to
18		the Rental Board.
19	**Kevin**:	It's hard to do, but, all that we've already (.) and that we try to do, it's the
20		problems in a building are everywhere, in each apartment, but it's- we try
21		to create a sort of- of group.
22		
23	**Janice**:	Mobilizing the group.
24		
25	**Kevin**:	Yeah.
26		
27	**Janice**:	Especially in buildings with thirty units. Well, we'll try to mobilize
28		everyone. [Well (inaudible) we'll try to mobilize everyone.
29		
30	**Kevin**:	[So, in that building, we target the building, and we try to have
31		the most people.
32		
33	**Edgar**:	Can't you make a complaint on the apartments? As an organization?

34		
35	**Janice**:	Can we? I remember that- We can we file a complaint directly with the
36		City? ((Turns toward Tina)).
37		
38	**Kevin**:	Yeah.
39		
40	**Tina:**	Yes, sometimes, yes.
41		
42	**Kevin**:	Yeah.
43		
44	**Janice**:	Yeah? Okay. ((Surprised tone))
45		
46	**Kevin**:	Yeah, but I think they ask that we join the formal notice.
47		
48	**Janice**:	There must be a formal notice that was sent by, to the landlord, from the
49		tenant.
50		
51	**Tina**:	We do exceptions sometimes, like we do a direct complaint for members,
52		on the state of the building.
53		
54	**Kevin**:	But there must be some kind of implication from the tenant, for sure, for
55		sure, that's it. But if we manage to reach like ten apartments out of thirty,
56		we have them sign a common letter, that puts more pressure on the
57		landlord, but also on the City.

Presentifying: Janice, with the help of Consuelo, who facilitated the workshop, begins by

presentifying through their three turns of talk between line 1 and 8 a matter of concern having to

do with pressuring the city to find monies for landlords to renovate their buildings, but also to

have more city inspectors to visit run-down buildings. This proposal is formulated in terms of

concrete actions: putting pressure, helping landlords, applying the housing code, getting more

city inspectors to visit buildings. Interestingly, Consuelo uses the pronoun "we" ("on," in French;

line 4), even if she does not belong to the association. The use of this pronoun can be read as a

completion of Janice's sentence and as an invitation to collectively engage in the conversation.

Substantiating and second presentifying: Picking up on this formulation in terms of

action, Consuelo then seems to ask who the agent would be: what role could the association play

in those activities? She offers further materialization by embodying the issue in "employees,

volunteers, members" (line 11) and by asking again what role the organization could play. This intervention reads as an invitation for Janice to substantiate her proposal. Janice then recognizes that what the organization can do is mobilize tenants, rather than pressuring the city (line 16-17). She substantiates this nuance by referring to the process of filing a complaint with the city (line 17), which becomes, for the rest of the conversation, the proxy materialization of the idea of pressuring the city. The complaint process highlights that all the organization can do is mobilize tenants, and can also be seen as materializing a new matter of concern, which substantiates the first but becomes dominant in the second half of the excerpt: the issue of mobilization.

Substantiating: Kevin then jumps in, from line 19 to 21, and adds his voice to Janice's when she mentions mobilization, thus offering more substance to it. The way he formulates his support – he begins by saying "it's hard to do" and then seems to have trouble to express the rest of his sentence, including a pause on line 19 – seems to materialize the fact that this is indeed a serious concern for the organization. Janice and Kevin then jointly establish how difficult it is to mobilize tenants, between lines 23 and 31, both in content – they speak of the large buildings and many apartments they have to canvas – and in form, with rapid turns of talk, including overlaps (indicated by aligning square brackets on lines 28 and 30).

