

# How participatory are we really? The pitfalls and potentials of participatory research practices

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**Abstract** The development of participatory research practices has been linked to high hopes of creating more relevant, socially robust, and democratic forms of academic knowledge. Researchers have, however, also pointed to a discrepancy between the ideals and realities of participation, in research and elsewhere. This paper uses these critiques of participation to unfold the dilemmas of two participatory projects: *RECCORD: Rethinking European Cultural Centers in a European Dimension* (2015-17) and *Participate: Citizen Participation in Danish Cultural Centers* (2019-23). Both projects approached participation as a method that involved co-researching participants from cultural centers, and as a practice to be explored while unfolding in the centers. This paper critically discusses the methodologies of the projects by developing an evaluative framework that highlights both the participatory potentials and pitfalls of the two processes. This transferable framework is based on the concepts of 'unpredictability', 'friction', 'autonomy', 'inequality', 'failure', and 'scale'.

**Keywords** Participatory research, method, evaluation, cultural centers

## INTRODUCTION

In line with the participatory turn in cultural practice, policy, and theory, the transformation of citizens into more active participants in research has become prevalent across a range of academic disciplines. The development of participatory research practices with extensive forms of citizen engagement and empowerment, with inclusion of (previously excluded) voices and perspectives has been linked to high hopes of creating more relevant, socially robust, and democratic forms of academic knowledge. Some researchers have however pointed to a discrepancy between the ideals and realities of participation, in research and elsewhere. Already in 2001, Bill Cooke and Uma Kothari's *Participation: The New Tyranny?* influentially criticized participatory projects for centralizing the authority of the researcher through a rhetoric of decentralization, privileging strategic goals, exploiting the participants' free labor, and benefiting only or perhaps predominantly resourceful participants. In *The Nightmare of Participation* (2011), Markus Miessen similarly criticized participatory projects for trapping people into collaborating and aligning their actions with (the ones in) power. Recently, Leila Jancovich and David Stevenson (2020; 2021) have added to this critique by arguing that participatory projects tend to downplay failures. And in *The Participant – A Century of Participation in Four Stories* (2020), Christopher Kelty has argued that the global spread of participation has been accompanied by a formatting that has cramped and dwarfed it and reduced its power.

In this paper, we use these critiques of participation to unfold and discuss the dilemmas of participatory research practices. We do so by (self)critically confronting two of the participatory projects that we have been involved in: *RECCORD: Rethinking European Cultural Centers in a European*

*Dimension* (2015-17) and *Participate: Citizen Participation in Danish Cultural Centers* (2019-23).<sup>1</sup> In both projects, cultural center organizations were engaged in the development of the project idea, the funding application, the selection of participating centers and co-researchers, and the organization of the research process, dissemination, and evaluation. The participating employees or volunteers from the centers were primarily involved in collecting and producing data, but also in analyzing and discussing these and in the dissemination and implementation of the results. In the paper, we will critically discuss the methodologies of the two projects by developing a transferable evaluative framework based on the concepts of 'unpredictability', 'friction', 'autonomy', 'inequality', 'failure' and 'scale'.

The method of this article is thus to scrutinize – and rethink – our own previous research practices by means of a new set of concepts and in that way try to distance ourselves from our habitual ways of exploring this practice as 'participatory'. In existing work (Eriksson, Reestorff, & Stage, 2018; Stage, Eriksson, & Reestorff, 2020), we have analyzed the empirical data produced by using methods in a participatory way, and presented our results on citizen participation in cultural centers. In this article, we instead want to reflect on the research projects' overall participatory approach through established theories that are fundamentally critical towards participatory (research) practices. In that way, we hope to be able to move beyond analysis of the complex value creation of cultural participation in cultural centers and instead explore the dilemmas linked to participatory research as a particular knowledge practice.

