THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Edinburgh Research Explorer

The Sign of Silence: Negotiating Musical Identities in an Improvising Ensemble

OPEN ACCESS

The sign of silence: Negotiating musical identities in an improvising ensemble

Graeme B Wilson[1]
Newcastle University, UK

Raymond AR MacDonald
Glasgow Caledonian University, UK

[1]Corresponding author:

Institute of Health and Society
Newcastle University
Baddiley Clark Building
Richardson Road
Newactstle upon Tyne
NE2 4AX
UK

Tel. 0044 +191 222 5695
Fax 0044 +191 222 6034
Email: graeme.wilson@ncl.ac.uk

Abstract

Group musical improvisation, as a spontaneous process of collaborative creativity effected through nonverbal social interaction, is a unique psychological phenomenon and universal capacity. Existing studies focus on improvisation among professional jazz musicians, often using qualitative methods. However, improvisation transcends genres and levels of training or experience; and existing qualitative data are rarely analysed as discourse. We compare findings from studies of jazz musicians' improvising with interview data from free improvisers from varied backgrounds focused on their improvising together (n=10). The ways jazz musicians construct improvising in talk were distinct from the constructions of this more diverse group, suggesting a specifically professional discourse. By focusing on accounts of deciding whether to play, the ambiguity of musical contributions in the non-verbal context of playing is highlighted. Analysis indicates that musical acts within improvisation are interpreted by the musicians involved in ways that inherently support or resist particular identities. The unique creative, communicative and *social* process of musical improvising in groups can therefore best be understood when the entirety of improvisational practice and its various contexts are acknowledged. Future research can best recognise the diversity of, and change in, what improvisation can encompass with continued discursive investigation of group improvising.

Keywords

Musical performance is an important area of interest for the fields of music psychology and creativity, and the expanding practice of group improvisation should be a key focus within that. In this article, we review literature investigating the processes of group improvisation. We then outline discursive psychology as a valuable approach for such investigation, and summarise key findings from our two previous studies applying discourse theory to jazz musicians' accounts. Finally, we present findings from a new study of discourse around improvising in musicians from diverse backgrounds. This aimed to show whether our previous findings can be generalised beyond jazz and how discourse theory can inform the communication supposed to underpin group improvisation.

Group improvisation in music

This involves the creation of music as it is being played through the idiosyncratic contributions of two or more individuals, each interpreting and musically responding to the playing of the other(s). Any individual musical contribution is impromptu and is tailored to the sounds, rhythms and tonalities heard from accompanying musicians (Bastien & Hostager, 1988; Mazzola & Cherlin, 2009; Nettl & Russell, 2008; Seddon, 2005). Since all have input into the overall sound, the creativity in group improvisation is inherently social, rather than being attributable to or located within a single individual (Sawyer, 2003). As a spontaneous process of collaborative creativity effected through nonverbal social interaction, this musical practice is a unique psychological phenomenon that has not received the thorough investigation it merits (MacDonald, Wilson, & Miell, 2012).

Improvisation is a universal capacity since anyone who enjoys music can participate in group improvisation to some extent, irrespective of musical training (MacDonald, Kreutz, & Mitchell, 2012a; MacDonald & Wilson, under review; Pothoulaki, MacDonald, & Flowers,

2012). Yet study of this behaviour tends to be limited to examining the improvisation of individual performers judged to possess expertise, and has tended to focus on jazz improvisation. This music has for example been characterised by multiple tensions of 'real-time' interaction, demanding from the individual player a simultaneous focus on their own musical contribution and the contributions of those around them (Cook, 2004; Kenny, Gellrich, Parncutt, & McPherson, 2002). The importance of a shared awareness of known social practices in jazz has also been highlighted (Bastien & Hostager, 1988). Seddon (2005) proposes the concept of empathetic attunement facilitating communication between members of a jazz ensemble, according to which musicians reaching a point where each can apprehend the others' musical perspectives through the use of six verbal or non-verbal processes in preparing a work for performance. It is further argued that the same broad processes are at play in both classical and jazz small ensembles, despite the varied degrees of constraint from scores and prearranged strategies (Seddon & Biasutti, 2009). A widespread metaphor of jazz as a 'language' is prevalent, with studies explaining group improvisation of music as analogous to conversation (Monson, 1996 ; Sawyer, 2005). Monson's argument, that jazz musicians understand their practice in terms of a 'vocabulary' of musical components and a 'grammar' of how they should be put together, remains popular: to play the music you must learn to converse in the language. Yet improvisation has always been a musical component of most genres and is gaining increasing currency as a central mode of music making, even being viewed as a "post-genre musical process" (Bailey, 1993; Biasutti & Frezza, 2009; Lewis, 2007; MacDonald, Wilson, et al., 2012). As such it is a much broader phenomenon of significant interest to social psychology, one which a rule-based language learning model of musical improvisation may be inadequate to explain.