Attributing: On line 32, Edgar reacts to Janice's and Kevin's difficulty and formulates what may seem like a suggestion. He asks whether they can file complaints directly to the city, which is a question of agency in the sense that, depending on the answer to the question, the intervention strategy will concern either the organization directly or the tenants (in which case the organization can only mobilize them). As an answer, Janice picks up the verb "can" and the interrogative form, and also asks "Can we?" (line 35) which is followed by some trouble, including two false starts ("I remember that-" and "We,"; line 35) before she turns towards her

colleague Tina for an answer (line 36). This materializes that indeed the question of the

organization's agency is an open one. The inquiry over this question takes the form, between

lines 38 and 42, of a quick exchange of the word "Yeah" with some variation. However, on line

44, Janice adds a surprised tone, before Kevin adds, on line 46, an important nuance: the need

that "we join the formal notice." This last element is crucial as it indicates that there is a need,

after all, to mobilize tenants. In other words, agency over the matter is attributed to tenants, but

with a responsibility for the organization to mobilize them over that matter of concern.

Crystallizing: Between line 48 and 57, finally, Janice, Tina and Kevin jointly contribute

to crystallizing the need to mobilize tenants. Janice first crystallizes the concern, on line 48, by

reformulating Kevin's prior nuance more clearly and restates the fact that the tenant must send a

formal letter. Tina recognizes that there are only some exceptions (when the tenant is a member),

but even then, Kevin explains – and concludes – that there has to be "some kind of implication

from the tenant." The fact that this is a final crystallization is indicated by his repetition of "for

sure" (line 54) as well by his "that's it" (line 55), and by laying out what may seem like a course

of action on lines 55-57 to reach out to tenants and get them to sign a common letter.

Conclusion to Excerpt 3: This excerpt shows two interesting elements. The first is that

when attempting to substantiate one matter of concern, another one may be identified, as when

participants brought up the importance of mobilizing tenants after Consuelo – who, contrary to

Nicolas, was not intimately aware of the organization's action – insisted that Janice substantiate

her concern about pressuring the city. Second, this excerpt also shows how attributing and

hesitating over agency can be done explicitly (here, over a series of turns of talk between lines 35

and 44), as it is not always a yes-no question. While in segment 2 of Excerpt 2, the conclusion

was that mental health does not pertain to the organization at all, in this case, agency over

pressuring the city belongs to tenants (as materialized in the process of filing a complaint), but

the responsibility to mobilize them belongs to the organization.

This is an important question from a strategic point of view as it reveals that the

organization may perhaps not be in a position to develop direct interventions with respect to city

authorities, but may need, instead, to focus on working with its clients, the district's tenants.

Concerning the role of the researcher-facilitator, in this segment, Consuelo empathically engages

in the conversation, pushing to some extent her interlocutor to further substantiate her proposal.

Excerpt 4: The organization's expertise

In this last excerpt, participants answer a question by the workshop's facilitator, Viviane,

who is also one of the researchers, concerning the organization's expertise. This is an obviously

strategic question, in order to determine the organization's strengths, but this quickly reveals a

threat. Indeed, Ann immediately identifies that the organization's expertise resides essentially in

Charles, a senior employee who is on the verge of retirement. Participants jointly identify that

indeed his imminent departure is an important issue and attempt to come up with solutions.

1	**Viviane**:	[…] so if we go with the theme of the organization's current expertise, in
2		your words, if you wanted to introduce the organization to someone, how
3		would you define the expertise the organization currently possesses?
4		
5	**Ann**:	Charles ((laughs)). The other day I was worried because when he
6		((referring to Charles)) leaves, he told me, how would we get on, he's the
7		bible. The lawyers who come to speak to me, who almost only do housing
8		law, they come to ask us questions, so that's a big expertise that we should,
9		I don't know how to make sure there is a transition, because he won't be
10		there eternally.
11		
12	**Olivia**:	No, that's it, I'm also worried ((laughs))
13		
14	**Susan**:	Well it's his passion, isn't it?
15		
16	**Ann**:	Yes, I listen to him a lot, but it's over several years.