## CRITIQUING PARTICIPATION AND PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH

Kelty distinguishes between a grammar of hope/enthusiasm and a grammar of suspicion when it comes to understanding participation's ability to deliver on the desire for a vibrant and inclusive democracy. These grammars approach the issue of participation in quite different ways:

(...) when participation is experienced as effective and powerful by people who engage autonomously by contributing to some project, it becomes a problem to produce more of that experience, more reliably, more widely: it becomes a challenge to make it into a procedure, a script to be followed, a tool kit that can reproduce that experience widely. Yet, when participation is experienced as a trap – as something one did not choose (autonomously) – then it becomes a problem of critique, of suspicion about its form and effects, that it might be a containment strategy and not a liberation at all (Kelty, 2019, p. 25).

The grammar of suspicion is expressed in its purest form in the 'nightmare' and 'tyranny' of Miessen, Cooke and Kothari's titles, but is also present in other research (e.g. Bishop, 2012). The grammar of enthusiasm – and 'tool kitting' – has played a role in a variety of areas including digital and social media (Bruns, 2008; Gauntlett, 2011; Jenkins, 2006) and cultural institutions (Eriksson, Stage, & Valtysson 2020; Simon, 2010). In between these clear positions, more ambivalent or dilemmatic work on participation exists. Here, participation is perhaps understood as democratically crucial, but a critique of current forms of participation – for often being not participatory enough – is

<sup>1</sup> *RECCORD* was developed and implemented by Birgit Eriksson, Camilla Møhring Reestorff, and Carsten Stage (all Aarhus University/AU) in collaboration with The Association of Cultural Centers in Denmark/KHiD, Aarhus European Capital of Culture 2017, and European Network of Cultural Centers/ENCC. It was co-funded by KHiD, Aarhus ECoC 2017, ENCC (Creative Europe), the cultural center Godsbanen, and AU. *Participate* was developed and implemented by Birgit Eriksson, Louise Ejgod Hansen, and Karen Nordentoft (all AU) in collaboration with KHiD, and co-funded by the Nordea Foundation, KHiD, and AU. "We" in the article refers to the researchers in *RECCORD* and/or *Participate* (depending on context).

raised. Classics are Carol Pateman's (1970) distinction between partial and full participation and Sherry Arnstein's (1969) famous 'ladder of participation', which has 'citizen control' as the goal. Nico Carpentier (2011) distinguishes between 'access', 'interaction', and actual 'participation', which is based on collective decision-making. These and many other participation typologies operate with minimal or fake versions of participation, where influence on decision-making does not actually exist, or is only symbolic.

Other researchers highlight the challenges in creating collective decision-making or citizen control even if one wants to. Andrea Cornwall (2008) distinguishes between invited and self-made participation and analyzes the inherent difficulties in transferring ownership in participatory projects that are initially structured (and owned) by those who invite.

In continuation of positive as well as more problematic experiences with participation, a wide range of procedures and tool kits have been developed. Many of these offer models and scripts for successful participation, but they also complicate matters for instance by asking which aims deem a project successful (White, 2011/1996), by distinguishing between various forms (Eriksson, Reestorff, & Stage, 2018; Simon, 2010), outputs (Cohen & Uphoff, 2011/1980), and dimensions (Kelty et al., 2015) of participation, or by replacing the normative question of good and bad participation with analyses of how materialities and technologies influence contemporary participatory practices (Marres, 2012). Common to all these positions is that they call for more multifaceted approaches where the equal distribution of power is only one of many (usually positive) possible outcomes of participation.