Discursive psychology

In a similar way, discursive psychology has shown that transmission of information and generative grammar models cannot explain the full scope of verbal language use (Potter & Edwards, 1992). A central principle of discursive psychology is that talk is never just a neutral delivery of information or a statement of internal viewpoint. Any speech act inherently indicates:

- what the speaker anticipates as necessary or appropriate to that type of interaction

- where it is taking place, both physically and in the sequence of utterances or contributions to a conversation

- how the speaker can or wants to portray themselves and others, with particular identities worked up that are specific to the conversational moment

By considering how talk is shaped by these considerations, researchers can enhance their understanding of communication (Potter, 2004; Potter & Wetherell, 1994). Analysing verbal data for the structural features of discourse can illuminate what an individual's expectations are when they engage in conversation, what aspects of a topic they treat as normal or subject to stigma, and what particular identities they support or resist for themselves (Wetherell, Taylor, & Yates, 2001). More significantly, by considering how all participants engage in a dialogue, we can see how those identity projects are shaped by perceived confirmation or challenge from others (Antaki & Widdicombe, 1998). The social construction of musical identities has been argued as central to music-making (MacDonald, Miell, Hargreaves, & Miell, 2002; MacDonald, Miell, & Wilson, 2005) and discursive psychology therefore has much to offer research on improvisation (Linson, Dobbyn, & Laney, 2012). For

instance, when jazz musicians say improvising together is like language use, what function does that metaphor fulfil in maintaining a particular identity?

Jazz musicians and discourses of improvising

Our studies of jazz musicians' talk as *talk*, rather than as a window onto what happens in music, have described how musicians say they manage to improvise together; explored how the context of this talk is relevant; and considered whether musicians' talk about improvising together behaves as discourse. We progressed from the belief that if music is created in a group, it is worth asking a group about it, and initially conducted focus group interviews with professional jazz instrumentalists living in central Scotland about their musical practice (MacDonald & Wilson, 2005; Wilson & MacDonald, 2005). While no definitions of jazz were unanimously agreed in the discussions, structural features such as maintaining swing feel and a balance of collective and individual practices were used to distinguish jazz improvising from other types of music. Participants also discussed what comprised the life of a jazz musician, positioning themselves in relation to these emergent identities. Eclectic professional practice created a demanding lifestyle; in this context, the group aspect of jazz playing is integral to related musical identities. These individuals were a limited population, all male and acquainted; their discussion of jazz practice highlighted the importance of social context to identity as a musician, but also the ways in which positive and negative aspects of this identity were foregrounded to invite particular interpretations of these identities. A second study involved individual interviews with male & female jazz musicians in London not known to the authors, aiming to tap into personal accounts to set against the 'public' discourse arising at focus groups of musicians (MacDonald & Wilson, 2006). This latter study mapped patterns of identity work around gender that operated to

support power structures around gender, and therefore demonstrated these musicians' discourse around their professional practice as necessarily hegemonic.

In all these data, participants discussed views and experience of playing music and improvising. The content of what they *said* about improvising corroborated many features other authors have observed. For instance, this passage from a bass player ostensibly reports that jazz is perceived as a language to be learned by those who play it:

1   *I mean, there's people who do improvised music but people would say they're not*

2   *jazzers. I'm not going to name anybody, but there's a few people on the scene who (.)*

3   *they will say it's not (.) it's not jazz because they're not using the language, it hasn't*

4   *come from the tradition. So there is a, not a snobbery, but there is a, you know, there*

5   *is a certain expectation of certain rules to be followed or certain traditions to have at*

6   *least been studied or absorbed.* (quoted in MacDonald & Wilson, 2006)

However, the way in which this is said indicates this claim has implications for how she is presenting herself to the interviewer and the recorder. The respondent attends to the context of the research interview by not asking questions (treating this as the interviewer's role), and stressing that she will not 'name names' (line 2). She also constructs two categories of people – people who do improvised music and people who say this is not jazz - without expressly aligning herself with either. Nevertheless she recognises a possibility that people who claim 'jazzer' authority might be construed as snobbish (line 4) and seeks to repair this by stressing the minimal and hence reasonable nature of their concern ('certain',

'at least'). The elements of discourse are therefore all observable and construct a more complex understanding of the relationships between players than a straightforward exchange or interplay of musical contributions.

A consistent pattern of description brought into play to position a speaker or other people as one type of musician constitutes a repertoire: 'a lexicon or register of terms and metaphors drawn upon to characterize and evaluate actions and events' (Potter & Wetherell, 1994, p138). We identified two distinct repertoires used by jazz musicians when talking to account for what they play (Wilson & MacDonald, 2005). According to 'mastery', improvisation is understood and controlled through mastery of skills and knowledge; according to 'mystery', improvisation is instinctive and uncontrolled, arising from unfathomable inspiration. These repertoires have distinct implications for identity: mastery emphasises achievement and authority, but suggests that anyone can improvise given time, while mystery implies innate exclusivity of improvisers, but accords them less authority in their practice.

Both repertoires are used to maintain exclusivity of a socially negotiated in-group. Within the focus groups, the repertoire of *mastery* was always endorsed and accepted:

1   *K*   *…it's not always that kind of romantic notion that everybody has, ya know,*

2   *there has to be some sort of effort.*

3   *H*   *Yeah it doesn't magically happen.*

4   *K*   *There has to be effort and there has to be some degree of training.*

while the repertoire of *mystery* was always treated with irony where it was deployed:

1   *H*   *Which is another point about improvising, when you're truly improvising*

2   *you're playing with this intensity. And y-you don't really care what, mistakes*

3   *just go by and it's like, doesnae matter cause you're playing with in<u>ten</u>sity and*

4   *(.) and <u>pass</u>ion // and -*

5   *J*   *//Improvising a full solo of intense mistakes.*(both quoted in Wilson &

6   MacDonald, 2005)

From this perspective, jazz musicians' talk of 'learning the language' of jazz operates to bolster in-group identity in a fluid and competitive environment. When they talk about improvisation, jazz musicians use discourse to invite or counter particular versions of themselves and their improvising. However, the studies outlined above did not clarify whether this discourse simply represented a narrow professional milieu rather than improvising per se. For instance, a similar use of mastery and mystery repertoires has recently been identified in the talk of conservatoire students about playing classical music (Juuti & Littleton, 2010), and both jazz and classical musicians may access these repertoires in genre-specific ways (Dobson, 2010). Furthermore, although these studies sought to understand how musical communication might operate in group improvisation – through transmission or construction - the data rarely strayed into first person accounts of playing experience, and all participants played with different people. There was therefore a need to explore further how diverse types of musicians talked about a shared experience of improvising and how they maintain and negotiate their musical identities through related discourses.