17		
18	**Dylan:**	But it's true that it's obvious, when it comes to jurisprudence, the
19		tendencies at the level of the courts, how the law is applied, how to prepare
20		proof, how to demonstrate, we at least, our prejudices, the effects of what
21		goes on, it is true that at that level I think, maybe not worldwide, but I
22		think that for a long time too, I don't know how many years, so maybe also
23		that it's been a long while uh, the expertise on the field, how to work with
24		tenants, how to try and convince them to file complaints or to give the
25		information they need, uh, on the field he's got a big expertise too at that
26		level.
27		
28	**Patricia**:	I think that the capacity to organize media actions in fact that have an
29		important impact like exactly by making tenants testify, by inviting the
30		tenants, it's the implication of tenants, and it allows us to really show, very
31		directly, what are the housing conditions, so mobilizing, I would say, the
32		mobilization for political action.
33		
34	**Viviane:**	Are we still talking about the expertise of Charles or of the organization?
35		
36	**Patricia:**	Of the organization in general ((laughs))
37		
38	**Dylan:**	They're very related, unfortunately.
39		
40	**Patricia:**	No, but listen, it's not just because she's ((Ann)) here, but for example the
41		press conference that we did during the city elections, it's Ann who did all
42		the work with the tenants, it was excellent, Diane too, yes Charles, I do not
43		deny Charles, but I think that it was broader than a single person, it's the
44		group.
45		
46	**Dylan:**	It's the team, but the reason why I am insisting is that I think Ann has a
47		good point, there's got to be a way to extirpate Charles from the
48		organization without losing everything he brings, but I think it's a
49		conclusion the organization must come to given Charles' age, which is sad,
50		but if we want to get to that conclusion, then it will have to be done.

Presentifying: To Viviane's question about how to describe the organization's expertise

"in your words" (lines 1-2), Ann responds by naming one of her older colleagues, Charles (line

5). Embodying expertise in that single name – in addition to being a surprising move that she

recognizes with a laugh – presentifies what will turn out to be an important matter of concern:

the concentration of organizational knowledge in a single person, in a context where Charles told

Ann that he would be leaving ("… when he leaves, he told me…"; line 6).

Substantiating: Ann then proceeds to support her claim that Charles is the organization's expert. She gives substance to that claim through a question ("how would we get on" (line 6)) and by describing him as "the bible" (lines 6-7), but especially through the anecdote of specialized lawyers coming and asking "us" questions (line 8). Interestingly, it is "us" to whom the questions are addressed, and not only Charles, which may indicate that Charles' expertise is also that of the organization. On lines 12-16, Olivia, Susan and Ann add their voices to establish Charles' importance in the organization. Similarly, Dylan (lines 18-26) provides a long list of elements on which Charles is an expert in terms of housing law, as well as examples of his expertise in community organizing in the field.

Patricia then continues, between lines 28 and 32, the effort to list Charles' expertise, with the example of getting tenants involved in media events. These are further substantiations of the matter of concern at hand: Charles does hold a lot of expertise. At that point, on line 34, Viviane, the facilitator, appears confused as to whether the conversation is still about Charles' own expertise or whether it has moved to the organization's. On lines 36 and 38, Patricia (including through her laugh) and Dylan jointly establish that both are very tightly connected, thus again materializing the matter of concern by stating it more clearly.

Attributing and crystallizing: Patricia then tries, on lines 44 to 44, to give back some agency to the organization, meaning that she tries to show that it is able to handle the situation concerning Charles' concentration of expertise. Her attempt consists in showing that other people in the organization also have some expertise, by citing Ann and Diane's work with the media and tenants during the past city elections, a position she summarizes as "it's the group" (lines 43-44). Dylan then offers what appears to crystalize a course of action as he reiterates and substantiates this position by nearly repeating Patricia's point in slightly different words: "It's

the team" (line 46). However, for Dylan, the fact that the team has the ability to do some things

without Charles, as Patricia points out, does not deny the problem of Charles' concentration of

expertise ("I think Ann has a good point"; lines 46-47). He proposes a course of action that both

recognizes the group's ability to play an active role in this situation and takes seriously the

problem: they must admit the problem and find a way of "to extirpate Charles from the

organization" (lines 47-48) without losing his knowledge.

Conclusion to Excerpt 4: Ann makes a matter of concern – the concentration of expertise

in Charles and his imminent departure – very salient by using his name to materialize the issue.