We can, as mentioned, also identify a more radical and critical position, or what Kelty calls the 'grammar of suspicion'. If we focus on the critical classics of participation, Cooke and Kothari – with a background in developmental research – offer a substantial counterargument to the notion that participation is inherently good, democratic, and egalitarian. They argue that participatory research and interventions have become a prominent answer to "the shortcomings of top-down development approaches" and "[t]he ineffectiveness of externally imposed and expert-oriented forms of research" (Cooke & Kothari, 2001, p. 5). Participatory research promises to solve these shortcomings by being more sustainable, relevant, and empowering. However, Cooke and Kothari confront the inherent innocence and positivity of participatory research processes by highlighting their intricate, and often overlooked, power dynamics. According to them, important patterns include: the authority of the researcher is often intensified and centralized (despite the use of a rhetoric of decentralization); the strategic goals of the process leave little space for surprise and friction; the process exploits the free labor and time of participants; group dynamics that benefit the already strong members are reproduced; participants adapt to the framework of the research process; participants are often chosen because they resemble or are able to mirror the researcher(s); and, the local success of interventions is highlighted at the expense of an interest in structural and contextual inequalities. Based on research in the cultural sector, Jancovich and Stevenson (2020; 2021) add to this critique by arguing that positive anecdotes and local successes often overshadow the failures and lack of structural changes in participatory projects.

The architect and writer Markus Miessen likewise claims that the increasingly overused concept and ideal of participation has lost its innocence. According to him, the main problem with participation is that it traps people into willingly collaborating with and aligning their actions with (the ones in) power. In all the political invitations to participate, he finds "an almost fundamentalist willingness towards inclusion" (Miessen, 2011, p. 45). Hidden underneath the apparent inclusivity is usually "a very clear idea of how you should participate; in other words, a code of conduct, a set of unspoken rules" (Miessen, 2011, p. 47), while those who present the ideas and available options to choose from cannot be challenged. Drawing on Chantal Mouffe's theory of agonistic democracy, he insists on the conflictual character of participation, which never happens in a closed system,

but is embedded in power structures that need to be addressed “based on a critical distanced voice” (Miessen, 2011, p. 96). Rather than trusting apparently inclusive, consensual, and democratic invitations to participate, he argues for a radical understanding of participation as “a means of consciously directed, forced entry into a territory, system, discourse, or practice that one is not usually part of” (Miessen, 2011, p. 53).

In *The Participant* (2019), which explores historically important uses and abuses of participation, Kelty is less inherently critical of participatory processes than Cooke, Kothari and Miessen, but nevertheless paints a rather bleak picture of current engagements with participation. According to Kelty, participation relies on individuals who contribute to a collective, but this kind of ‘contributory autonomy’ can constitute the personhood of the participant in more or less politically compelling ways. Kelty in general criticizes how participation – not least in an era of social media – is 1) increasingly instrumentalized to obtain certain goals and 2) too focused on aggregating individual contributions, and not focused on enabling a truly collective process to unfold. In that way, participation has become synonymous with the strategic use of accumulated individual actions (e.g., the collection of big data about user behavior on platforms) and disconnected from a profound experience of taking part in meaningful collectives where the sum is greater than the parts. Based on his historical studies, Kelty describes the experience of participation as “something more than individual” and as “both individual and collective at the same time” (Kelty, 2019, p. 18). Therefore, he also encourages a different kind of formatting of participation that focuses more on collective-making than individual aggregation, on ensuring that the effects of participation are visible to participants, on exploring participation as long-term and durable processes, and on safeguarding disagreement and contention (e.g., on the benefits for organizers as well as participants) as crucial to the experience and development of participation.

Before using Kelty, Cooke and Kothari, Jancovich and Stevenson, and Miessen as resources to build a critical framework for evaluating the two previously mentioned research projects, we will shortly introduce the design and phases of these.

## INTRODUCING *RECCORD* AND *PARTICIPATE*

The two projects – *RECCORD* (2015-17) and *Participate* (2019-23) – are closely related and share many traits.<sup>2</sup> *Firstly*, both projects explore citizen participation in cultural centers: *RECCORD* in a European context and *Participate* in a Danish context. We define a cultural center as:

a particular cultural institution that often combines art and creative activities (...) with a focus on diversity (...), civic engagement, involvement of volunteers and openness to bottom-up initiatives. The centers are normally closely tied to the local neighborhood, they often run on a rather low budget (...), they offer open and flexible spaces and combine professional and amateur as well as cultural and social activities (Eriksson, Reestorff, & Stage, 2018, p. 208).