We report below on a novel study addressing these gaps. In particular we sought to answer:

- How might the talk of jazz musicians about improvising represent a professional rather than a musical discourse? –

- Do the discursive practices in improvising musicians' talk extend to their musical interaction?

Method

Participants for this study were recruited from The Glasgow Improvisers Orchestra, an ensemble rehearsing and performing together regularly, in which both authors played (www.glasgowimprovisersorchestra.com). This ensemble is dedicated to free improvisation, a growing movement eschewing genre parameters in the interests of maximising innovation in music. Its line-up includes more than 20 players from a wide range of musical backgrounds including jazz, classical, pop & avant-garde, allowing us to look beyond jazz practice. Furthermore, these interviewees were able to reflect on a body of musical experience shared with each other.

Individual in-depth interviews (n=10, 2 female and 8 male) about improvising and playing in the ensemble were conducted by [author A]; his identity as a fellow ensemble member is likely to have been an influence on the data and we reflect on this in the analysis. Since it was intended that conduct in depth analysis of rich data, a sample of ten musicians diverse in gender and musical backgrounds was sought. Eleven ensemble members including all female ensemble members were approached by the authors on this basis and invited to take part, with only one declining. Participants were assured of confidentiality and it was

made clear that participation was voluntary at all times; interviews were tape recorded with consent and lasted between 45 and 120 minutes. They took place at participants' convenience in either their own homes, a university room, or in cafes. Interviewees were asked to describe their own experience of instances of group improvising within the ensemble.

The authors both coded transcripts independently for themes and categories of conversational action following the analytic practices of discursive psychology (Potter, 2004). Thus, each researcher noted under their own headings recurring features that they observed in the content of interview talk, as well as any striking patterns in how accounts were presented, endorsed or challenged; and particularly considered structural features of discourse analogous to those identified in their previous studies. We discussed and refined these headings and patterns to arrive at definitions that both could recognize, then re-examined the transcripts to identify divergent instances and test whether the explanations developed could account for all these and arrive at a consistent interpretation of the data. Finally, reflexive features of the interview process and context were considered in relation to this interpretation, in particular the relationship between interviewer and interviewees as fellow ensemble members.

Results

Free improvising identities compared with jazz identities

We wished to know whether discourse about improvising was homogeneous among the improvising musicians sampled from different backgrounds, or whether particular features

were associated with a particular professional identity of jazz musician. Some themes in these data were similar to ways in which jazz musicians talked about improvising. For instance, the interviewees described experiencing tension between self-expression and awareness of others while improvising together:

1   *I've been guilty of it myself in being so bothered about what I'm doing, and then I*

2   *kind of flip out of that and listen to what everyone else is doing and thinking I'm*

3   *playing really badly or, or inappropriately um just because I've got really in involved*

4   *in my own world. And you see that even in some kind of quite renowned improvising*

5   *groups but, sometimes you're like, you're not actually listening to each other, you're*

6   *just play, you're just playing.* (i08)

They emphasised the importance of social interaction to the group's success:

1   *…usually you sort of come out and at the end of it and it's, you feel better sometimes,*

2   *you know you've got something out of your system, you know, in a way that's sort of*

3   *fine, and then we all go for a drink in the State Bar and you know it's just like this sort*

4   *of, little club thing where everyone's got these shared things...* (i03)

Talk of mastery and mystery in relation to musical practice was also evident. As in previous studies, irony could be applied to naïve versions of improvising where identity as a trained musician was being worked up. For instance, in the quote below the speaker disparages the unskilled improvising of unspecified others by referring to it as 'messing' (lines 1-3) and laughing at this.

1   *… I don't like to see people messing [laughs] I suppose like messing around and things*

2   *they can't play, do you know? [uh-huh] do you know what I mean, and I know there*

3	*are people who mightn't be able to read music or (.) that's not what I mean, you*
4	*know it's just that I think that what makes it is that all all of us in GIO are highly*
5	*skilled on our instruments, and I don't think, and I think that anybody who's not, will*
6	*find it very hard to improvise.* (i04)

This assertion functions to privilege trained identity and position the speaker as possessing mastery in contrast (a 'reader'). However, the speaker also has to attend to the possible inference by the interviewer that fellow ensemble members are being categorised as naïve or less masterful musicians ('that's not what I mean', line 3). There is therefore a subsequent rhetorical assertion that everyone must be skilled, otherwise they would be unable to improvise (lines 4-6). In this respect, the mastery repertoire emerges as problematic here in a way that was not observed in jazz musicians' talk.

