

Qualitative Research as Jazz

PENNY OLDFATHER JANE WEST

A metaphor of qualitative research as jazz is developed to illuminate qualities embedded in processes of qualitative inquiry. The jazz metaphor creates a pathway for making explicit the tacit understandings that enable us to make our way as researchers without fully orchestrated scores. As jazz is guided by a deep structure of chord progressions and themes, qualitative inquiry is guided by epistemological principles, socially constructed values, inquiry focuses, and findings emerging through analytic methodologies such as constant comparison.

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The horn played a phrase. Soft and short. The drums answered. The horn said the same thing all over again. The drums repeated it. The next time it was more intricate. The phrase was turned around, it went back and forth and up and down. And the drums said it over, exactly the same. (Petry, 1990, p. 57)

This article is a playful attempt to employ a metaphor of qualitative research¹ as jazz in ways that shed light on the nature of qualitative inquiry. It is our hope that this jazz metaphor might extend understanding of the fundamental qualities of qualitative research, illuminating the inherent paradoxes of structure and freedom.

In the world of music, jazz is set apart by its improvisatory nature. Jazz musicians participate in a shared culture. They carry common (but not identical) repertoires, and a common body of knowledge that allows them to make music together. The music is guided by a deep structure of chord progressions and themes. Using this unifying structure as a base, jazz musicians create recurring and sometimes surprising variations on the underlying themes—weaving together varied qualities of tone, harmony, rhythm, volume, pace, and voice.

Outsiders attending a jazz performance may not perceive the nuances, the on-the-spot unfolding of a tightly executed improvisation. Just as trained classical ears detect and appreciate the inversions and intricate variations in a Bach fugue, the accomplished ears of jazz insiders delight in discovering sustained patterns and creative inventions of the jazz artist.

Jazz is adaptive and is shaped by the participants. Their improvisations are collaborative and interdependent; the quality of the music depends on each musician's hearing, responding to, and appreciating the performances of the other players. The spotlight moves back and forth between the ensemble and soloists—as they alternate taking the

lead or providing backup. Jazz musicians encourage each other to do things differently, to express their individuality and particular talents. No jazz performance is exactly like another, even if played by the same musicians on the same occasion.

Jazz can be experienced first-hand by an audience attending the concert, or by those who listen to the recording later. Aficionados follow jazz events by reading concert reviews in the paper. But most would agree that the live performance is always best: hearing the freshness of the sounds, seeing the facial expressions and body language of the performers, feeling the vibrations of the percussion, experiencing the ambiance of the room, being immersed in the culture and the intensity of the moment with others who share and appreciate the experience.

In *Composing a Life* (1990), Mary Catherine Bateson suggested that life is an improvisatory art and noted ways in which jazz is a suitable metaphor for life. As Bateson explained, "Jazz exemplifies artistic activity that is at once individual and communal, performance that is both repetitive and innovative, each participant sometimes providing background support and sometimes flying free" (pp. 2-3).

As the deep structure² of jazz guides the unfolding of the music, so the epistemological principles, socially constructed values, inquiry focus, and emerging findings guide the unfolding of qualitative research processes. As jazz is collaborative and interdependent, so are the dynamics of qualitative research. As each improvisation is unique, so are the contextually bound findings within each research setting (Erickson, 1986) and the peculiar adaptive methodologies of each qualitative inquiry.

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The metaphor of qualitative research as jazz applies on multiple levels. The researcher may participate as a "musician," adding a collaborative voice (Branscombe, Goswami, & Schwartz, 1992; Gitlin, 1990; Heron, 1981; Oakley, 1981; Oldfather & McLaughlin, 1993; Reason, 1994). This "gig" might take place in schools, for example, as the participant observer becomes a part of classroom life. Other times the researcher works as sound engineer, recording and mixing the voices of participants for presentation to a future audience—the research community. For example, members of a research team work in this way as they sit around the kitchen table examining, analyzing, and writing about their data. They are "mixing" participants' voices to present to a wider audience. Even when researchers act as sound engineers, they improvise, as they search for ways to provide balance while maintaining the clarity of the voices. (See Krieger, 1983, on polyphonic interviewing.)

Jazz musicians work in a variety of settings: recording in the studio, performing live on the stage, jamming in the local bar, or practicing in the garage. Researchers' workplaces are also varied: reading in the library, writing at the computer, presenting at scholarly meetings, sitting in a local pub with colleagues sharing ideas and swapping stories about their work. Fieldwork may occur in the classroom, media center, or playground.

