Journal of Multicultural Discourses

ISSN: 1744-7143 (Print) 1747-6615 (Online) Journal homepage: http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rmmd20

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To cite this article: Lisa Rudnick & David Boromisza-Habashi (2017): The emergence of a local strategies approach to human security, Journal of Multicultural Discourses, DOI: 10.1080/17447143.2017.1365079

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17447143.2017.1365079

Published online: 21 Aug 2017.

JOURNAL OF MULTICULTURAL DISCOURSES, 2017
https://doi.org/10.1080/17447143.2017.1365079

The emergence of a local strategies approach to human security

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ABSTRACT

We consider the contributions that the study of discourse and security can make to international efforts to improve conditions of human security through the study of discourses of security in local socio-cultural contexts. We begin by discussing an applied program of work conducted at the United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR) between 2007 and 2014. This program of work began by developing a cooperative approach to community Security Needs Assessments, and subsequently created a process of Evidence-Based Design to support UN staff in the explicit integration of local knowledge as a key resource in the design of security-related policies and programs. We describe how this work drew from the ethnography of communication, the practical challenges its developers encountered in rendering such knowledge program-relevant, and how this led them to conceptualize a focus on local strategies for the task of UN program design. We reflect on the potential of local strategies research (LSR) for addressing applied challenges in human security, what a LSR agenda on security could look like, and how this might be expanded in dialogue with the vernacular security approach to discourse and security.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 16 April 2017
Accepted 1 August 2017

KEYWORDS
Security; ethnography of communication; culture; applied research; evidence-based design; local strategies

The world's human security environment has undergone significant change in recent decades. Conflicts between states are no longer the greatest threat to human security: 90 percent of conflicts initiated in the twenty-first century were in countries that had already experienced a civil war, meaning that many places experience ongoing cycles of violence (Walter 2011). These cycles of violence contribute to present conditions in which humanitarian need is outstripping the capacity of the international community to keep pace. Between 2002 and 2013, 86 per cent of resources requested through United Nations (UN) humanitarian appeals were destined for humanitarian action in conflict situations ('The Peace Promise'). Indeed, protracted conflicts of eight years or more make up two thirds of all humanitarian assistance. At the same time, there is growing recognition that the *ways* in which many forms of assistance are delivered (especially humanitarian assistance, but also development) may be contributing to the very cycles of violence and conflict they aim to address (Anderson 1999; Petřik 2008; Wood and Sullivan 2015).

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At a time in which 97 percent of humanitarian aid is delivered in situations of complex emergencies (i.e. bearing conflict elements) (United Nations 2017), communities themselves are the front lines along which challenges to human security, and the policies and interventions devised to address them, play out. In such contexts, questions and consequences of security take on a decidedly *local* aspect.

In this article, we consider the contributions that studies of discourse and security can make to international efforts to improve conditions of security. Specifically, we argue that the study of situated practices of security in local socio-cultural contexts produces findings that can be useful for taking steps to localize international efforts to improve security conditions in local contexts. We begin by discussing an applied program of work on a range of local-level security concerns conducted at the United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR) between 2007 and 2014. Dedicated to improving the effectiveness of UN interventions in addressing the needs of affected people, this program of work began by developing a cooperative approach to community Security Needs Assessments (Miller and Rudnick 2008), and subsequently creating a process of evidence-based design (EBD) (Miller and Rudnick 2012, 2014) for UN field staff for the explicit integration of this knowledge in the design of policies and programs.

Discourse and security

Within the communication discipline, those who study the relationship between discourse and security seek to understand how power-laden systems of symbolic resources and meanings can be mobilized to render security conditions real and relevant to people's everyday lives. Further, the study of this relationship helps us understand how the control of discourse about security conditions shapes how people act, think, and feel within those conditions (Taylor et al. 2017). Our take on discourse is partly aligned with this program of research. As we discuss below, due to their roots in EC, both the Security Needs Assessment Protocol (SNAP) and the EBD process are interested in uncovering 'the structures of meaning that guide (i.e. enable and constrain) speakers in both their *conceptualization* and *accomplishment* of security' (118, emphasis in original), particularly in post-conflict and crisis-affected communities. However, where that UN-related work – and therefore our discussion – diverges from the discourse approach is that its ultimate end-in-view is application rather than description and critique. Through Miller and Rudnick's program of work, we focus on how learning about community-level discourses of security can provide human security practitioners with crucial resources for designing strategic interventions and engagements for improving conditions. From this applied perspective, complex local systems of meaning become a practical asset when they can be used explicitly in the design of strategic action (Miller 2009; Miller and Rudnick 2010; Miller and Rudnick 2011). Such action, we might add, may or may not involve explicit reference to local discourses of security.