The mystery repertoire, on the other hand, could be used by these musicians to construct a preferred version of self as someone whose lack of assimilated technique and knowledge allows them able to operate on instinct to greater improvisatory effect:

1	*…for me it's about not having the either the learning or the time spent studying this*
2	*instrument that allows it to be quite a blank canvas… I imagine for some people*
3	*improvisation is based on a knowledge of what different combinations of notes um*
4	*chords and scales can be, whereas it's not for me.* (i08)

In the quote above, mastery is positioned as a remote concern of 'some people' (line2). The use of distancing constructions such as 'I imagine' functions to work up identity as an improviser with no need to possess instrumental mastery (lines 2-4). Among jazz musicians, the mastery repertoire was never treated as dis-preferred in this way. Another interviewee,

in contrast to i04 above, specifically endorses 'messing around' (line 1) as a valuable aspect of his playing:

1	*what I did really enjoy doing was just messing around, er not so much making up*
2	*tunes but just kind of, you know touching the keyboard. Er and I I I would enjoy, I*
3	*could do that for an hour or whatever whereas if I really couldn't get into practicing*
4	*pieces that someone had told me to do, [mm-hm] yeah so I think yeah um, I've*
5	*always, I've always enjoyed doing my own thing rather than doing what someone*
6	*has told me to do* (i02)

There was no ironic marking around the adoption of a mystery repertoire was observed, in contrast to how jazz musicians treat this. For both interviewees i08 and i02 above, embracing the mysterious by avoiding practised technique is instead presented as evidence of an individuality cogent with successful improvising. I08 stresses that what he describes works 'for me', and i02 privileges following his own dictates rather than someone else's (lines 5-6).

In summary, the construction of group improvising as an essentially social interaction requiring a balance of attention to individual and group processes was apparent in the talk of these improvisers. However they employed varied and distinct orientations towards the repertoires of mastery and mystery, in contrast to discourse consistent among jazz musicians. These findings are important as they highlight not only that improvisation is socially constructed by musicians, but that it is constructed in ways that depend on the implications for genre-specific identities. For example, the mastery repertoire implies that high quality improvisations must be underpinned by technical proficiency in established areas, and may be important in validating oneself or others as professional practitioners

However, the mystery repertoire implies that high quality improvisations can be achieved by performers with low levels of conventional technical skill. It may be important in asserting individual creativity, or in support of experimentation across genres associated with distinct areas of technical prowess

Communication in improvisation: to play or not to play

Although musicians' talk about improvising together has been found to be characterised by discourse practices around ongoing identity projects, and is widely viewed as analogous to conversation, it is not clear whether or how their interaction in talk may extend to, or inform, their musical interaction. We examined where musicians individually commented on performing with each other in GIO in order to consider what was communicated or understood by musical events or processes, and how.

The orchestra aims to realise music that is as diverse and unprecedented as possible. This meant that descriptions of 'typical' musical interactions did not tend to recur in the talk at interviews, making it difficult to compare accounts of a common event in different contexts, or from different individuals. However, in most musical situations, not everybody plays all the time and Cage's most famous work reminds us that, in the context of a performance, not playing is a musical act. When improvising music as freely as possible within a large ensemble, deciding whether to play or remain silent at points in a performance remains a fundamental musical choice, and descriptions of staying silent within an improvisation did recur in almost all interviewees' accounts of performing together. The various renderings of instances of "silence" presented offer an excellent opportunity to interrogate how meaning

is constructed in practice around a musical, nonverbal contribution. Although not playing was treated as an important musical consideration when improvising together, varied interpretations of this musical behaviour were accessible. The quote below demonstrates this:

1   I: *…How did you pick up on, or how were you aware of whether or not* [names

2   two other musicians] *were with you, you said you felt that…*

3   i06: […] *if I did or if they stopped playing then that would be a clear sig- you know*

4   *certainly* [yeah] *stopping playing would that be a signal? Okay let's just*

5   *check, let's get everyone on board here again, I mean it might be*

6   *deliberately, I mean like intentionally not playing for the the sake of the*

7   *music or, or there might be something wrong, so that's obviously a sign, or if*

8   *you can actually hear someone searching, like I was in the first few seconds,*

9   *I was searching as well,* [yeah] *just to get locked in.*

The interviewee corrects himself from describing not playing during a piece as a 'clear signal' (line 3), and rephrases this as a question (line 4), to suggest that his silence could be subject to a number of interpretations. He proposes that it could be taken by other players as: a deliberate communication (to 'get on board', line 5); a deliberate decision that the performed piece required silence at that point ('for the sake of the music', lines 6-7); a symptom of problems with the improvisation broadly ('something wrong', line 7); or an indication that the speaker was not yet ready to play ('searching, lines 8-9). This account of group improvisation implies that silence from a player during group improvisation must be divined by other players in terms of its intentionality, and its musical or communicative

function. Rather than a straightforward transfer of meaning in the manner of the transmission model of communication (a 'signal'), the act of silence emerges as more of a signifier in Saussure's terms, with the potential for multiple divergent meanings to be read into it by co-performers (Potter & Wetherell, 1994).