Those who experience jazz firsthand (as players or members of a live audience) are those most deeply affected. Similarly, those who participate directly in qualitative research, who are physically, intellectually, and emotionally present in the research context, and who hear the interplay of voices for themselves are those for whom the understandings are most vivid and meaningful.

Metaphor as a Pathway to Understanding: Similarities of a New Kind

The jazz metaphor creates a pathway for making explicit the tacit understandings that enable us to make our way as researchers without prescriptions of "fully orchestrated scores." The metaphor invites exploration of both the deep structures that guide qualitative research and the improvisatory qualities that allow ethnographers to fly free in response to serendipitous events and emerging understandings.

Other writers have sought metaphors to depict qualitative research processes. Valerie Janesick (1994) presented qualitative research design as *dance*, and Ray Rist called hurried research *Blitzkrieg ethnography* (1980). Gail Weinstein-Shr (1990) described qualitative research as *journey*. When two realms of experience are compared through metaphor, unique understandings become possible. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) described this illuminating power of metaphor:

There is a similarity induced by the metaphor that goes beyond the mere similarities between the two ranges of experience. The additional similarity is a *structural* similarity. It involves the way we understand how the individual highlighted experiences fit together in a coherent way. . . . The metaphor, by virtue of giving coherent structure to a range of our experiences, *creates similarities of a new kind* (pp. 150–151).

Structural similarities made clear through metaphor represent not only intellect but also the full range of human sen-

sory experience. The power of metaphor derives in part from its aesthetic resonance with sensory experience—from what Lakoff and Johnson (1980, p. 235) described as "imaginative rationality," or the blending of cognition and affect.

Eisner (1993) noted this blending of cognition and affect within the realm of aesthetic experience:

Experience is the bedrock upon which meaning is constructed, and that experience in significant degree depends upon our ability to get in touch with the qualitative world we inhabit. This qualitative world is immediate before it is mediated, presentational before it is representational, sensuous before it is symbolic. (p. 5)

Metaphor can serve as a bridge from experience to mediation, representation, and symbolism, which in turn allow us to understand experience in new and deeper ways. Jose Rosario (1991) built such a bridge with his metaphor of John Coltrane's "sacred act of jazz" for what he called the "sacred act of thinking":

Coltrane jazz opens thought to thought. The music makes us think about those orders of knowledge and meaning (the religious, the aesthetic, the intuitive, the tacit . . .) that for some reason or other simply defy direct access. To grasp in any meaningful way these inaccessible forms . . . requires that they be approached indirectly through some kind of mediating process or experience. The way Coltrane came at the sacred in Jazz is one example. (p. 178)

Playful Exploration Through Metaphor: "When You Hear Two Knocks, Just Start Playing"

Inductees to the cultures of both jazz and qualitative research may go through periods of uncertainty and discomfort as they adjust to the ambiguities, unexpected freedoms, and new ways of thinking in their respective fields (Reinharz, 1993). Newcomers may search for the sheet music, or the instructions, and finding none, may be quite uncomfortable until they develop an intuitive sense of the guiding deep structures. Those who remember their first uncertain forays into the realm of qualitative research may identify with pianist Lilian Hardin's first experience with jazz.

When I sat down to play, I asked for the music, and were they surprised! They politely told me they didn't have any music and furthermore never used any. I then asked what key would the first number be in. I must have been speaking another language, because the leader said, "When you hear two knocks, just start playing." It all seemed very strange to me, but I got all set, and when I heard those two knocks I hit the piano so loud and hard they all turned around to look at me. It took only a second for me to feel what they were playing and I was off. (Gioia, 1988, p. 51)

Waiting for those two knocks, and wondering what in the world they will do when they come, can be both terrifying and exhilarating for new members of the culture. The trick is to be able to feel the music. This ability comes through both understanding the deep structures and giving oneself the freedom to let go and apply those deep structures in improvisatory ways.

Educated Listening

Educated listening is a critical skill in jazz for both musician and audience. Consider the relevance for qualitative research found in Richmond Browne's description in *Improvising Jazz* about jazz listening:

The soloist has to establish for the listener what the important point, the motif if you like, is, and then show, as much as he can, of what it is that he sees in that motif, extending the relationships of it to the basic while never giving the feeling that he has forgotten it. The listener is constantly making predictions: actual infinitesimal predictions as to whether the next event will be a repetition of something, or something different. The player is constantly either confirming or denying these predictions in the listener's mind (as found in Coker, 1964, pp. 15-16).