Both projects aim at knowing how, and with what values and impacts, the cultural centers understand and engage in citizen participation.

*Secondly*, both projects explore participation by *being* participatory in terms of methodology. They both use an inductive approach, where they understand participation through its uses in the centers. Both projects are carried out in a collaboration between researchers, cultural center organizations and employees, or more rarely, volunteers from the European and Danish centers.

<sup>2</sup> The introduction of the two projects draws on previously published work (Eriksson, Hansen, & Nordentoft, 2021; Eriksson, Reestorff & Stage, 2018; Stage, Eriksson & Reestorff, 2020).

Methods	<i>REccORD</i> : Data collection task	<i>Participate</i> : Data collection task
<b>Interview</b>	Four interviews on citizen participation involving one center manager, one volunteer/staff member and two users.	Interviews with at least six users and reflections on the interviews.
<b>Observation</b>	Observation of participatory spots/activities at the center.	At least three structured observations of participatory spots/activities, with a maximum of five photos per observation.
<b>Document analysis</b>	10 documents about the center (from calendars to mission papers), with help from the host center to translate and describe the documents.	5-10 documents, the motivation for the selection, and an analysis of these.
<b>Mapping</b>	One participatory map of the center and its stakeholders (co-produced with relevant local stakeholder(s)).	One graphical map of the center, including e.g., spaces, actors, objects, activities, resources, uses, stakeholders.
<b>Autoethnography</b>	3-5 autoethnographic texts of the participants' bodily experiences of wanting to participate at the center or not (shared in a Facebook group during the exchange).	At least three autoethnographic texts describing and reflecting on the participants' own experiences of participating in the center and/or project (shared in a Facebook group).

Fig. 1. Five methods and data collection tasks in the two projects

The participants from the centers act as a kind of co-researchers who collect and produce data by using five methods. As seen in Fig. 1 below, the tasks in the two projects are very similar.

In both projects the data collection process was expected to last around 10 working days, and in the (many) cases where the participant was not the director of the center, the director confirmed that the participant could use working hours on the project. Compared to *REccORD*, the tasks in *Participate* were described in more detail, and the participants were asked to analyze or reflect on some of their data. The reason for this is that while the participants in *REccORD* did fieldwork in an unknown center in a foreign country, the participants in *Participate* did so 'at home'. In *REccORD*, they would thus encounter language and maybe cultural barriers, and their data collection and understanding would depend strongly on help from and translations by local people. In *Participate*, the participants had a strong knowledge of their own center, and the set-up enabled them to both use this knowledge and to establish an analytical and reflective distance.

The purpose of this compilation of methods and data was to give an overall impression of the participatory profile of the centers (the documents) and their physical resources and local networks (the maps), but also of the ways in which their users and staff members practiced and understood participation (the interviews and observations), and hopefully to present sensory aspects of participation that might otherwise be overlooked (through autoethnography). The five methods also enabled the participants to use their personal competences in different ways, thereby making it likely that all participants would give some sort of impression of the center. All were asked to use all five methods, but clearly each had their preferences and priorities.

Although this setup could be interpreted as an expression of desire for data systematicity, or even as researchers outsourcing empirical collection of data, we prefer to regard the five methods as an experimental set of devices, which were bound to be used differently due to the various contexts and backgrounds of the participants and which enabled them to co-decide on data-collection and knowledge-production. The common tasks thus created a heterogeneous and rather messy dataset but also made patterns visible, and the result in both projects was a very comprehensive and multidimensional image of the centers.