Other aspects of the improvisers' talk suggest that this potential for ambivalence around not playing is exploited in the construction of specific versions of self and others, and that meanings of the improvised music are worked up for particular identity functions. One incident in the course of a particular performance where several members of the ensemble had stopped playing was raised by five interviewees. In the excerpt below, one of these individuals explains their decision to stop playing on that occasion:

1   *[…] Um and we just finished a week with* [workshop leader] *telling us (.) if there's*

2   *something that you think should be there you should do it. Well what I thought should*

3   *be there is less of everything, so I'm going to start by giving no* [names instrument]*,*

4   *that's the only thing I can do. [yeah] I mean you know I can't you know wander over to*

5   *someone who's playing something I hate, and say you know, I'll give you five quid to stop*

6   *that, you know I'd be broke in an afternoon (.) so it's just I've gone, you know I took the*

7   *trouble to go through a lot of this in um in Europe and in London and the States...* (i07)

The interviewee constructs a particular version of his silence on this occasion as the expression of a considered, individual musical choice (lines 2-3). However he attends to this account as contestable (i.e. it might be thought that he should have done otherwise) by qualifying this as a correct execution of an instruction to the group (line 2) and by implying

that he was compelled to take this option ('the only thing I can do', line 4). The interviewer, enacting a neutral role, does not counter this but provides limited acceptance of the interviewee's account ('yeah'). This claim is reinforced by suggesting that because some co-improvisers were contributing with 'hateful' musical sensibilities (line 5) the interviewee's silence was inevitable if confrontation was to be avoided ('I can't). In doing so he shifts to interpreting his non-playing as an attempt to communicate (that others should follow his example and play less). However, this is sensitive; the interviewer was also an ensemble member. This is apparent in the rendering of his claim as humour (lines 5-6), delivered in faster speech and punctuated repeatedly with 'you know' to offer this as an objective viewpoint shared by the interviewer. The potential breach of etiquette is repaired by the interviewee invoking a mastery repertoire to identify himself as possessing substantial international experience (lines 6-7) and therefore authority to recognise improvisation as less musical.

Another interviewee described continuing to play on this occasion, with a distinct interpretation of the phenomenon of not playing:

1   *I think a lot of them felt inhibited about just er… I don't know* [workshop leader's] *er*

2   *persona or something, I don't know, um but yeah I mean there was a lot, a lot of good*

3   *stuff going on. But a lot of, some people just didn't, didn't play which was er… was ok*

4   *you know, [yeah] if you don't want to play. Cause er that's what part of the playing in a*

5   *big group like that you know, people sit out sometimes or, [yeah] you can everyone plays*

6   *all the time every minute of the the piece. [yeah] So it was good that um… it was good*

7   *that people didn't play. [both laugh].* (i10)

The speaker identifies himself as someone who continued to play on this occasion by referring to non-players as 'them' or 'some people'. He initially attributes their silence to inhibition (line 1) rather than musical choice, and marks this as negative behaviour by stating that there was 'good stuff' in what was being played (lines 2-3). Disparaging others' playing in this way becomes sensitive given that the interviewer does not respond, and the interviewee goes on to describe not playing as 'ok' (line 3). Having elicited a 'yeah' from the interviewer, he repairs his account to suggest that ensemble members not playing was interpretable as their individual musical choice, and emphasises that this is appropriate within group improvisations to avoid excessive noise using the extreme case formulations (Pomeranz, 1988) 'everyone', 'all', 'every' (lines 4-6). The reaching of a consensus that not playing could be positive is marked with shared laughter (line 7).

These varied constructions of individuals not playing within an improvisation could be presented as having influenced the interviewees' musical responses within that context. For instance, at one point another interviewee positioned non-playing as a negative phenomenon within the group:

1   *I think the kind of non participation thing in GIO, that's my little mountain that I have to*

2   *get over I think because and it happens, it happens more, I think it happens more and*

3   *more now, rather than less and less because I care more about it, you know, I care much*

4   *more about the quality of music that we make, than I did before so… er if if I think that*

5   *something's really nice and I see someone being kind of grrrr in the corner it really it puts*

6   *me off, I just can't, I have to stop like I can't do anything else.* (i04)

Here, the interviewee positions silence from other players as problematic (a 'mountain', line 1). She attends to sensitivity around this claim by affirming this as a problem for herself

rather than the group ('my little..'). This concern is nevertheless legitimised by identifying herself as having acquired a heightened concern with quality (lines 3-4). This done, she positions others' non-playing as something that can be interpreted as aggression ('kind of grrr', line5) forcing her to stop playing as well (line 6).

In summary, focusing across interviews on accounts of shared improvised performance where some members of the ensemble did not play their instruments indicates that musical contributions to improvisations are subject to multiple potential meanings. Silence in a performance was variously constructed by interviewees quoted as: a rallying signal; an act of minimal creativity; a warning of individual or group problems with the music in play; a stop sign; an indication of inhibition; a lack of concern with the quality of the music; or an act of aggression. These and other alternatives have varied implications for the contribution of co-improvisers and reflect the social context of performance; their discursive functions indicate that silence is never straightforwardly translatable or decodable. Instead, meanings for the improvisatory act of not playing were worked up (both by those not playing and those responding to others' silence) to support particular constructions of identity for self and others, and to discount alternative constructions.

Discussion

Our findings indicate that when musicians talk about improvising, they construct a version of their musical practice shaped by musical identity work. These constructions have significant implications for researchers studying creativity in general and improvisation in particular (Clarke, 2012). For example, the importance of instrumental virtuosity may be