This surprising response was perhaps in part made possible by the way Viviane initially

formulated her question, letting people use their "own words." We see here another example of

how the researchers participate, to some extent, in materializing some matters of concern. The

ensuing joint effort to substantiate this matter of concern with more examples of Charles'

expertise demonstrates that this is, indeed, an important issue. It is highly strategic, as the

examples cover a wide array of domains, thus suggesting that the organization had been putting

all of its eggs in the same basket, and that it may run the risk of losing its ability to conduct many

of its activities. Arguably, participants appeared to be building up the seriousness of the matter of

concern without being sure as to what to do about it. until Patricia's attempt to give back some

agency to the organization on line 40-44, and then Dylan's final intervention, which offers the

beginning of an action plan, namely to "extirpate" Charles from the organization.

[INSERT TABLE 2 HERE]

Discussion

Our analysis reveals how strategizing takes place through the material features of talk and

interaction, which we have identified as a materializing process. A matter of concern is

presentified in the way it is expressed: it is not brought into the interaction in the abstract; it is

uttered in a specific way that makes it available for others in equally specific ways. A matter of

concern may be first materialized, for example, as a reference to small buildings, a flyer, a

statistical figure, a procedure to file complaints or a person, making the matter of concern

differently available to be probed and assessed by others. After it is first presentified, the matter

of concern will gain strategic importance if it can be substantialized in more ways – including

through others' turns of talk, their gazes and nods, etc. – thus making it matter more. However,

alternative or opposing positions can also be substantiated through further materializations,

depending on how the interaction unfolds, possibly bringing to the table new matters of concern.

Matters of concern are assessed based on the actions that should or could be taken with

respect to them, i.e., in terms of agency. For an issue to be strategic, participants must attribute

the matter of concern, and the ability to do something about it, to the organization (or to its

representatives). Otherwise, if the matter of concern or the ability to do something about it

pertains to something or someone else, then either the issue does not concern the organization –

it does not matter to them – or the organization is unable to address it. Once this determination is

made, a course of action may crystallize as the conversation reaches a closure. It is only once the

matter of concern goes through the whole process that participants know what to do about it.

In these above excerpts, we did not observe people writing down minutes or taking notes,

except the researchers / facilitators themselves. Texts, of course, are a privileged form of

materialization, and may contribute to crystallizing strategy, as they contribute to displacing

issues and decisions raised during conservation outside of the specific moment of the interaction

(what has been referred to as "dislocation," see Cooren and Fairhurst, 2008). Indeed, in future

conversations, people may be guided by documents they prepared, including agendas (Cooren et

al., 2015) and notes from previous meetings (Vásquez et al., 2018), thus allowing the strategizing

through materializing process to continue on beyond a single conversation. In this case, our notes

(as action researchers) helped us prepare a final strategic plan and other suggestions to the

organization that were crucial in the organization's future.

Thinking of strategizing as the sequence of presentifying, substantiating, attributing and

crystallizing makes at least four contributions to the strategy literature, and most particularly to

the field of strategy-as-practice. First, it is of methodological relevance as it draws attention to

the concrete and observable processes through which an issue becomes strategic for an

organization, or is dismissed. As we have demonstrated, it offers a tangible and actionable

analytical apparatus to turn the researcher's attention to the talk where strategy is formulated in

the first place. Second, and relatedly, such a view of strategizing turns attention to the initial

establishment of what is strategic or not – a critical step that is often overlooked. Third, the

notion of relative autonomy highlights that strategizing is a creative and surprising process that

cannot be reduced to any particular person's control. Finally, avoiding the bifurcation between

materiality and communication allows us to reconcile two streams of the strategy-as-practice

literature, namely strategizing and materiality, and strategy-as-talk.

Observing the materialization of strategizing

Our study shows that, through progressive materialization, seemingly abstract ideas take

flesh. In other words, there is no such thing as a disembodied concern, belief, value, interest, etc.