In the following sections we sketch how Miller and Rudnick's work introduced a focus on *culture, discourse*, and *social action* into community security research at UNIDIR. Next, we recount how in encountering certain discursive struggles in their work they came to identify *local strategies* as a key asset for designing better local interventions, and therefore began to develop an approach to local strategies research (LSR). Finally, we extend an

invitation to security scholars, particularly those interested in vernacular security (Bubandt 2005; Jarvis and Lister 2012; Luckham and Kirk 2013), to aid the development of a theory of local strategies.

The challenge of localization

The idea that aid and assistance must be 'localized' in order to be effective is by now widely accepted across the various sectors of the international system. However, actors at all levels of the system continue to grapple with how to achieve localization in practice (Guay and Rudnick 2017a). While not a new idea, it has most recently taken shape as its own agenda, thematizing system-wide calls for 'locally tailored solutions', and featuring prominently in, for example, the present humanitarian reform agenda of the World Humanitarian Summit held in 2016 in Istanbul. On the one hand, international actors (such as donor governments, operational agencies, and civil society organizations) use the term localization to refer to a shift in roles and responsibilities between international and local actors that underscores the 'need to support and maximize the role of local, national and regional actors in humanitarian action' (United Nations General Assembly 2016). On the other hand, Guay and Rudnick 'assert that localization must also refer to the imperative that definitions of local problems, and solutions created to address them, be explicitly informed by (if not actually derived from) local systems of practice and meaning' (Guay and Rudnick 2017b, 18). Localization in the former sense compels us to reconsider the way our local (operational and political) partnerships are designed, composed, conducted and evaluated, and towards what ends (Rudnick et al. 2016). In the latter sense, localization compels us to rethink what it means to identify problems and create responses in ways that are not just 'tailored to local needs', but are also reflective of local socio-cultural systems in which they will play out (Guay and Rudnick 2017b, 18). In other words, this way of thinking about localization looks beyond the idea of adapting external approaches to local socio-cultural contexts, and toward the goal of adopting processes for creating new ones from local contexts.

Achieving this kind of change in the context of local-level security programming requires a fundamental shift in perspective, away from the assumption of 'security' as a universally agreed set of conditions, toward the recognition of 'security' as socio-cultural phenomenon. In other words, it requires the recognition that meanings of security vary around the world, and that these meanings shape the actions people take, and the sense people make of the actions of others. The absence of this recognition among practitioners and decision-makers has long been a barrier to effective engagement in local socio-cultural contexts.

For example, Miller and Rudnick (2008) cite a 2005 study conducted by the Feinstein International Famine Center at Tufts University (Donini et al. 2005) which found that peace support operations (PSOs) and assistance agencies (AAs) 'tend to define security in their own terms, with little cross-referral, and that the security needs, aspirations and priorities of the local communities are imperfectly understood by both the military and humanitarians' (35). This study revealed that

> PSOs, AAs and local communities constitute three distinct but overlapping worlds, with significantly different understandings of peace and security. As regards the outside actors – that is, PSOs and AAs – some of these differences, as would be expected, are due to institutional mandates, agendas, and functions. Others are due to their limited interest in, and analysis of, local

> community perceptions. Local communities have their own histories, agendas, idiosyncrasies and perceived needs as well. (52)

The operational consequences of this, especially as this pertains to matters of local security that permeate across humanitarian, security, and development programming, have been high. More than 10 years ago the UN Executive Committee on Humanitarian Affairs observed that

> [t]he ability to sensitise a mission to the perceptions, expectations and attitudes of local populations is directly related to a mission's success, and effective management [of relationships with the host government and society] is an important problem-solving tool. […] [T]his lack of two-way communication between mission and society allows minor incidents to take on major importance and impact, and in extreme cases, can derail a mission. (Eide et al. 2005, 35)

Despite the important recognition that 'local communities have their own histories, agendas, idiosyncrasies and perceived needs', the central operational challenge remained largely unaddressed. For Miller and Rudnick (2008), the point was this:

> Designing services [or interventions] for local communities cannot be founded on *our* perceptions of local communities if they are seriously intended to have ownership. What is needed rather are 'understandings of understandings not our own' (Geertz 1983, 5) that is, trying to comprehend the perspective of the community in their cultural manner. Failure to make this transition—from our own understandings of the local, to the *local* view of the local—will mask the underlying social systems that we engage on a daily basis in operational work. As the reasons for local practices vary, and the common terms we use to describe them can hide local meanings, operational agencies of all types are reaching a common impasse when trying to achieve better operational effectiveness through participation and ownership in the absence of a means to overcome this conceptual problem. (19–20)

A response to the challenge: the SNAP project

In recognition of this challenge for implementing actors, and the consequences for affected communities, Miller and Rudnick launched the SNAP project. SNAP was a project of UNIDIR that was undertaken to develop a cooperative approach for rapidly conducting empirically based qualitative research with local actors to learn about the security needs of communities, and it offered a collaborative approach for assisting UN staff and local partners to apply the findings to the design of local-level interventions (Miller and Rudnick 2009[1]).