Thirdly, the two projects share the aim of engaging the centers in processes and discussions of participation, thereby making participation a research object, a research method, and a collective

Phases	<i>RECCORD</i> (2015-17)	<i>Participate</i> (2019-23)
<b>Selection of participants</b>	Open call disseminated by ENCC. 20 participants and 20 hosts were selected and matched based on English skills, diversity in terms of geography/size/type of center, personal background, and motivation.	Open call disseminated by KHiD. 35 participants from cultural centers and “other citizen-involving cultural institutions” <sup>**</sup> were selected based on diversity (like <i>RECCORD</i> ).
<b>Pre-seminar activities</b>	The participants provided basic information about their home center and its participatory activities. Based on this, we made a preliminary typology of participation, which was discussed at the five-methods-seminar and later revised.	The participants provided basic information about their home center and its participatory activities, which was discussed at the seminar.
<b>Five-methods-seminar for participants</b>	Two-day seminar with introduction to and hands-on practical exercises on the five methods utilized during the exchange trips (incl. ethics) and their link to specific data collection tasks. Some tasks were adjusted after the seminar dialogues.	Two-day seminar with introduction to <i>RECCORD</i> 's typologies of participation utilized in the data collection. Introduction, hands-on exercises and adjustment of tasks like in <i>RECCORD</i> . First of several workshops in four regional networking groups.
<b>Fieldwork, producing data with the five methods</b>	The participants visited and collected empirical data in the host centers for 10 days and posted autoethnographic texts in the Facebook group.	The participants collected empirical data in their own centers. They used the Facebook group, but less actively than in <i>RECCORD</i> . They met in networking groups and in online workshops with us. <sup>**</sup>
<b>Uploading and analyzing data, discussing preliminary results on FB/at seminars</b>	20 participants uploaded empirical data to a collective server (e.g., 392 pages of documents). We coded the data with a focus on how participation was identified. The new results challenged the initial typology, and were discussed in the Facebook group and at the final conference.	28 participants uploaded empirical data to a collective server (e.g., 104 audio files and 79 transcriptions of interviews). Like in <i>RECCORD</i> , all the data was coded and analyzed. Based on this, and in dialogue with the participants on online/-site seminars, the typologies were revised again.
<b>Concluding conference, presentation and sharing of results</b>	Three-day conference where all involved (hosts and fieldworkers) were invited, and a large majority joined to share and discuss individual and collective experiences and results. Four Danish participants co-planned the conference and conducted various conversations/workshops.	Two-day conference: one day for the participants, with discussions of the overall and individual outcomes of the project; another day for the wider public. Here, results were debated, including a guide to participation in cultural institutions, presented and co-written by four participants.
<b>Evaluation, publication of results, closure, further collaboration</b>	The project was evaluated, and research results were published. Local presentations and follow-up seminars were arranged by participants as well as by researchers and KHiD, who later co-developed <i>Participate</i> .	The project runs until 2023. Evaluation and publications are in process. A group of researchers/ participants have jointly presented the project at a conference and are exploring possibilities for further collaboration.

\* *Participate* involved mainly cultural centers but also included cultural institutions like libraries, a museum, and a festival engaged in citizen participation.

\*\* The data collection as well as the activities were hindered by two long Covid19 lockdowns in 2020-21.

Fig. 2. Phases of the two projects

issue to reflect upon and develop during and after the project. Discussions of participation took place in a closed Facebook group for all the participants and researchers as well as in smaller groups: in *RECCORD* between the host center and the visiting participant; in *Participate* in regional networking groups; and for both projects in numerous conversations between smaller groups of participants/researchers and with colleagues at the participants' own centers. The projects further

involved online/onsite seminars and a concluding conference thus combining various dialogical genres that turned participation into an issue of multi-perspectival reflection and connected it to everyday experiences and ideas from the centers. Participation as a collective issue was thus present in various phases of the projects as illustrated in Fig. 2.