From the moment it is expressed, a concern takes on a precise form, through specific words and

gestures, and possibly through graphs, pictures and documents (as in Paroutis et al., 2015), or

fails to do so in the case of silence or hesitation. These are what other participants deal with in

the interaction, i.e., how the concern is available to them. Non-verbal materializations make

evident that strategy is not only about putting into words opinions or preferences, but that all features of an interaction may contribute to strategizing. As our analyses revealed, these specific materializations provide the particular form in which the matter of concern can be discussed: whether buildings are big or small, whether flyers can be written in multiple languages, whether immigrant populations come to the office or not, and so forth.

From a methodological standpoint, this is important as it means that the way something becomes strategic or not is available to be observed and even recorded, as was done for this study. Other studies have adopted a similar research approach, in particular by drawing on ethnomethodology and conversation analysis (e.g., Kwon et al., 2014; Samra-Fredericks, 2003), but they were preoccupied with what goes on during strategic conversations, rather than directly answering the question of how a matter of concern *becomes* strategic. Similarly, other studies that paid attention to materiality in strategy-making did not look at how materiality plays a part in determining what is strategic or not (e.g., Carlile, 2015; Dameron et al., 2015).

In contrast, we propose that by observing *how* people talk, write and interact, we also witness matters of concern progressively gaining materiality *through* communication. Their materiality at once refers to their physical presence in the interaction and to their strategic importance for interactants. Strategy is not only a rational, cognitive problem, as if it occurred in people's mind and was then shared with others or imposed on them through persuasion. If it were so, we would be merely looking at people attempting to persuade each other to adopt their preferred strategy. Persuasion has its place in the strategic process as a whole. However, thinking in terms of gradual materialization offers a constitutive view of communication (Cooren et al., 2015) that accounts for how an issue becomes strategic, and elucidates how strategizing happens.

Another methodological contribution relates to our study's action-research approach. Action-research led us to reflect on our role as researchers and facilitators in the becoming of the strategy effort we observed. This role fluctuated among the three main researchers. As an insider, Nicolas engaged in discussions as a full-fledged participant of the organization. Consuelo was an "empathetic outsider" and (discursively) allowed herself into the organization as a means to provoke reactions or raise questions among participants, while Viviane was a distanced outsider, who facilitated the conversation by inviting the organization's members and partners to speak in their own terms, and engaged only minimally in the interaction. Each researcher's role varied depending on their relationship with the organization and, thus, their level of engagement, as well as their communication styles. However, in all cases we did participate, like any other person around the table, and to different degrees, in materializing a matter of concern, and in its strategic becoming. Our presence obviously had an effect on how strategizing took place, as we helped perform specific understandings of strategy (see Vásquez et al., 2018). That being said, and in agreement with action-research methodologies, we did not approach the organization with an *a priori* set of research questions that could have led us to steer strategizing in one particular direction. In addition, these notes, but also the other documents and materials we collected, as well as François' role as an outsider on the research team (Bartunek, 2008; Evered and Louis, 1981), allowed us to maintain professional distance in our analysis (Anteby, 2013).

Establishing what is of strategic relevance

Theoretical speaking, our study elucidates how some issues gain strategic importance in the first place. Our findings respond to Gond, Cabantous and Krikorian's (2018) recent call to explain "how things become strategic." Few studies have considered this initial step of the strategizing process. Indeed, much attention in strategy-as-practice scholarship was devoted to

the transmission and sharing of already-formulated strategy to other people and audiences within

and around the organizations, and to the way strategy is made sense of and transformed by those

individuals and groups (e.g. Arnaud et al., 2016; Asmuß and Aggerholm, 2016; Teulier and

Rouleau, 2013). Gond et al. (2018) situated the work of "strategifying," as they call it, in

practices such as cognitive, relational and material coupling, without making explicit how these

rely on communication. We complement their ideas by showing that strategizing work takes

place in concrete communicative and interactive practices, namely: presentifying an issue as

matter of concern, substantiating this concern, attributing it or attributing the course of action to

the organization or one of its a representative, and crystallizing this decision.