SNAP's intellectual foundations consisted of three basic assumptions. First, Miller and Rudnick assumed that security was a rich socio-cultural concept, the linguistic expressions and meanings of which could vary across cultural contexts, as could communities' ways of enacting or accomplishing such locally defined security. Second, they assumed that research could uncover such variation. Third, they assumed that understanding the concepts and practices of security active in different places and among different people, and recognizing how these may be different from the assumptions that shape action originating from outside of communities on security matters, was essential for improving conditions in locally relevant, ethical, and durable ways.

Miller and Rudnick were motivated to develop SNAP by the observation that, despite the obvious importance of such socio-cultural knowledge for effective engagement on matters of security and peacebuilding in local cultural contexts, they encountered two

gaps. On the one hand, they did not see such information either being required for, or explicitly used in, the design of programs. On the other hand, they found no tools, techniques, or assessment guides that focused on the generation of such knowledge as part of the assessment system – a system that is part and parcel of international programming cycles. They concluded that a key barrier to international programs achieving better impact – whether in the security, development, humanitarian, or peacebuilding sectors – derived partly from these gaps.

From the very beginning, then, Miller and Rudnick's primary motivation at UNIDIR was to *help improve the impact of interventions for people living in conditions of insecurity*. *Local* discourses of security, they reasoned, were an important resource for enabling engagement among diverse actors for creating such impact. But this practical, empirical goal meant that, ultimately, the center of gravity for their efforts had to be the explicit *use* of local knowledge in the design of situated action (which is what programs and interventions are). In other words, their focus had to be the applied move.

To address this challenge required an approach that explicitly addressed two tasks: rapidly generating previously unavailable, strategically relevant local knowledge, and integrating this knowledge in the design of policies and programs. Taking the recognition of security as a socio-cultural phenomenon as their starting point, Miller and Rudnick designed security needs assessments to reveal a range of the security needs in a given community, as defined and understood from the point of view of local experience. This represented a departure from other approaches to needs assessments shaped by narrow definitions of thematic concerns, devised to reduce security into quantifiable indicators that could be identified and measured in any location. Examples of such indicators include a reduction in the frequency of violent incidents, and the degree of compliance with standards (i.e. agreements, legal frameworks, and other policy instruments), to mention two. In contrast, Miller and Rudnick devised the SNAP approach to identify and interpret a range of local concepts, meanings and practices around 'security', and to discern from them those elements that were central to ameliorating problems in a cooperative manner through local programming.

Miller and Rudnick drew their investigation of security as socio-cultural action from a range of approaches. The work of early International Relations theorists such as Laswell, Bozeman, and McDougal was influential in their conceptualization of an agenda of work for the study of security. The work of scholars in discursive psychology (Harré), interpretive anthropology (Geertz), and most significantly the ethnography of communication (EC) (Philipsen, Carbaugh) was foundational in both conceptualizing and investigating socio-cultural action as systems of practice and meaning, and also in furnishing an orientation to discourse suitable for the practice and goals of community assessments. A small group of scholars working across these approaches were invited to serve as an Advisory Group to SNAP, including among others Donal Carbaugh, Tamar Katriel, Randolph Kent, Gerry Philipsen, Ron Scollon, and Kwesi Yankah.

For research methods, SNAP tapped into the EC research tradition. EC is an approach featuring its own philosophy, theory, and methodology as 'a way to analyze communication as a cultural resource' (Carbaugh 1995, 269). EC defines culture as 'a socially constructed and historically transmitted pattern of symbols, meanings, premises, and rules' (Philipsen 1992, 7). Taking communication as the primary social process, EC treats discourse as the primary site of social organization. In the EC tradition, the discourse

concept points to communication practices whose forms and meanings are culturally variable, where communication practices refer to patterns of situated, message endowed communicative action (Carbaugh et al. 1997) that is always *accountable* (i.e. subject to challenge and explanation; Boromisza-Habashi and Parks 2014). Contrary to other, broader perspectives on discourse (e.g. Gee 2006), this approach grounds discourse firmly in the realm of the observable use of language for accomplishing communication as an element of coordinated social action. Studies produced in this tradition and the related approach of cultural communication (e.g. Philipsen 1987, 2002) share an assumptive base that regards communication as patterned; as socially and culturally variable; and as constitutive of socio-cultural life at least in some part (Philipsen 1992; Carbaugh and Boromisza-Habashi 2015).