## DISCUSSION: UNPREDICTABILITY, FRICTION, AUTONOMY, INEQUALITY, FAILURE, AND SCALE

Above we have outlined many of the elements in *RECCORD* and *Participate's* methodology that, in our view, were important and (at least partly) successful. These include gaining a multifaceted knowledge on citizen participation in cultural centers, creating an intercultural and interdisciplinary learning environment where participants as well as researchers could contribute *and* have their understandings challenged, sparking sustainable and still-evolving networks and collaborations, and making participation a collective issue to reflect upon and develop. In projects like the ones outlined here, it is easy to get 'carried away', both because of the affective ties that often develop between researchers and participants, and because of a willingness to see the high hopes of creating more relevant, socially robust, and democratic forms of academic knowledge realized.

We, however, still need to ask ourselves how, and to which extent, the projects failed or succeeded in distributing research authority and producing knowledge in a more democratic or socially valuable way. To do so, we draw on the critique of participation by Cooke and Kothari, Miessen, Kelty and Jancovich and Stevenson and propose an evaluative and reflective framework based on six concepts derived from their academic work: unpredictability, friction, autonomy, inequality, failure, and scale. In the following, we will briefly unfold the reflections that these concepts enable. In general, we would argue that they make it possible to address some of the recurring dilemmas of participatory research, but also to transgress a sole focus on power transfer and co-decision when designing/evaluating participatory processes.

### *Unpredictability*

The concept of unpredictability regards whether and how participatory projects are formatted to reach results foreseen and wished for by researchers, or if they allow participants to radically change the framework according to their local contexts and agendas. According to Cooke and Kothari, participatory projects focused on obtaining strategic goals often leave little room for surprising results. Despite a rhetoric of decentralization, the researchers centralize their own authority and choose participants who they can collaborate with and who resemble themselves, making the participants more likely to adapt. In the same line, Miessen criticizes how unpredictability in apparently inclusive projects is limited by clear rules of how one should participate. Unpredictable perspectives thus require that the participants talk from a critical, distanced position or force themselves into (parts of) projects they are not necessarily invited into.

For Kelty, the problem instead primarily lies in the "tool-kitting" of participation: the global spread, particularly in participatory development, of tool kits that are used in multiple, different contexts. According to him, this standardization and upscaling of participatory tool kits that "remake the world in their own image" (Kelty, 2019, p. 253) risks creating an institutionalized, procedural form of participation with "pathological 'professional participants'" (Kelty, 2019, p. 233). The tool kits reduce the chance of context-specific and surprising results, as they "ease the conversion of the unstructured mess of social lives into the phantasmatic virtual collectives made of data" (Kelty, 2019, p. 253).

The critical points above are relevant in relation to our two research projects. When we selected participants for the projects after the open calls, we aimed at diversity but also (more



or less consciously) chose participants whose style of writing, understanding of and motivations for the project matched our own. Both projects tried to strike a balance between openness (the variety of methods) and standardization (the seminar, guides, and tasks). In both projects, and most elaborately in *Participate*, we had clear 'rules' regarding framework and tasks. One of these rules was to join a regional networking group where the participants could meet without us, set their own agendas, and invite other people in. These groups can be interpreted as a de-centralization of authority, but also as another task for the participants. And the fact that the funding allocated for the groups was only partly used, points towards the latter interpretation.

To what extent did this formatting of participation make the results of the projects predictable and standardized? The involvement of 20 hosts and 20 co-researchers in *RECCORD* and 28 co-researchers in *Participate* enabled a collection of a comprehensive and more unpredictable, empirical data than we could ever have collected alone. This dataset was very heterogeneous because of the diversity of the centers but also because the participants, with each their skills and interests, made their own priorities between and within the five methods, and the result was a dataset far less standardized than in all other projects we have been involved in.

