Improvisational Cultures: Collaborative Emergence and Creativity in Improvisation

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I was delighted to read Becker's (this issue) insightful and broad-ranging comments, especially since they touch on parallels that I've been exploring in my own work—between jazz, improvisational theater, and everyday social life. Becker identifies several fruitful areas for future research, and my comments will focus on these areas and how they connect with my own recent research.

I focus on two key themes of Becker's article. First, Becker's title tells us that his focus will be on "etiquette." *Etiquette* is collective social knowledge—"no one taught us these rules"—the rules are learned through long years of socialization. The etiquette of jazz is "aggressively egalitarian," and Becker connects this egalitarian ethic to the processes of musical interaction during a collaborative jazz performance. Jazz is fundamentally an ensemble art form, and everyone involved in the improvisation is constantly offering new ideas—"tentative moves, slight variations"—and each musician is listening closely to the others. The performance that results is truly a group creation, a collective social process that I call *collaborative emergence* (Sawyer, 1999).

Second, Becker emphasizes the preexisting structures that guide an improvisational performance. It's a common misconception about improvisation that performers simply play whatever pops into their heads, that "anything goes." Improvisation, although it involves spontaneity and extemporizing, doesn't mean that there is a total lack of structure. In fact, all genres of musical performance include some structures that guide the performance (Sawyer, 1996).

Likewise, in jazz, musicians follow shared structures—typically by agreeing on a song and then improvising together within the harmonic structure of that song (although the melody and rhythm may be completely improvised). Becker notes that the use of these shared structures reflects an etiquette vis-à-vis the audience; because a knowledgeable audience is also familiar with these structures, they will better be able to understand the performance and to appreciate how it is different from similar improvisations (cf. the *conventions* of Becker, 1982).

Almost all jazz musicians also rely on *licks*—a less-pejorative term for what Becker calls clichés—short melodic lines that can be used at many different points during a solo and that are worked out and refined in the privacy of rehearsal. Only the dedicated fan will recognize these licks; most audiences will not be able to tell which portions of a solo are completely new and which are licks that have been used many times before. Jazz musicians know that they need these licks to perform effectively, but they have mixed feelings about relying on them too much; they

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feel a constant tension between depending on these fixed structures and their desire to constantly keep it fresh, to actually improvise something new and different each time (Sawyer, 1992).

A musician's personally developed repertoire of licks contributes to a recognizable style. In addition to these uniquely created licks, most musicians also use licks that have been used by many other performers throughout the history of jazz, and, for the knowledgeable listener, each such use invokes a rich complex of associations to other occasions of listening. Thus, the tension between using licks and playing novel phrases is bigger than any one musician—it's a broader tension between creating something new, yet staying within the tradition of the genre of jazz, and playing so that your audience can understand what you're doing. If the performance is *too* new, the audience won't get it; respect for the audience requires the musicians to maintain a certain degree of continuity with tradition.

Becker's article—in its focus on etiquette, licks, and song forms—focuses on the structured aspects of jazz. In fact, Becker starts this article by invoking the preface of *Art Worlds* (Becker, 1982), where he reports almost falling asleep during jazz performances; his point in both texts is that the conventions of the genre are so rigid that they in fact require very little creativity. Becker suggests that improvisation isn't really that creative, or, at least, it's less creative than most people think it is; note that Becker avoided using the word *creativity* in his article. In taking this stance, Becker is consistent with the perspective of his book *Art Worlds* and, more generally, consistent with the discipline of sociology—with its traditional focus on norms, rules, and practices—and, more broadly, with the structuring forces of society that guide and determine each interaction among its members.

However, Becker acknowledges that this is only one extreme of jazz performance, the uncreative extreme—when the participants do not follow the etiquette, they are "not courteous to each other," they "do not listen carefully" to the "collective direction," and the musicians each play their own "tired clichés." Becker hints that performances may sometimes be more creative, when musicians listen to each other, and use that inspiration to go beyond their clichés. Jazz etiquette is paradoxical—although "etiquette" implies constraint, limitation, and lack of individual freedom, in jazz it can sometimes work to encourage novelty.

Some improvisations are relatively boring, repetitive, and structured; others are inspired, fresh, and original. When one examines the ethnomusicological literature, one finds that in all improvisational genres, there is the same tension between structure and creativity (Sawyer, 1996). This observation has inspired some of the key questions of my own research: What are the structures used in improvisation? How and when are they used creatively? And what is the nature of this creativity? In this article I use these questions to connect Becker's themes to my work on individual and collaborative creativity.

I started graduate school at the age of 30, after many years as a jazz pianist. This history led me to study the psychology of creativity with Mike Csikszentmihalyi and to try to apply creativity theories to improvisation. But when I began to analyze improvisation, I soon realized that the concept itself was problematic: What is improvisation? Yes, structures are always present, but how much structure can there be before we would no longer call it an "improvisation"? It's obvious what *isn't* improvisation: scored, European notation, where the performer plays what is written in advance by a composer. But there are very few musical traditions with a notational system; yet, many musical traditions have fairly structured songs, as well as more improvised genres. It would be ethnocentric to define "improvisation" as any musical performance that is not performed from notation.