> Ethnographers of communication are centrally interested in describing culturally variable systems of meaningful expression as resources for participation in everyday life. Ethnographers working in this tradition explore such systems in order to learn about cultural discourses, or 'basic beliefs and values about persons, social relations, communication itself, and nature' (Carbaugh 1996, 206) that inform expression. (Miller and Rudnick 2009, 13)

Anchoring SNAP in EC's theoretical orientation, then,

> identified the type of knowledge of central concern for such assessments (cultural); specified a range of relevant approaches for the generation and analysis of data (qualitative); identified the kinds of claims possible on the basis of such an orientation (interpretive); and indicated the general units of analysis relevant to such investigation (cultural discourses). (Miller and Rudnick 2009, 13)

This approach allowed the researcher to treat communication not as a transparent window on the minds and actions of community members but rather as describable, interpretable practice where ideas take shape and actions are endowed with local meaning.[2]

SNAP's use of EC contrasts with other ethnographic approaches being applied to security studies, such as those prevalent in International Relations. Working within the critical tradition, the focus of such work has been to document the imprint of conflict, violence, and the security state on everyday practices for the purpose of formulating social critique (Salter 2013). SNAP, by contrast, was conceived to generate local knowledge about communal security practices for the sake of designing more effective interventions. In other words, Miller and Rudnick used ethnography in the applied mode (Sprain and Boromisza-Habashi 2013), that is, for the dual purpose of creating a shared orientation to particular problems among multiple stakeholders and seeking workable solutions to those problems.

SNAP also presented a different approach to community assessment from others such as Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA) and Participatory Action Research (PAR) both of which are widely used especially in development and peacebuilding work. Although they use many of the same methods of data collection as SNAP (such as local observations, open-ended interviews, and in-depth interviews), RRA's and PAR's analytic goal is to capture local perceptions, attitudes, and opinions about topics of interest (e.g. to be addressed by interventions) evident in community members' solicited talk. In contrast, SNAP's basis in EC meant its analytic goal was to understand the cultural logic that *informed* members' expressed perceptions and opinions, logics often located beyond community members' awareness,

but observable in spontaneous and solicited talk, as well as in a range of other forms of communication (religious, artistic, political, legal, etc.) and practices.

Taking this view of security as social action, SNAP assessments directed attention to:

- observing and describing socio-cultural practices – including, but not limited to, discourse – that people engaged in and understood as related to 'security',
- learning the local system that made such practices intelligible as (or as related to) security to the people engaged in them (whether or not they seemed reasonable, relevant, or rational from an outsider's perspective) from what people have to say about 'security', and
- interpreting these systems in terms of cultural discourses immanent in them so they could be attended to both conceptually and practically.

SNAP's goal was a pragmatic one: to render the local knowledge of communities visible, relevant, and usable to implementing agencies addressing matters of community security. At the very least, the findings generated could form a basis for identifying differences between the assumptions shaping policy, or guiding agency approaches and engagement, and local systems of practice and meaning. Another use could be in interpreting reports of 'security incidents' generated from the point of view of external systems. These could include technical systems for recording incidents of crime, violence, and a range of human rights violations, as well as findings from other forms of assessments that did not include a cultural element. SNAP findings could be combined with this broader range of technical security assessments in the creation of a holistic 'security profile' that created new opportunities for understanding the relationship between, for example, large-scale security challenges, their local iterations, and creating strategies to address them.

In response to this discussion of SNAP, a challenge could be raised concerning the extent to which SNAP was able to transcend the bureaucratic – and perhaps also 'West-centric' (Shi-xu 2016) – constraints on understanding local discourses of security. After all, SNAP's mandate derived from the bureaucratic system of the UN itself, inevitably bringing into play agency discourse in shaping the nature of the security concerns to be addressed in any given engagement. By taking a strictly interpretive approach to discourses of security and the cultural discourses immanent in them, did SNAP inadvertently reproduce the discourses it was designed to counter? One answer is to note that although SNAP was committed to the important project of tilting the playing field toward of greater recognition and inclusion of less powerful communal discourses in official ones (Shi-xu, 2016) its main objective was to go beyond merely locating differences between discourses of security, or using such discourses to provide mere 'context' for operations (as crucial as both are). Instead, its mission was to generate information about relevant local practice and meaning as a key resource that could be employed as the basis for design and decision-making practices (Miller 2007; Miller and Rudnick 2008). Thus, SNAP, as a program located and deployed from within the UN's institutional framework, was not in the business of either crafting or fostering community-level oppositional discourses (Huspek 2006), but in that of creating space and legitimacy for local discourses to emerge, even and especially when these contrasted with institutionally grounded discourses. In this way, SNAP sought to function as a catalyst between institutional and

local discourses of security for the purpose of fostering more informed, locally accountable, and successful joint action (e.g. based upon shared goals), even in the face of contrasting practices, premises, and meanings.