The dynamics described above can easily be seen as those taking place within the interactions of socially constructed meaning among research participants. They can also be understood as the forms of thinking that are part of constant comparative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1994).

Attitudes Toward the Original Scores

In jazz the original score is a "bare bones" chord chart that provides just enough guidance for the musicians' collaboration. "Jazz demands that [the] music be played not as it appears on the published page, but as the performer conceives it anew. The original compositions are merely outlines for the player's improvisational skills" (Levey, 1983, p. 24). The "score" in qualitative research is the initial design or plan. The plan is adapted and elaborated according to the evolving themes of the inquiry.

Through the improvisation of constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1994), for example, new passages are played, one verse leading to the next, shaping and reshaping the music. Seasoned jazz artists learn to read the audience—adjusting their timing or drawing out certain notes or phrases that seem to have special appeal to those present. Jazz concerts become synergistic events. Similarly, qualitative researchers learn to "read" their participants—discovering which questions or issues are important to the insiders of the culture they are hoping to understand, and collaborating to shape the directions of the inquiry accordingly.

Levey (1983) pointed out that jazz requires what might be considered a certain irreverence toward the music as written. This irreverence does not imply a lack of respect for the composer or the music, but a sense of participation with the composer in the creative process. The music serves as an outline for the new event, rather than an untouchable and finished creation, not to be tampered with. To be sure, classical music, though not improvisatory in the same way as jazz, is interpretive. Musicians bring their own sense of the music to their performances, resulting in great variation. For example, Bach's contrapuntal unaccompanied sonatas and partitas for violin are merely a series of exercises when played by a detached performer, though the notes may be played accurately. The same works, when interpreted by Henryk Szeryng, come alive as lyrical, exquisite melodies that elicit deep emotional response from sensitive listeners.

In contrast to the formal concert hall atmosphere of classical music, jazz is at home in nightclubs and bars. Jazz performers undergo their "naked" creative struggles in front of an audience, whereas classical performers do so in private rehearsals. Although classical compositions are often perceived as untouchable, jazz thrives on "newness, innovation, and further exploration of the idiom" (Gioia, 1988, p. 24). The casual ambiance of the jazz experience may belie its underlying intensity: Irreverence does not imply lack of seriousness.

Like improvisational jazz, qualitative research embodies both deep structure and creative freedom. Acknowledging these complementary aspects of qualitative research, Preissle (1991) called for

a view of research design that is more balanced between process and product, standardized and idiosyncratic, systematic and freeform. . . . Some designs can be valued for their conformity to standard patterns and consistency with conventional practice, but others can be admired for originality or uniqueness. (p. 65)

Our jazz metaphor is not intended to imply a dismissal of other more standardized forms of research. As Preissle pointed out, there is potential value in multiple approaches to research, each of which may be admired for contrasting qualities.

Inclusiveness

In many jazz cultures there is an attitude of inclusion, rather than exclusion. In the world of classical music it would be exceedingly rare for unexpected participants to show up at a concert with their trumpets and to be invited to "sit in" for the performance of a voluntary or a sonata. The notes might not be played quite right. Unlike the classical form that aspires to an ideal of perfection, jazz embraces a view of art as

a spiritual and expressive communication between artist and audience, and not as a class of perfected objects. Like Prometheus, who brought fire from the gods to share with man, jazz can perhaps serve to carry art back from the unattainable world of divine perfections and bring it within the sphere of truly human endeavor. (Gioia, 1988, p. 107)

The culture of improvisation, in its open-endedness, is suited to inviting in the unexpected contributor. In many jazz settings, there is a tendency away from hierarchical structures. Even so, some participants are certainly less welcome than others whose language is understood, whose repertoire and demeanor seem to "fit," or who are known to members of the specific musical culture. We must acknowledge, however, that this is not always the case. For example, in *Outsiders* (1973) Becker highlighted the adversarial relationship between jazz musicians (outsiders to the mainstream culture) and the "square" audience (outsiders to the jazz culture). On the larger inclusivity/exclusivity continuum across musical genres, however, jazz cultures are probably more inclusive in nature than many other musical cultures.