The unpredictability of the projects is probably most visible in the fact that the central typologies of participation were revised several times during the projects: In June 2016, we, as researchers, suggested a preliminary typology of participation based on surveys and textual and audiovisual data about the *RECCORD* participants' own centers. In the spring of 2017, we revised the typology based on a thorough study of all the data from the fieldwork (and after dialogue with the participants). This new typology was also used in *Participate*, where it was introduced to the participants at the five-methods-seminar in November 2019 and included in the methods guide. And it was again revised in 2020-21 based on an analysis of all the new data from (and another dialogue with) the participants. In this way, the data collected and produced by the participants has repeatedly disturbed our understandings and typologies of participation.

### **Friction**

The second concept, friction, relates to the questions discussed above but regards the interaction between both the various participants, and the participants and researchers. If participants, who resemble the researchers, too easily adapt to a project's framework, as argued by Cooke and Kothari, this reduces the chances of friction. In both projects, most participants were dissimilar to us in age, education, experiences, lifestyle and so on, but still the projects generated strikingly little friction. This can be interpreted in two different ways. Based on Kelty's grammar of hope or enthusiasm, it can indicate two successful projects with an inclusive, generous, and welcoming atmosphere, where the participants experienced meaningful participation. Based on the grammar of suspicion, however, it can indicate that the projects lacked room for friction and dissensus.

For Miessen and Kelty (as for Cooke and Kothari), the suspicion overshadows the hope or enthusiasm. Miessen understands lack of criticism and conflict as fake participation because participation *is* conflictual. And Kelty emphasizes the importance of nurturing "the ability of different collectives to judge the world differently, and to participate in the clash of these judgments" (Kelty, 2019, pp. 25-26). He therefore asks us to be suspicious when "participation produces easy consensus" stating that "[t]he existence of perplexity is one of the best signs we have that different grammars are being used to make sense of the world — that different forms of life are confronting one another" (Kelty, 2019, p. 261).

To which extent did these confrontations happen in the two projects? In the interactions between the various participants, we see kind, friendly, and supportive exchanges rather than agonistic clashes between forms of life and judgements. The participants (as their centers) were very different, but these differences did not clash but seemed to co-exist peacefully. A question



worth asking here is whether the participants and centers – who were in the projects mainly for their own development – would have increased their outcome by more critical discussions, and how we as researchers could have facilitated this. Based on the data, it would have been possible to confront (judgements on) various forms of center visions, ways of working, openness to citizens' bottom-up initiatives etc. But neither we nor (as far as we know) the participants in their own networking groups encouraged a distanced criticality and confrontation between different datasets and viewpoints. Thus, a generous, supportive, and frictionless atmosphere dominated.

Regarding the interactions between researchers and participants, things are a little different. The perplexity that Kelty interprets as positive was articulated by some participants when they did not see how they could use the methods in a meaningful way, when they found their tasks too demanding, when language or other obstacles hindered them in making sense of a foreign center, or when Covid19 lockdowns made on-site data collection and network meetings impossible and their own participation potentially meaningless. This perplexity could take the form of either non-communication, expressions of demotivation, or asking for help, and it was met with encouragement and support from us and the co-participants. As researchers, we were eager to get *some* data from the participants, and discrepancy between our ambitions and some of the participants' ability and/or willingness to fulfill these thus resulted in 'soft' encouragements rather than clashes of authority. How the participants felt about not living up to our expectations and 'rules' is, however, a question, which would have been highly relevant to investigate thoroughly.

In *Participate*, seven (out of 35) participants left the project because it did not match their (or their center's) agenda or resources. Some of these were related to the delay of the project caused by Covid19, which – apart from difficulties in data collection and on-site project activities – meant that some could not find the time to participate, while others changed their place of work or went on maternity leave. Only a single participant explicitly criticized the data collection tasks before quitting, but others were clearly overwhelmed by the tasks, which were more time consuming than in *RECCORD* (not least by asking the participants to transcribe their entire interviews, while in *RECCORD* they only transcribed the parts they found most relevant).