From local needs to local strategies: lessons from and for application

Using the basic principles of EC to orient a research agenda for learning about local discourses of security proved highly generative. Each field test of SNAP confirmed that employing an ethnographically oriented approach to matters of human security, in situ and in SNAP's integrated teams, generated findings and insights that began to address the gap in socio-cultural knowledge about security in cultural contexts. But they also began to highlight challenges in the usability of such findings for purpose of program and policy design.

The first pilot of the SNAP approach took place in northern Ghana in 2007 with a team of distinguished researchers from the University of Ghana, Legon. The site was selected for this initial pilot at the suggestion of Prof. Kwesi Yankah, University of Ghana, Legon. Some years earlier violence had erupted in a 'three-day war' between the Abudu and Adani Gates in the Dagbon Traditional Area, resulting in the death of Andani chief Ya-Na, Yakubu Andani II, and several others. Although the UN had long-standing involvement in the area through programs on community security, development, and social cohesion, the impression from community members was that this programming had been largely ineffective. The team endeavored to learn something about the cultural logic of 'security' active among community members engaged in long-standing, though presently contained, tensions.

The SNAP team quickly found that there was no term for 'security' in Dagbani. Instead, community members used the key term 'protection' and an associated vocabulary of terms, translated as 'peace', 'disunity', and 'violence'. The team found that

> [t]here is a cultural logic around "protection" here (a term that emerged as more relevant and significant than 'security' and that rendered 'security' a term that did *not* have cultural resonance among Dagbani speakers). This logic involves concepts, norms, rules, and values about specific forms and practices of social action. (Rudnick and Miller, 2007, 7–9)

For example, there are kinds of talk that are understood as powerful and highly consequential by community members, such as rumors ('nama fila'), lies, and 'useless talk' ('yali yali' talk). Such actions cause disunity ('nangbang kpeni') and mistrust, and have a range of 'bad effects', like preventing economic cooperation with neighbors, destroying families and marriages, and diminishing important 'social occasions' such as weddings, funerals, and naming ceremonies, which play a key role in membering (Philipsen 1989) and fostering social cohesion for participants. These kinds of actions (consequential talk, and the resulting actions) not only create disunity and mistrust, but, in such a context, can lead to violence on a communal level (because one is always a family and community member). For example, one might be shot, beaten, or have their house burned down as a consequence of rumors, lies, and loose talk. In this case, learning about the local cultural logics (i.e. of 'protection') relevant to problems that implementing actors are tasked to address (i.e. 'community security') provided some insight not only into a community's local sense of a security problem but also into the means by which the community

members [may] be receptive to addressing them with international actors such as UN agencies. In this way, these findings offered a basis for recommendations to help guide or shape the orientation such actors take for engaging communities, and place the local in view when it might otherwise be obscured (Miller and Rudnick 2008; Rudnick and Miller 2007).

In another pilot, SNAP was deployed not in order to generate general learning about local discourses relevant to 'security' that may be active in a place, but rather to support a UN implementing agency in identifying areas of possible intervention around a key programming objective in post-conflict Nepal.

In 2009, the country was preparing for the release of nearly 20,000 ex-combatants from cantonment sites. A key area of responsibility for UNICEF in Nepal at that time was a program for the reintegration of several thousand Children Associated with Armed Forces and Armed Groups (CAAFAG), with ex-combatants among them. To support their broad programming objectives in the Eastern Terai region, where many CAAFAG would be resettled and reintegrated, UNICEF articulated a practical goal: to support local capacities to prevent or reduce the involvement of children in violent activities (Miller, Rudnick, Payne and Acharya 2010).

To support UNICEF in their efforts to develop locally adapted ways of doing this, SNAP developed a research agenda that centered around the key terms and concepts of 'child', 'community', and 'violent activity'. In order to begin to consider how UNICEF could support local capacities to either reduce or prevent the involvement of children in violent activities through programming approaches and activities, it was first important to understand who counted as a 'child' and what counted as 'violent activity' from the point of view of the community.

As in Ghana, the international SNAP team members partnered with local researchers – this time from the University of Purbanchal (Prof. Rajesh Jha) and Kathmandu University (with additional support from UNIDIR, the University of Massachusetts, and the University of Colorado Boulder), as well as Madeshi community members from districts in the Eastern Terai. Over a roughly four-week period, the SNAP team, together with local researchers and community members, once again collaborated in the design and implementation of a rapid, collaborative, team-based ethnographic assessment using the SNAP framework as a guide, this time organized around the practical concerns being faced by UNICEF.

Among other many other things, findings included information about a local model of persons as fluid and inherently interconnected entities; a model of 'child' that orients toward evolving capacities, rather than age-markers; a set of practices through which children and young people display these evolving capacities and through which they enact, maintain, and develop the affiliations central to social life in this place, and through which they are communally evaluated; and, a model of sociation, potently expressed and elaborated in the child–parent relationship through the concepts of 'expectations and aspirations', or 'ikchcha' and 'akaankcha', in Mathili.