In fact, there is no sharp dividing line between "improvisation" and "not improvisation"; rather, there is a continuum, from more improvised to less improvised (cf. Nettl, 1974). This continuum is multidimensional; in *The Semiotics of Improvisation* (Sawyer, 1996), I proposed a set of nine contrast dimensions that contribute to improvisationality.

COLLABORATIVE EMERGENCE

These definitional issues arise whether we are concerned with solo or group improvisation. But in group improvisation, the questions are even more complex and more interesting and lead us to some important insights about individual agency, social action, and the nature of creativity. In an ensemble improvisation, we can't identify the creativity of the performance with any single performer; the performance is collaboratively created. Although each member of the group contributes creative material, a musician's contributions only make sense in terms of the way they are heard, absorbed, and elaborated on by the other musicians. The performance that results *emerges* from the interactions of the group.

Because my interests and training lie in conversation analysis, I've chosen to study improvisation by studying improvised verbal performance (Sawyer, 1997a, 1997b), while drawing inspiration from recent ethnomusicological studies of collaborative creativity in jazz (Berliner, 1994; Monson, 1996). I've spent the last few years studying Chicago improvisational theater, where a group of actors works together to improvise a scene, complete with characters, plot, and dramatic events, using only their dialogue (Sawyer, 1997a). Becker notes several parallels between improv theater and jazz; I think these parallels derive from the fact that both are examples of *collaborative emergence*. I demonstrate the key features of collaborative emergence by walking through the following transcript (from Sawyer, 1995b) of the first 30 sec of an improvised theater sketch, which lasted about 5 min. Note that the actors do not use props; all actions described are mimed.

Four actors stand at the back of the stage. Actor A begins the scene.

  1. (Actor A walks to center stage, pulls up a chair, and sits down, miming the action of driving by holding an imaginary steering wheel.)
  2. (Actor B walks to A, stands next to him, fishes in pocket for something.)
  3. A: On or off?
  4. B: I'm getting on, sir (continues fishing in his pocket).
  5. A: In or out?
  6. B: I'm getting in! I'm getting in!
  7. A: Did I see you tryin' to get in the back door a couple of stops back?
  8. B: Uh …

Although this dialogue seems natural and almost scripted, in fact, there is a high degree of unpredictability. When an actor takes a dialogue turn, one possible path is chosen, and many other potential paths are closed off; once closed off, it's hard for us to see that the other paths were ever there at all. The importance of collaborative emergence in dialogue only becomes clear when we spend some time analyzing the many possible paths that the dialogue might have taken at each turn.

Of course, unlimited options are available at the beginning of the scene. Actor A could have chosen a different activity, or another actor might have entered the scene first. The determination of who will begin the scene is itself emergent from the split-second decisions of all actors. A's initial nonverbal act is to sit in a chair and mime the act of holding a steering wheel, suggesting that he is a driver and is sitting in a vehicle.

Likewise, any of the remaining actors could have entered the scene next, during the brief period when all of them were watching Actor A. The ensemble does not choose which actors will be in a scene or their order. A different actor may have been just a split second away from deciding to walk forward, but Actor B made the next move. Actor B has many possible acts available at turn 2, which would have been dramatically coherent. For example, B could have pulled up a second chair and sat down next to the "driver," and he would have become a passenger in a car. A's initial act does not indicate whether the vehicle is moving; it does not indicate the type of vehicle; it does not indicate the role of his character or the relationship with any other character. The range of dramatic options available is practically unlimited: For example, at turn 2, B could have addressed A as Captain Kirk of Star Trek, initiating a TV-show parody. In turn 2, Actor B's action also leaves A with a large range of options for turn 3. In turn 3, A could have addressed B as his friend, searching for theater tickets. A's utterance (3) begins to define the dramatic frame more specifically. "On or off" would not be an appropriate statement for a car driver. It suggests that A is a professional driver of some vehicle—perhaps a bus, plane, subway, or even a spaceship. Turn 3 also entails a relationship: B is a paying customer of A.

A few minutes of examination of an improvisational transcript indicates many plausible, dramatically coherent utterances that the actors could have performed at each turn. A combinatorial explosion quickly results in hundreds of potential performances. Nonetheless, by turn 8 the actors have established a reasonably complex drama, a collectively created structure that now constrains the actions for the rest of the scene. They know that A is a bus driver and that B is a potential passenger. A is getting a little impatient, and B may be a little shifty, perhaps trying to sneak on. In the remainder of the sketch, the actors must retain dramatic coherence with this structure. Of course, each actor's turn will suggest additional dramatic elements, which will enter the emergent dramatic scene and influence subsequent performer's acts. All of the elements of this dramatic structure are emergent—they have emerged from the collective interaction and creative contributions of all three actors. They have been created, but not by any single actor.