contested when exploring issues around aesthetics and quality. Viewing musical events as ambiguous and open to multiple interpretations by both performers and listeners challenges the importance of a canon of skills as a prerequisite for successful improvisation. The different ways in which a disparate group of free improvisers construct their musical practice indicates the importance of recognising some of jazz musicians' talk about improvising as an expression of their professional milieu rather than a universal or authoritative account of improvising in its broadest sense. Musicians in this ensemble were able to construct versions of themselves as improvisers whose practice was the more valid because it lacked mastery or informed control, something we have never observed jazz musicians to utter without such a claim being undercut with irony. Yet ensemble members could also endorse the importance of instrumental mastery and theoretical knowledge. What seems significant is that privileging one or other repertoire in their talk required a consequent acknowledgment that alternative versions of improvising were tenable, to avoid potentially excluding colleagues from identity as improvisers. Thus the social nature of group improvisation, when it takes place among musicians of varied stripes, may require all concerned to maintain a flexible approach to what should constitute improvisation. This counters the version of improvisation expressed, for instance, in ethnomusicological studies of jazz musicians (Berliner, 2002; Monson, 1996), where assimilation of a core set of skills, knowledge and procedures is prescribed for improvisation to take place. This may be the basis on which a great many successful jazz musicians see themselves operating; but the findings here underline the importance for psychologists of not treating this as *necessarily* the way that all people or groups will improvise. Gibson, in studying jazz musicians' accounts of improvisation, finds a similar emphasis placed on the acquisition of necessary embodied skills, but locates their centrality within the practices of a specific art world (in Becker's

sense) around jazz (Becker, 1984; Gibson, 2006). Our findings suggest a great many more modus operandi in improvisation that could be studied and mapped; or indeed, that models of improvisation must be anticipated as being subject to change or obsolescence just as ways of making music have been transformed across centuries and cultures.

This implies that further research is needed to map out which aspects of our knowledge of improvisational processes represent particularities of professional or institutional milieus, and how we might revise our understandings on an ongoing basis by exploring alternative arenas of musical practice. For instance, Davidson and Good (2002) observed the influence of interpersonal dynamics on how classical musicians perform together, and a more recent comparison of the accounts of jazz musicians and classical string players has drawn attention to how nuances in their discourse reflect structural features of their working practice and professional context (Dobson, 2010). Piano students in a musical conservatoire have been observed to valorise a repertoire of mastery in talking about their studies, and it seems reasonable to consider that possession of exclusive technique should be a key feature of professional identity work among those dedicating years of their lives to acquiring this status through music (Juuti & Littleton, 2010). Greater understanding of how professional identity work is distinguishable from music identity work could be achieved with wider study of improvisation. The study we report involves musicians known to each other and the researchers, and with musical experiences in common and has yielded rich insight into the complexity of interaction and sense-making when improvising. This is in part achieved through recognising the specific context of musicians being interviewed by a fellow ensemble member and using this to inform interpretation of the data. If the social processes of improvised music are potentially much more complex (and therefore much

more interesting for psychological research) than previous genre-specific studies have suggested, there is therefore considerable scope for enriching and extending these findings by undertaking similar investigation into improvisation wherever it is found around the world.

The ways in which participants talked about improvising together were consistent with the understanding of communication in discursive psychology (Potter & Edwards, 1992). Individuals were seen to ascribe meanings or intentions to how they and others took part in improvising, but those meanings were negotiable and constructed in response to conversational context. However, the findings also demonstrate how the transmission models of communication that are frequently used to explain the non-verbal interaction of group improvising can be fruitfully superseded by a model of conversation as discourse. It is a tenet of the turn to language that we cannot access the internal individual worlds of musical behaviour, only verbal versions of it. These are inevitably subject to social construction and may be inadequate to account for such an embodied and transient experience. However, the findings demonstrate that these musicians recognised a particular non-verbal event within a shared musical improvisation as something irresolvably ambiguous. While there is a significant amount of evidence to indicate the effects of specific structural parameters upon musical communication, this finding underlines that music has an essentially ambiguous quality, and that elements such as preference and structure interact in a number of sophisticated ways to produce meaning for the listener (Knox, Beveridge, Mitchell, & MacDonald, 2011) - including someone listening to their fellow performers. Moreover, when recounting that particular event, the improvisers treated its

multiple potential meanings as consequential in both preferred and dis-preferred ways for the identities of themselves and fellow players, and oriented to them accordingly.

This is important as no matter what specific emotion a performer wants to convey in any given performance on behalf of themselves or a composer, as listeners we filter everything we hear though our own listening histories, experiences and preferences. What is heard is therefore interpreted in innumerable idiosyncratic and context-specific ways (Cross, 2005; MacDonald, Kreutz, & Mitchell, 2012b). Our findings suggest strongly that this is no less the case among musicians improvising together. In the course of performing this music, an individual improviser may make a contribution to the music with a particular intent; but both musical content and intent will be shaped by the identities which that individual can construct for themselves and others within the social and temporal context of performance. Yet that musical contribution may be interpreted, and responded to, in idiosyncratic and unpredictable ways by the other improvisers, depending in turn on the meanings they assign to it in the context of what has gone before, and the identities they recognise for themselves and others in the group. Since any musical contributions and responses require subjective social constructions of the process taking place and the performers involved, the improvised music necessarily constitutes an emergent, non-verbal discourse. This is a version of group improvisation that much better represents the excitement, complexity and diversity of improvised music than the idea of people who have learnt simply an objectively right way to pass about commonly understood musical components.

It also stands in some contradiction to frequent assumptions that improvisers reach shared musical meanings in playing together (e.g. Borgo, 2004). Previous studies of jazz ensembles have examined creativity and communication in the rendition of works that exists to some

extent in advance, even if only as a sequence of chord changes and an assumed style (e.g. Seddon & Biasutti, 2009). The musicians in our study, however, were concerned with creating, rather than rendering, a piece of music entirely in performance, with no prearranged parameters. Furthermore in a large ensemble, visual cues are less readily transmitted, particularly where no leadership role is assigned. In this context, the meaning of musical contributions must truly be constructed in a social context. While Sawyer has argued (Sawyer, 2005 p49) that the unpredictability of improvised jazz means that 'a musician cannot know the meaning of her own playing until the other musicians have responded", our findings suggest that in free improvisation, she may not even know then, but can only construct meanings for that music in contingent ways. This suggests an important qualification of Seddon's (2005) empathetic attunement: group improvisation depends on the *social construction* of other players' musical perspectives, rather than necessarily being able to 'see' them as intrinsic characteristics. What we observed in the accounts of these musicians shows significant divergence in the interpretation of musical contributions and objectives between individuals, despite the ensemble having a strong awareness of, and enthusiasm for, a collective identity.