Against the backdrop of these features of a local socio-cultural system, the team explored with community members practices and activities viewed as 'violent'. These findings helped to flag a number of sensitivities around the targeting of beneficiaries for reintegration assistance, the nature of assistance offered, and ways in which both could affect the sensitive relationships between returnees and their communities. This relationship was of paramount importance in determining whether reintegration will be 'durable'

or lead to new tensions and conflict. For example, taking the contrasting models of child into account revealed that

> [i]n the context of ex-combatants (…) their experiences of fighting often serve to confuse internationally held understandings of the concepts of child and adult and the distinction between them. For example, young people's experiences of combat may constitute a transition to adulthood, despite being under eighteen years of age, which goes unacknowledged by organizations involved in rehabilitation and reintegration efforts. […] In addition, we have also seen how capacities are critically linked to obligations and expectations, and the crucial role this plays in communal relations. Some understanding of what expectations and obligations are at stake for resettled ex-combatants seems crucial for being able to design programmes that can help determine appropriate activities and roles for such persons as the negotiate their place in the community. (Miller, Rudnick, Payne and Acharya 2010, 54)

Using an EC approach in both of the above cases was useful. However, as productive as SNAP was at generating locally grounded descriptions and interpretations of 'security' or security-related issues from a socio-cultural point of view, when faced with the need to make the applied move the SNAP team reached a barrier that many other practitioners and policy-makers have also encountered at this juncture. While the findings generated (in this case, about discourses of security) were certainly *applicable* to the design policies and programs, finding ways to *apply* them explicitly in such design – beyond making recommendations – was difficult. Since information not incorporated into a project plan, program design, or results framework often gets lost, this was a focal concern.

As we have emphasized, SNAP's ultimate goal was not to generate local information about security *generally*: it was to generate information *specifically relevant* to the design of local-level engagement in the forms of programs and interventions. The challenge of making the applied move revealed that if the objective is to design joint action for achieving a shared goal, then *strategy* was important to know about.

Following Wylie (1967), Miller and Rudnick define strategy as a plan of action designed to achieve a goal. Considered from this perspective, interventions and programs through which much of international assistance is delivered can be usefully regarded as a form of strategic action. Irrespective of these externally determined plans and goals, community members have their own, locally situated (sometimes competing) ways of identifying problems, and acting toward them. That is to say, there are *local strategies.*

For Miller and Rudnick, strategies are composed of four elements: a *goal* to be achieved or attained, *methods* for doing so, the *resources* available or required for employing those methods, and a *theory* (of action, of change), whether formal or folk, that coheres these elements in a consistent relationship. They proposed this construct as a heuristic for learning deliberately about what Philipsen describes as the 'tactical processes for managing and improving social life that are developed in, and indigenous to, a given locale or community' and the 'local notions of the problematic and the possible in social life' (Miller et al. 2009).

While always part of how people and communities get on with things, local strategies become of keen importance for security-related programming in two types of instances. First, they become important when communities find themselves under duress. Such experiences, conditions, and situations have a way of rearranging priorities, or making some priorities known that perhaps were less prominent in times of peace and stability, as Lasker (2004) learned, for example, in her research of state and community emergency

preparedness for terrorist-initiated public health threats in the United States. Second, local strategies become directly relevant when the purpose at hand is the design of strategic action itself, in the form of joint programs, projects, or interventions, as discussed above.

Although Philipsen's definition (in Miller et al. 2009) highlights improvement and social betterment as both goal and outcome of putting local strategies into practice, equally important in the context of security-related programming is the recognition of negative strategies. Local strategies can be, and are, directed toward a wide range of goals, and result in an equally wide range of outcomes for different community members. For example, local strategies directed at the goal of increasing the security of some members may threaten that of others – intentionally, or unintentionally. A community member in southern Nepal, for instance, described a strategy for coping with the perceived communal threat represented by returning female ex-combatants that involved a plan for setting their houses aflame. Or, local strategies directed at the goal of family well-being may be successful for an individual family, or even several families, but undermine social cohesion and therefore communal resilience to violent conflict. In other words, in conflict settings, local strategies for community security can involve coercion, suppression, and violence within the community itself. In crisis settings, local strategies can evolve around capturing aid and assistance, securing dominant access, and containing resources for some at the expense of others. For example, a strategy has evolved among some parents in Gihembe refugee camp in Rwanda, to sell or rent their children's UNHCR ration cards, which is seen as a violation of the child's right by protection officers, but is undertaken as a good faith effort on the part of parents to meet needs they deem of higher priority for the child or the family as whole (Rahman et al. 2016).

