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Changing the Story Jazz and Peacebuilding PGR Workshop



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Alongside [Changing the Story's](#) celebration event in June 2022, a workshop brought together nearly a dozen post-graduate and early career researchers to reflect on what the jazz metaphor could offer to research on peacebuilding. Jazz music and jazz musicians have managed to flourish in nearly every corner of the globe. Since 2011 the United Nations celebrates [International Jazz Day](#) in recognition of its role in promoting peace and freedom of expression, social change and intercultural dialogue. Jazz has a legacy as a form of musical and social innovation, resistance, and celebration of marginalised peoples and histories, but it also calls on us to question seemingly 'naturalised' roles of power and hierarchy in organising. Jazz itself is not outside the politics of power and hierarchy; its origins as an African American music born in the deep south in the late 19th century connect it to a legacy of slavery, colonialism and racism. The popular success of jazz in the early 20th century even led to its use [as a tool of diplomacy](#) to promote the United States abroad during the Cold War and its rise as a [forbidden underground art form in communist countries](#). Jazz's popularity across the world have seen it increasingly associated with [elitism](#), and women are still largely [underrepresented](#) among jazz musicians.

It is within these reflections on the origins, history, and legacy of power and politics in jazz that this workshop was situated. The four-year Changing the Story project sought to promote social justice-based approaches and practices to building inclusive civil societies with and for young people in twelve post-conflict countries. The power dynamics in post-conflict countries and international development aims are themselves embroiled in complex histories and practices of hierarchy and injustice. The participatory and arts-based methodologies of Changing the Story seek to challenge these very power dynamics by working with civil society and young people to promote social justice.

I was not a part of this project throughout any of its research process, but I have spent a great deal of time in my own research thinking about notions of participation and representation. I also happen to love jazz and exploring the jazz metaphor in all manners of life and research. The jazz metaphor largely refers to viewing jazz practice as new language and a different way of viewing collaboration, interaction and adaptation in systems of power relations. And, in the delightful task of exploring arts-based methods, much of the content of this workshop was inspired largely by Adrienne D. Dixon's (2005) work on jazz as a research methodology informed by racialized discourses and ethnic epistemologies, Ajay Heble's (2000) critical reflections on dissonance, and Michael Humphreys, Deniz Ucbasaran and Andy Lockett's (2011) research on jazz leadership. But, more than anyone else, the development and co-hosting of the workshop in collaboration with the wonderful Leeds-based jazz pianist [Ben Gilbert](#) illuminated endless opportunities for how reflecting on the practice of jazz could be valuable for reflexive research methodologies, or indeed for new ontologies and epistemologies.

Ben and I ran the workshop as a conversation: he, at the piano, explained concepts, stories and techniques from jazz, and I helped bridge the link between these examples and research methods to spark discussion amongst the group. We chose to focus on two key elements: (1) how leadership and improvisation in jazz connect to research design and collection of data, and (2) how the notion of dissonance in jazz offers insight into the interpretation and analysis of data. Across both themes, critical reflections on the notion of voice emerged. We questioned our own voices, the spaces we give through the inherent asymmetric power relations of doing research to others' voices, our own performances as voice, the emergence of new ways of viewing voices in interaction, and the various leadership roles and dynamics at play in any research project.

There are multiple modes of leadership and support at play in any jazz ensemble. Jazz has a basic structure within which members of an ensemble have the creative freedom to improvise. Each musician passes the baton to one another, taking the lead in solos and then providing a supporting role, cultivating a shared space for individual and collective creative expression. Solo improvisors can change the direction of a piece by offering new opportunities for chordal progression, but this only works if the ensemble itself is actively listening and responding to the soloist, giving them space they need to say something new and to take the piece in a different direction. In this sense each soloist can 'lead' the ensemble into new directions, but there are also different styles of leadership at play in how an ensemble is put together in the first place. Humphreys, Ucbasaran and Lockett (2011) found that, according to word-of-mouth jazz lore, Duke Ellington first tried to get to know each musician's sound to curate an environment where they could each flourish, Miles Davis continuously brought together different musicians in pursuit of new sounds, and Art Blakey prioritised nurturing young talent and encouraging young leaders in jazz. But there are other jazz greats who were perhaps less generous in passing the baton to others.

These different styles of leadership open up multiple questions on participatory research methods: What it is exactly that we mean by participatory research? At what stage of the research process do participants become participants and at what stage are they no longer participating? What are the barriers, including the ones we place as researchers, on their participation? And, most importantly, what does participation mean for them? Are we 'passing the baton' or largely keeping it for ourselves? How well are we listening out for the opportunities for 'chord changes' that open up a new creative space for the soloist and the ensemble? In many ways these questions have been central to Changing the Story's work with young people, and particularly with the incredible [Youth Research Board](#) who self-organised to carry out their own collaborative work to campaign for changes they want to see.

Who researchers decide to listen to, how they listen, and the spaces within which 'speaking' and 'listening' take place are fundamentally political matters. Jazz is not the only field bringing insight into these matters, as a rich body of postcolonial, decolonial and feminist scholarship that has already contributed to thinking on positionality, situatedness and reflexivity in the research process. But, jazz contributes a concept of dissonance to this line of thinking.

Dissonance is not unique to jazz, but it is essential to it and at its simplest form refers to landing on notes that do not sound quite right until they are resolved. But it can also be understood as a way of breaking the rules or 'landing on the wrong note' in ways that can add intrigue, attitude, depth and scope for emotional expression. It can open space for resistance and more nuanced affective understanding of what others are trying to communicate. It can challenge us to explore richer and more meaningful interpretations of research and life. A research participant might seemingly go off topic in an interview, but upon closer listening there is very likely an additional layer of depth and intrigue in which the participant is 'improvising' on a solo and finding creative ways of expression in their own voice. As researchers we have an important supporting role to play, to listen, play the supporting 'riffs', allow an uninterrupted solo moment, and follow up with any chord progressions to support that soloist. And, we can also think about dissonance in terms of writing up research findings. For instance, for those researching deprivation or suffering, to what extent does this research allow space for agency and new expressions for those affected, beyond their suffering? Can dissonance offer a methodological tool that opens critical space for expression and alternative discourses among those we research, where they are active in expressing their own resolution, or even their own aspirations for this resolution of dissonance as a matter of social justice?

Many of the discussions at the Changing the Story celebration event centred on creating space for young people's voices, or even playing a supporting role in ensuring there are ways for them to create their own space in a mode of 'sustainable disruption' (to repeat a quote oft cited at the celebration event) in pursuit of social justice. Perhaps by thinking about sustainable disruption at the nexus of listening and voice, we can advance new participatory methodologies that go further than recognising resistance and instead cultivate a sustainable environment within which it can thrive, and where the 'ensemble' and 'soloists' promoting social justice have the support they want and means for adaptation they need to sustainably disrupt in pursuit of their own 'resolutions'.

There are multiple applications of the jazz metaphor for research, and the discussions at the postgraduate workshop extended far beyond what I have tried to capture here. But, we do intend to take our first meeting and discussions as a springboard for future conversations and collaborations advancing arts-based and participatory action research.

References

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