It can be argued that this spirit of inclusivity carries into the improvisatory culture of qualitative research. Qualitative methodologies often suit researchers who hold a political agenda or ideology that values inclusivity. Critical,

feminist, and other emancipatory researchers sometimes find their purposes are well served by qualitative methods and constructivist epistemologies that attempt to understand and represent multiple constructions of experience (Fine, 1992). Expanding notions about what counts as scholarly knowledge have opened the doors for teacher research (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1990; Goswami & Stillman, 1987), participatory research (Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Whyte, 1991) and what Gitlin (1990) terms *educative research*. As Prometheus carried fire from the gods to humans, as jazz carries art into the obtainable realm of human endeavor, so qualitative research may serve to alleviate the problem Boomer (1987) referred to as the *elsewhereness of knowledge*. Participants in collaborative inquiry may experience a degree of *epistemological empowerment* (Oldfather & Dahl, 1994). Through collaborative methods of inquiry, those who have traditionally been the "researched" are assuming more active roles. They pull their trumpets out of the closet and find ways to weave their own themes and variations (both old and new) into the tunes of the occasion. Sometimes they just "sit in" for the evening—and sometimes they join the band. In spite of good intentions of inclusion and emancipation held by many, the culture of qualitative research has not fully achieved those ideals (Fine, 1994).

The Critic

Critics are powerful within the worlds of art and of qualitative research. Noted critics can influence the perceptions of audiences and thus the careers of budding artists or untenured researchers. Criticism is more than passing judgment: "Criticism is an art of saying useful things about complex and subtle objects and events so that others less sophisticated, or sophisticated in different ways, can see and understand what they did not see and understand before" (Eisner, 1991, p. 3).

The artful critic of jazz must have a substantive knowledge to grasp the "complex and subtle objects and events" present in a performance. Levey (1983) suggested the following standards for jazz critics:

Sometimes a scholarly sounding gentleman of the press may cause confusion. His personal prejudices may be cleverly concealed as he tells the reader only what he wishes the reader to hear. In order to evaluate this critic, one must inquire: Is he knowledgeable? Does he know jazz players, Does he know jazz styles, Does he know jazz history? Does he know jazz forms and structures? If the critic does not know these things, little will be learned from his discussion except his enthusiasm or antipathy. (p. 112)

These same sorts of relevant knowledge are needed among perceptive reviewers of any form of inquiry. Who is most qualified to review qualitative research? As researchers within diverse paradigms are acutely aware, the reviewers are sometimes not appropriately matched with manuscripts submitted. Reviewers of qualitative manuscripts should be chosen according to their familiarity with the deep structures and improvisatory aspects at work in that paradigm.

A Matter of Imaginative Rationality

You take each solo like it was the last one you were going to play in your life. What notes to hit, and when to hit

them—that's the secret. You can make a particular phrase with just one note. . . . I usually think about four bars ahead what I am going to play. Sometimes things go wrong, and I have to scramble (late clarinetist, Pee Wee Russell, to Malcolm E. Bessom, as cited in Levey, 1983, p. 103).

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) suggest that the metacognitive processes facilitated through metaphor may serve as a guide to future action. Sometimes we think about "four bars ahead." Sometimes our long-range plans and expectations work out, but the unpredictable struggles of the creative process continue, and sometimes we do "have to scramble."

The holistic and intuitive understandings that become available through metaphor are, in the words of Lakoff and Johnson (1980), a matter of *imaginative rationality*:

[Metaphor] permits an understanding of one kind of experience in terms of another, creating coherences by virtue of imposing gestalts that are structured by natural dimensions of experience. . . . Metaphor is not merely a matter of language. It is a matter of conceptual structure. And conceptual structure is not merely a matter of the intellect—it involves all the natural dimensions of our experience, including aspects of our sense experiences: color, shape, texture, sound, etc. . . . Works of art provide new experiential gestalts and, therefore, new coherences. (p. 235)

These experiential gestalts and new coherences available through this metaphor expand our sense of the deep structures and improvisatory possibilities embodied in qualitative research. Only when we are able to develop a clear notion of the epistemological frames that guide our work can we access these imaginative rationalities and find ways to put away the sheet music, and in Bateson's (1990) words, fly free.

Notes

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¹We have searched for language that best captures the form of research we are describing. *Constructivist, interpretive, naturalistic*, and others all took their turns. We have settled, finally, on the more inclusive and accessible term *qualitative* research. We acknowledge, however, that there are multiple definitions of qualitative research, and that some forms are less improvisatory in nature than those described here.

²"Deep structures" as conceptualized here are, like those of Chomsky (1972), viewed as abstract principles embedded in thought. Although Chomsky's deep structures determine how speakers use and interpret language, the deep structures explored in this article determine how research is conducted and how jazz is played. In all three realms—language, research, and jazz—deep structures make possible the social construction of meaning and expression.

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