In both of these examples, the *methods* employed by affected people are described, but that knowledge alone is not sufficient for understanding local strategies. Other, important questions remain, including: What is known about the *goals* in view? Additionally, what social and cultural *resources* are drawn upon in conceiving of and conducting such action in locally intelligible and meaningful ways? And finally, what is the theory of action or change that makes such a course of action seem like a good idea, among these people, in this place?

Knowing about, and having some ability to interpret such strategies is vitally important for meeting a range of applied challenges in addressing human security concerns in effective and meaningful ways. International interventions never step onto a blank playing field. Rather, they are implemented in systems of strategic action that are animated, and made sensical, by local systems of meaning that both precede and outlast them. The fundamental shift from assessing needs to identifying strategies offers a different kind of entry point for learning about and engaging these systems in ways that are targeted, strategic, and applicable to the design of action. Importantly, this shift does more than facilitate the comparatively quick generation of design-ready findings for programming and policy (which in itself is a valuable contribution); it is a direct step toward localizing assistance in the best sense of this term. Rather than position affected people as passive actors with needs that require external assessment and response to be remedied, taking a local strategies approach assumes and privileges the agentive capabilities of affected people and communities, and recognizes a diversity of objectives and interests, both positive and negative.

Toward an agenda for LSR

The foregoing discussion of SNAP has put forward three claims:

- First, that security can be usefully understood as a socio-cultural phenomenon.
- Second, that as such, it can be observed in, and studied by giving attention to, a range of discourses and their meanings.
- Third, that the broader view of discourse as developed by Carbaugh and others that encompasses practices and activities provides a productive way of doing so.

However, through the discussion of SNAP's experiences and challenges in working on a range of practical security concerns, a fundamental claim has been made: when the objective is to design joint action for the purpose of achieving a shared goal, then findings about local strategies are called for.

The approach to LSR described here emerged in response this particular applied challenge as encountered by SNAP. It was developed to explicitly bring the *strategic* dimensions of life in difficult circumstances (i.e. the aftermath of conflict or disaster) into view, and to do so in ways that are systematic, comparable, local, and actionable. But, the job of any assessment tools or teams working in the context of international response is to 'grab it and go' – that is, generate information for the purpose of facilitating the tasks of decision-making, designing, planning, and implementing, *not* for the purpose of creating deeper, rigorous understandings of social phenomena in their own right. For LSR to realize its potential, both as a distinctive area of inquiry that can foster new insights into social phenomena, and as an approach that can generate deep findings over time that are both useful and useable as resources for the design of local-level interventions, will require attention from scholars whose job *is* creating deeper, rigorous understanding social phenomena to a range of questions (Miller, Rudnick, Kimbell and Philipsen 2010).

We therefore propose a research agenda, animated by Miller and Rudnick's heuristic to help refine the phenomena of interest, address key theoretical concerns, and further explore and develop methodological responses. First we propose research to generate findings about local strategies as they play out in local socio-cultural contexts:

- What locally conceived problems do local strategies address in relation to 'security'?
- To what goals do local strategies orient? Why those?
- What means (methods, actions, practices) are used to get there? With what range of consequences and outcomes? For whom?
- What social and cultural resources do community members draw upon to achieve this practice in an effective and coherent way? What system of practice and meaning do members draw upon, to develop and enact such practices, and how?
- What theory of action coheres this strategy? (What *kinds* of theories – folk or otherwise – are invoked, by whom, how and why?)
- What is the range of strategies active (in a place, or among people)? Are there *competing* strategies? If so, what is at stake for participants and stakeholders? How do communities handle this?

Next, we propose that a range of theoretical concerns be explored to help us refine our thinking about, and investigation of, local strategies. For example:

- Miller and Rudnick's heuristic proposes four constitutive elements of a strategy – goal, methods, resources, and theory of change (or cohering theory). Are there others?
- What ought to be the criteria for claiming that a strategy is *local*? (We propose Carbaugh's [1990] characterization of culture systems as mutually intelligible, commonly accessible, deeply felt, and historically grounded as a good place to start.)
- Through what types of discursive practices do local strategies find their expression?
- What is the role of discourse in constituting local strategies?
- More fundamentally, how can the ontological status of local strategies as social phenomena be further theorized? Should we see them as observable practices, analytic or interpretive constructs, heuristics, or something else?

In addition, there is an array of methodological concerns to explore, as the rich range of methods and techniques that exist for exploring the socio-cultural world are explored for their utility in learning about local strategies. These concerns include:

- Above we have asked what the role of discourse in local strategies might be. Equally, we wish to ask, what is the role of discourse in constituting the *study* of local strategies?
- To what extent must the analyst be accountable to the community for their formulation of local strategies?
- What kinds of qualitative or quantitative research designs would allow analysts to elicit local strategies in the field?
- What kinds of contributions can various subfields of communication (journalism, political communication, organizational communication, rhetoric, etc.) make to the study of local strategies?
- In cross-case or cross-cultural comparative studies of local strategies, what dimensions of comparison are the most valid and useful?