Remaining open to surprise

The notion of matters of concern stresses the relative autonomy – a "life of their own" –

that matters of concern gain once they are materialized (Asmuß and Aggerholm, 2016; Vásquez

et al., 2016). In the same way that we can say that a person's words have betrayed them, a matter

of concern can be assessed, including by the person who formulates it initially, precisely because

it does not "belong" to that person but becomes publicly available once uttered. This is what

happens, for instance, in Excerpt 1, when Damian realizes that he can himself substantiate a

position contrary to his initial proposal, or in Excerpt 3, when Consuelo's intervention leads

Janice to think back at what she said and to provide further substantiation for her proposal.

People, in that sense, may come to the strategy table with competing interests to negotiate

(e.g., Kaplan, 2010), but what happens in the interaction cannot be reduced to some negotiation

among those interests. Once an interest is made present in some material way – either through

specific words, a graph, numbers or otherwise – then it stops being only its author's idea, and has

the potential to become constraining – a "matter of authority" (Vásquez et al., 2018) – including

by contradicting its own author (Cooren, 2010). However, this autonomy is always 'relative' as it depends on how the matter of concern is put to work in the interaction. We here align with relational ontologies that assume that "everything that is has no existence apart from its relation to other things" (Langley and Tsoukas, 2010: 3): as our analysis shows, matters of concern are intrinsically related to those that voice them, or are opposed to them.

Avoiding the bifurcation between materiality and communication in strategy research

Finally, our findings sit right at the intersection of strategy studies on materiality and those on discourse. Through our theoretical and methodological approaches, we have shown that these streams do not have to remain separate. Researchers do not have to "choose" one over the other as both complement each other, empirically and conceptually. Our proposal goes beyond the idea that people use tools and objects during their strategy-making efforts and discuss them as part of their conversations, which is already well accepted (Arnaud et al., 2016; Paroutis et al., 2015). What our findings show is that communication is material *in itself* (Cooren, 2018).

Thinking in terms of the materiality of communication also stresses the notion of degree of materiality (Cooren, 2015). This notion refers to how things, objects, people, organizations and concerns are more or less materialized through communication. The four communicative practices we identified operationalize this idea of degree of materialization. Indeed, for an issue to become strategic it must go through a series of instantiations that can solidify the issue – or will dismiss it. The question here is less about how materiality participates in strategizing, and more about the degree of materialization needed for a concern to become strategic.

Conclusion: Clarifying Strategy-as-Practice's Underlying Theory of Communication

Our study has shown that it is fruitful to look at the details of interaction, in order to study *how* people create strategy in the first place. Following the central premise of strategy-as-practice, that strategy is something that people *do*, we have argued and shown that this doing rests crucially on communicative practices – and, even more, that these practices are the means through which strategizing occurs, via the material features of interaction. We contend that viewing communication as materialization would be highly coherent with strategy-as-practice's interest in showing that strategy is something that is concretely *done*, communicative practices being one of the most pervasive ways in which this doing takes place.

Our proposal can also be read as an attempt to specify how strategy-as-practice conceives of communication, a necessary clarification given the importance this line of research gives to communicative practices. Emphasizing communication's materiality allows us to reinterpret some of strategy-as-practice's central themes and also opens up new avenues. For instance, it would allow researchers to take seriously strategy-as-practice research on sensemaking, by insisting on *how* sense, exactly, is *made*. For the moment, this research tends to present communication as a way for people to share their private interpretations through various channels, even though research has shown that narratives (Fenton and Langley, 2011) or other sensegiving practices (Corvellec and Risberg, 2007; Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991) are in fact collective achievements.

Finally, developments in strategy-as-practice also rest on researchers' methodological choices. When data collection offers better granularity – compared to typical interview-based research – as is the case with video data, it becomes possible not to divorce communication from its material dimension. Only at such a level of detail can research apprehend how people jointly

achieve meaning, a preoccupation that is at the heart of interaction-based research traditions such

as ethnomethodology. In particular, to the extent that it acknowledges the materiality of

communication, future research will be better able to tackle how strategizing occurs without

words, through gestures and other non-verbal elements. Such inclusions can expand pioneering

work that has attempted to draw attention to interactional details in strategy research (see

Neyland and Whittle, 2018). Paying close attention to the minutiae of mundane interactions, we

can attend finely to the process through which strategizing emerges and proceeds; neglecting

what might be considered as trivial details, we may in fact be missing the crux of strategizing.