The focus on choosing not to play as a particular musical event and behaviour has allowed this study to reach novel conclusions about what takes place in group improvisation, and highlights an important direction for future research in this area. Research pursuing cognitive modelling of improvisation focuses on physical processes at the expense of social processes (Berkowitz, 2010; Brattico & M., 2010; Johnson-Laird, 2002; Limb & Braun, 2008; Pressing & Sloboda, 1988). Yet the qualitative investigation of musicians' talk about improvising tends not to require musicians to focus on specific musical events, or compare

analysis of talk with analysis of their actual playing. This is perhaps surprising. However, musicians may often find difficulty in, or resist, verbalising an exact account of what takes place in the extraordinarily rapid, embodied and non-verbal processes of improvising (MacDonald & Wilson, 2006). Bastien and Hostager (1988) provided an early exception to this rule, having asked musicians to talk them through video recordings of their playing, but treated musicians' accounts as reportage rather than discourse. Discursive psychologists have repeatedly called for qualitative research to broaden its scope beyond interview transcripts (Potter & Hepburn, 2005). Although we have gained insight on improvisation through focusing on a specific instance that emerged as recurrent in our data, it might be more beneficial for future research to look beyond generic interviews with musicians and seek their descriptions of live or recorded musical acts to a greater extent; or, to undertake discourse analysis of recorded music itself.

There is a research imperative to enhance our understanding of improvisation as a unique form of collaborative creativity crucial to the landscape of contemporary music, and as spontaneous musical communication that is universally accessible regardless of technical proficiency. We conclude that the creative, communicative and *social* process of musical improvising in groups can best be understood when the entirety of improvisational practice is taken into consideration and its various contexts (musical, physical, cultural and interpersonal) acknowledged. While improvisation is a practice that cuts across all musical boundaries, the study of its wider musical applications is in its infancy. There is considerable need for further psychological research to enrich our capacity to understand improvisation by looking beyond particular genres, and beyond particular professional milieus or the musical activity of 'specialists'. However there is a particular danger in trying to formulate

research questions about artistic or creative behaviour that we proceed from a working definition of what the processes under investigation should be; whereas the very nature of artistic endeavour is to innovate and develop new and unique approaches, to redefine what constitutes creative practice. Qualitative research methods are the most appropriate approach to understanding what people do when they engage in the arts for this reason, since they proceed from individual understanding of the object of research interest, rather than testing an established definition. The continued investigation of group improvising through discursive psychology in particular can enable research into the arts to keep pace with the protean rate of change in music as in other art forms, rather than seeking to privilege particular versions of improvising as they become institutionalised.

References

Antaki, C., & Widdicombe, S. (Eds.). (1998). *Identities in talk*. London: Sage.

Bailey, D. (1993). *Improvisation: its nature and practice in music*.

Bastien, D. T., & Hostager, T. J. (1988). Jazz as a process of organizational innovation. *Communication Research, 15*(5), 582-602.

Becker, H. S. (1984). *Art worlds*.

Berkowitz, A. L. (2010). *The improvising mind: Cognition and creativity in the musical moment*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Berliner, P. (2002). *Thinking in jazz :the infinite art of improvisation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Biasutti, M., & Frezza, L. (2009). Dimensions of Music Improvisation. *Creativity Research Journal, 21*(2), 232 - 242.

Borgo, D. (2004). Play of Meaning and the Meaning of Play in Jazz, The. *Journal of Consciousness Studies, 11*(3-4), 174-190.

Brattico, E., & M., T. (2010). Creativity in musicians: Evidence from cognitive neuroscience. In R. Bader, C. Neuhaus & U. Morgenstern (Eds.), *Concepts, experiments and fieldwork: Studies in systematic musicology and ethnomusicology* (pp. 233-244). Frankfurt: Peter Lang.

Clarke, E. F. (2012). Creativity in performance. In D. J. Hargreaves, D. Miell & R. Macdonald (Eds.), *Musical Imaginations: Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Creativity, Performance and Perception* (pp. 17-30). Oxford: Oxford Univ Pr.

Cook, N. (2004). Making music together or improvisation and its others. *The Source, 1*, 5-26.

Cross, I. (2005). Music and meaning, ambiguity and evolution. In D. Miell, R. A. R. MacDonald & D. J. Hargreaves (Eds.), *Musical Communication* (pp. 27-43). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Davidson, J. W., & Good, J. M. M. (2002). Social and Musical Co-Ordination between Members of a String Quartet: An Exploratory Study. *Psychology of Music, 30*(2), 186-201. doi: 10.1177/0305735602302005

Dobson, M. (2010). Performing your self? Autonomy and self-expression in the work of jazz musicians and classical string players. *Music Performance Research, Vol. 3.1*, 42-60.

Gibson, W. (2006). Material culture and embodied action: sociological notes on the examination of musical instruments in jazz improvisation. *The Sociological Review, 54*(1), 171-187. doi: 10.1111/j.1467-954X.2006.00607.x

Johnson-Laird, P. N. (2002). How jazz musicians improvise. *Music Perception, 19*(3), US, www.