Finally, there is the matter of the applied move itself. Unlike the preceding three elements, attending to the applied move is not required for the development of an area of inquiry. However, LSR has been conceived for the purpose of application. One key feature of making an applied move is recognizing the distinction and the relationship between research-based knowledge and the design of strategic action (Sprain and Boromisza-Habashi 2013). As Miller and Rudnick (2014) explain,

> knowledge does not apply itself. Even in the face of the best research, or the most reliable evidence, we still need a way of bringing information to bear on our designs for action. Nowhere is this more important than in instances in which human safety and well-being are the focal concerns. (26)

Their approach to EBD was therefore developed in order to provide practitioners with a systematic and repeatable way of making the applied move (as opposed to the ad-hoc and idiosyncratic approaches that characterize most design processes for field-based programming), and doing so explicitly (as opposed to intuitively). In this sense, EBD was created to both require, and facilitate, the use of LSR in the design of evidence-based

programs and policies, within the institutional and operational particularities of UN programming, and as a mechanism to help ensure that collaboration between the research and practitioner communities could translate into more concrete gains for affected people. Therefore, a crucial question must be attended to as part of any agenda to develop this area of work:

- If one goal of LSR findings is to support design activities, (how) must this use influence the 'shape' and delivery of findings, in order for them to be usable?

Studies conducted along the lines of this emerging agenda will help us learn more about local strategies as social phenomena, wherever they may be observed (not just in contexts of crisis and conflict) and begin to address some of the theoretical and methodological questions posed above. Directed at a range of security issues (and actors), however, this becomes a powerful approach for learning how socio-cultural systems help shape communal plans, practices, and responses that affect well-being for many. For example, taking an LSR approach to comparing vernacular and official discourses of security, and the potentially competing cultural discourse animating them, can serve to usefully highlight the contrast between them. But it can also provide important grounds for engagement on key areas of security-related programming that dominate both policy agendas and workplans active today. For instance, Miller, Rudnick and colleagues have designed inquiry into local strategies for protection, crisis response, reintegration of ex-combatants, countering violent extremism, reducing armed violence, and for resilience to violent conflict.

While the above list of questions is not exhaustive, what we offer here is the beginnings of an interdisciplinary research agenda that could help LSR develop further. As an example, we look to other scholars taking a bottom-up approach to discourse and security to aid the development of LSR, and explore its utility for addressing the 'deep duality in the theory and practice of security itself' (Luckham and Kirk 2013, 339).

A dialogue with scholars of 'vernacular security' seems particularly promising. Much like SNAP, the vernacular security approach valorizes local discourses of security and calls for the study of those discourses on their own terms, that is, as located in specific socio-cultural and historical contexts (Jarvis and Lister 2012), and highlights security as a supply–demand relationship between states and non-state actors such as international agencies and small communities (Luckham and Kirk 2013). This approach has been particularly adept at showing that security as the condition of order and the political means of accomplishing order is inseparable from imagining political communities at the local, state, and global scale. In New Order Indonesia, for example, small communities appealed to global NGO discourse on development to circumvent the state's ambition to act as the protector of safety and social order (Bubandt 2005). Such anthropologically informed scholarship could help us reflect not only on the extent to which local strategies are exclusively 'local', but also on how local strategies related to security may implicate local strategies for accomplishing community.

Conclusion

In this article, we have explored a program of work conducted at UNIDIR that began with SNAP, and evolved to include approaches to LSR and EBD. As a core principle, this program

sought to both foster and generate diverse and pluralist discourses about security concerns that are central to a range of policy and programming activities of the UN and local communities themselves. But more than that, with this work Miller and Rudnick sought to develop dialogic practices capable of disrupting received, often 'Westcentric' notions of security for the purpose of more locally accountable assistance (through application of LSR findings in EBD).

We believe that LSR offers an approach for productively generating and interpreting vernacular discourses of security in a way that helps increase their applicability to, and power in the face of, official and/or institutional discourses of security. The proposed agenda provides one resource for discourse scholars who adopt a multicultural perspective to contribute to this effort.

Notes

1. The authors wish to thank UNIDIR for permission to publish excerpts from internal documents produced as part of its programme of work on the Security Needs Assessment Protocol Project.
2. We use the 'cultural discourse' concept to refer to the culturally variable systems of meaning immanent in, and animating, observable communication practices including types of expression locally understood as related to security (discourses of security). This is a multicultural approach to discourse (observable communication practice) in that it assumes, and values, the full range of possible systems of meaning (cultural discourses) immanent in discourses of security.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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