Table 1: Summary of the strategizing through materializing process

Communicative Practice	*Its part in the materializing process*	*How it can be observed*	*Example*
Presentifying	Bringing an issue to the interaction by giving it a particular material presence – specific words, graphical representations, documents, gestures, etc.	Finding the first introduction of an idea, proposal, worry, suggestion, etc. in the way people talk, draw, move, use artefacts or otherwise behave.	Someone saying, "What should we do about the tenants on Appleyard Street?" suggests that this group of people is defined by their status as tenants, that their particular street is of special relevance, and that there is prior agreement that something has to be done about them.
Substantiating	Offering additional materializations to the same matter of concern. In other words, making it present in additional material forms: different words, numbers, drawings, etc.	Looking for how other utterances, graphs, gestures, etc. materialize in a different way the same element. Also, looking for how these are *not* done, through silence or omission.	A second person repeating the question with a concerned tone; showing Appleyard Street on a map; invoking the tenants' complaints concerning their dwellings; nobody reacting to a suggestion; etc.
Attributing	Establishing whether the organization (or one of its representatives) must do something, or has the ability to do something, about the concern being expressed and has the ability to do so.	Observing how materializations position the organization as active (or not) in dealing with the concerns being considered. Also, identifying how failure to formulate answers may indicate people's lack of skill or agency concerning the issue at hand.	Describing the tenants as the organization's responsibility: "They are our members!"; representing possible actions as being within its capacity: "Appleyard Street is right next door"; not knowing how to express an idea: "Uh… Maybe we should… Hmm… I don't know."
Crystallizing	Summarizing the matters of concern and the organization's action with respect to it in a last materialization.	Determining whether an utterance, gesture or other materialization suggests a course of action that the organization should pursue with respect to the issue at hand.	One participant concluding, "So, let's go there and see what's going on"; notes being taken in minutes; a mark being done on the map.

Table 2: Summary of the analyses

	Are there small buildings in the district? (1)	Are we doing a decent job with languages? (2:1)	Are mental health issues our concern? (2:2)	From pressuring the city to mobilizing tenants (3)	The organization's expertise (4)
Presentifying	Suggesting that owners of small buildings must be dealt with differently.	Evoking the creation of a flyer in several languages for immigrant tenants.	Providing statistics to move the focus mental health issues.	Suggesting concrete action to put pressure on landlords and on the city.	Answering a question about the organization's expertise by naming one person who is about to retire.
Substantiating	Embodying the concern by evoking people around the table. Questioning whether there are small buildings in the district. Remaining silent (and thus not offering substantiation)	Verifying whether the flyer can be written in several languages. Providing evidence that the team does a decent job with languages and to reach to immigrant communities.	Supporting the idea explicitly, saying that it is indeed an important issue.	Asking the first speaker to substantiate her idea and identify the agent of those actions. The first speaker evokes the process to file a complaint to identify mobilizing tenants as the true concern.	Giving examples and arguments that demonstrate that expertise lies in that person.
Attributing	n/a	n/a	Doubting that the organization has the skills, in content and through the partial verbalizations that express this doubt	Questioning whether the organization may file a complaint by itself or not.	Showing that the organization can do something about Charles' expertise.
Crystallizing	n/a	n/a	Identifying an organization that would be better positioned to tackle this issue.	Confirming that the organization's role is to mobilize tenants.	Determining that the organization's agency consists in preserving Charles' expertise once he leaves.
Outcome	Concern dismissed	Concern dismissed	Becomes a strategic issue, but one that does not belong to the organization.	A new concern emerges while substantiating a first concern. Attribution of agency generates hesitation about the role of the organization.	The concern's strategic character is clearly established, and it is determined the organization should do something about it.

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