The concept of *emergence* is becoming increasingly important in many fields that study complex systems, including biology, meteorology, and cognitive science. In an emergent system, interaction among constituent components leads to overall system behavior that could not be predicted from a full and complete analysis of the individual components of the system. Group behavior must be thought of as emergent in those cases where there is not a structured plan guiding the group and where there is no leader who directs the group (Sawyer, 1999).

Consequently, an improvisational theater performance cannot be understood by trying to reduce it to a study of the individual actors. Rather, the study of collaborative emergence requires simultaneous analysis at multiple levels—group interactional, textual, and historical-developmental. Emergent processes are found at each of these three levels. At the group level, a collective creative performance emerges from symbolic interaction. At the textual level, text products emerge from a series of improvisations, as in the development of scripts through improvised rehearsals or the development of idiosyncratic children's games from the improvisations of fantasy play (Sawyer, in press). And, at the historical level, macrosocial structures and norms

emerge over time. Becker's article suggests a focus on this latter level: Where does the etiquette come from? Who created these unwritten rules? Jazz etiquette, like all social products, is collectively determined, but not in any single performance—it comes from "larger movements and organizations" and is reproduced and maintained through socialization into a community of practice.

IMPROVISATION IN EVERYDAY LIFE

When I moved to Chicago for graduate school, I didn't know anything about improvisational theater; I was fortunate to be exposed to the world's most vibrant improv scene at the same time I was beginning to study improvisation. Of course, Becker has also spent many years in Chicago and is likewise well positioned to notice parallels between jazz and improv theater. Both are professional performance cultures, with shared conceptions of "what works"—implicit, collective knowledge—and both follow a radically egalitarian ethic.

Becker's choice to emphasize these parallels leads him to focus on the noncreative dimensions of performance. In contrast, when we examine how improv theater differs from jazz, we are led to a focus on the creative, novel aspects of performance, because improv theater groups do not use either form of structuring convention that are used by jazz musicians: There is no overall structure analogous to the 32-bar song chorus; and actors don't use clichés or licks. These differences are exactly what make improv theater more emergent and more novel than the jazz jam sessions that Becker describes.

It's difficult for casual audiences to believe that improvisers do not draw on material that has been at least partially worked up in rehearsal, but I've performed with many improv groups repeatedly—and attended rehearsals—and I have never seen even a single line used twice. However, all groups draw on culturally shared emblems and stereotypes, which in some sense are "preexisting structures"; but then so do we all in everyday conversation.

In fact, everyday conversation is also a collective improvisation, as jazz musicians often point out (Sawyer, 1992). Like jazz, conversations are sometimes less creative, and "larger social organizations" determine how free we are to improvise. In many situations we will use clichés and follow culturally shared scripts for conversation. But in the many everyday situations where no script is specified—dinner conversation, small talk waiting for the bus, gossip in the company cafeteria—most of us can rise to the occasion and engage in emergent, improvised behavior. This phenomenon remains a puzzle for social scientists—the tension between preexisting structure and interactional creativity is at the core of many contemporary social theories, including those of Habermas, Foucault, Giddens, Bourdieu, and de Certeau (see Sawyer, 1995a), and partially accounts for the current revivals of Vygotsky and Bakhtin (as proposed by Wertsch, 1991). In this sense, improvisation is a critical issue for the social sciences, and the study of everyday social life faces the same key issues as the study of improvisation.

A small but growing group of psychologists, generally known as socioculturalists, have begun to draw on such theories to study human action from an interdisciplinary perspective; many of them have published in this journal. The concept of emergence has always been a central theme among socioculturalists, who argue that social groups are emergent phenomena and cannot be understood by analyzing the individual members of the group. Socioculturalists are fundamentally concerned with individual agency and with the processes of interaction and communication that

give rise to these emergent phenomena—what social theorists sometimes refer to as the "micro–macro" issue (Knorr-Cetina & Cicourel, 1981). Examples include Rogoff's studies of collaboration (Rogoff, 1990); studies of informal learning in workplace settings (Hutchins, 1995); and my own studies of informal social learning in preschool play (Sawyer, 1997b).

A key question for all of the social sciences of everyday life is: How much of everyday life is scripted and structured and how much of it is improvised? I think this is the question that Becker's article leaves us with as well. Questions about improvisation reside at the nebulous boundaries between sociology and psychology, between the study of collective action and individual agency. That's why I think it's particularly fruitful that *Mind, Culture, and Activity* is publishing this interchange, with representatives of several disciplines commenting on improvisation.

Becker's article focuses on macrostructuring forces, with rather cursory nods to individual freedom and agency. Of course, students of improvisation and interaction need to keep these structuring forces in mind; I agree with his final comment that those who study face-to-face interaction tend to neglect what is fixed in advance of the situation.

As a psychologist, I have chosen a stronger emphasis on individual agency and creativity. Although my emphasis is somewhat different, I think our approaches are compatible; they are both different pieces of the complex and untold story of improvisation, a story that touches on all of the grand themes of social theory and philosophy, and pushes us to reconsider the current disciplinary structures of the social sciences.

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