Juuti, S., & Littleton, K. (2010). Musical identities in transition: Solo-piano students' accounts of entering the academy. *Psychology of Music, 38*(4), 481-497. doi: 10.1177/0305735609351915

Kenny, B. J., Gellrich, M., Parncutt, R., & McPherson, G. E. (2002). *The science and psychology of music performance: Creative strategies for teaching and learning.*

Knox, D., Beveridge, S., Mitchell, L. A., & MacDonald, R. A. R. (2011). Acoustic analysis and mood classification of pain-relieving music. [Article]. *Journal of the Acoustical Society of America, 130*(3), 1673-1682. doi: 10.1121/1.3621029

Lewis, G. E. (2007). Mobilitas Animi: Improvising Technologies, Intending Chance. *Parallax, 13*(4), 108-122. doi: 10.1080/13534640701682867

Limb, C. J., & Braun, A. R. (2008). Neural Substrates of Spontaneous Musical Performance: An fMRI Study of Jazz Improvisation. *PLoS ONE, 3*(2), e1679. doi: 10.1371/journal.pone.0001679

Linson, A., Dobbyn, C., & Laney, R. (2012). *Critical issues in evaluating freely improvising interactive music systems*. Paper presented at the International Conference on Computational Creativity (ICCC 2012), Dublin, Ireland.

MacDonald, R., & Wilson, G. (2005). Musical identities of professional jazz musicians: a focus group investigation. *Psychology of Music, 33*(4), 395-417. doi: 10.1177/0305735605056151

MacDonald, R. A. R., Kreutz, G., & Mitchell, L. (2012a). *Music, Health, and Wellbeing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

MacDonald, R. A. R., Kreutz, G., & Mitchell, L. (2012b). What is Music, Health, and Wellbeing and why is it important? In R. A. R. MacDonald, G. Kreutz & L. Mitchell (Eds.), *Music, Health, and Wellbeing* (pp. 3-11). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

MacDonald, R. A. R., Miell, D., Hargreaves, D. J., & Miell, D. E. (2002). *Musical identities*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

MacDonald, R. A. R., Miell, D., & Wilson, G. B. (2005). Talking about music: A vehicle for identity development. In D. Miell, R. A. R. MacDonald & D. J. Hargreaves (Eds.), *Musical communication*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

MacDonald, R. A. R., & Wilson, G. B. (2006). Constructions of jazz: How Jazz musicians present their collaborative musical practice. *Musicae Scientiae, 10*(1), 59-83. doi: 10.1177/102986490601000104

MacDonald, R. A. R., & Wilson, G. B. (under review). Billy Connolly, Daniel Barenboim, Willie Wonka, Jazz Bastards and the Universality of Improvisation. . In G. E. Lewis (Ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Improvisation* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

MacDonald, R. A. R., Wilson, G. B., & Miell, D. (2012). Improvisation as a creative process within contemporary music. In D. J. Hargreaves, D. Miell & R. A. R. Macdonald (Eds.), *Musical Imaginations: Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Creativity, Performance and Perception* (pp. 242-255). Oxford: Oxford Univ Pr.

Mazzola, G. B., & Cherlin, P. B. (2009). *Flow, gesture, and spaces in free jazz: towards a theory of collaboration*. Berlin: Springer-Verlag.

Monson, I. (1996). *Saying something: jazz improvisation and interaction*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Nettl, B., & Russell, M. (Eds.). (2008). *In the course of performance: Studies in the world of musical improvisation*. Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press.

Pothoulaki, M., MacDonald, R. A. R., & Flowers, P. (2012). An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of an Improvisational Music Therapy Program for Cancer Patients. *Journal of Music Therapy, 49*(1), 45-67.

Potter, J. (2004). Discourse Analysis and Discourse Psychology. In P. M. Camic, J. E. Rhodes & L. Yardley (Eds.), *Qualitative Methods in Psychology: Expanding Perspectives in Methodology and Design* (1st ed., pp. 73-95). Washington DC: American Psychological Association.

Potter, J., & Edwards, D. (1992). *Discursive Psychology*. London: Sage.

Potter, J., & Hepburn, A. (2005). Qualitative interviews in psychology: Problems and possibilities. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 2*(4), 281-308.

Potter, J., & Wetherell, M. (1994). *Discourse and social psychology: Beyond attitudes and behaviour*. London: Sage.

Pressing, J., & Sloboda, J. A. (1988). *Generative processes in music: the psychology of performance, improvisation and composition*.

Sawyer, R. (2005). Music and conversation. In D. Miell, R. MacDonald & D. Hargreaves (Eds.), *Musical communication* (pp. 45-60). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Sawyer, R. K. (2003). *Group creativity: music, theater, collaboration*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Seddon, F., & Biasutti, M. (2009). A comparison of modes of communication between members of a string quartet and a jazz sextet. *Psychology of Music, 37*(4), 395-415. doi: 10.1177/0305735608100375

Seddon, F. A. (2005). Modes of communication during jazz improvisation. *British Journal of Music Education, 22*(01), 47-61. doi: doi:10.1017/S0265051704005984

Wetherell, M., Taylor, S., & Yates, S. (Eds.). (2001). *Discourse Theory and Practice: A Reader*. London: Sage.

Wilson, G. B., & MacDonald, R. A. R. (2005). The meaning of the blues: musical identities in talk about jazz. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 2*(4), 341 - 363.