Across the two projects, friction rather than explicit clashes between judgements were implicit in the form of participants who did not solve all the tasks or who did so in their own way. Whether one interprets this as anti-authoritarian resistance to a project that was too top-down designed and too demanding, or as a sign of the participants' agency and freedom to format participation to fit their own interests and forms of life maybe depends on whether one perceives the process through a grammar of suspicion or enthusiasm.

### **Autonomy**

According to Kelty, the balance between individual autonomy and collective goals lies at the heart of any participatory process. Participation as a concept and experience only makes sense if the individual involved is not simply inscribed in a collective (through e.g. habit or coercion), but is both able to decide whether or not she wants to engage in it, and has the chance to affect the collective through her actions: "The moment of participation becomes the moment of becoming both a full, autonomous, and free individual and, at the very same time (by virtue of that freedom), a member of a collective whose power is expected to be greater than that of its members" (Kelty, 2019, p. 17). This raises a range of dilemmas in relation to the two projects: Are we sure that participants have chosen to participate? Has individual choice made possible the experience of becoming a part of something bigger and meaningful? Has the right balance been found between individual agency and immersion into a shared process where the individual becomes 'an instance of a collective'? And what happens when the individual begins acting on her own and disconnects from shared objectives and goals?

Both projects are based on participants applying to participate – and their ability to withdraw from the process – and as such, the individual choice to engage in a collective process is ensured. The formatting of participation as solving empirical tasks rather than setting goals – and aggregating individual contributions to a large sum of data – nevertheless makes it difficult to determine whether the participants experience themselves more as individual ‘soldiers’ managed by researchers than as a collective creating knowledge together. However, as mentioned above, it was clear that in both projects some of the participants did not worry much about solving the tasks to perfection, but simply did what they found doable and meaningful.

In *RECCORD*, some participants also initiated local projects on their own during their field trips – e.g., a small exhibition – but how to interpret this is again a challenge: Was it a small protest against a too tight and micromanaged formatting of participation or rather evidence of the fact that a balance between individual, localized actions and shared goals could be handled without problems within the framework of the project? And exactly how many left *Participate* because their participation was too demanding and micromanaged? Being left unanswered, these questions stress that we could have been more focused on trying to understand and listen to the actual *experience* of participating in the projects. What did the participants think about all these issues and concerns? Such experiences were maybe shared informally (during conversations and dinners), but they were not collected in a systematic way that for instance also allowed for more anonymous responses.

Another shortcoming is the lack of follow-up on the participants’ own agendas for joining the projects. In the early phases, the participants were asked to describe what they felt needed to change in their centers. These specific agendas probably (and hopefully) influenced their priorities, for instance between networking and data collection or between different tasks. But at least for us as researchers, these agendas were overshadowed by collective results as the projects developed. It is unclear to what extent the participants stuck to these individual agendas, or indeed lost them in the process. Just as it is unclear whether autonomy was most easily practiced in *RECCORD*, where they were on their own in a foreign country, or in *Participate* where they did fieldwork at home, with their own local knowledge, but also among colleagues and potentially dealing with conflicting interests. A thorough investigation of these questions would have been highly relevant.

### *Inequality*

The research processes of both projects were based on application and admittance processes that could be reviewed through the work of Cooke and Kothari. Two specific dilemmas – regarding unequal access to and engagement with participatory processes – are particularly relevant: To what extent is the uneven distribution of economic and other resources shaping who is invited to participate, and to remain active, in the project? Are certain logics of identification reproduced in how researchers choose who should be included as potential participants and do these logics affect internal hierarchies in the collective?

Due to the explicit research agenda of both projects, the ability to write a clear application, personal experience with the methods, and some sort of academic training were clear advantages and thus maybe somewhat implicit criteria for selecting participants. Diversity in terms of geography and type of center, however, played a counterbalancing role. Nevertheless, in both projects, the group of participants ended up being characterized by an overrepresentation of younger, female, white, and well-educated cultural workers, thereby mirroring a cultural sector characterized by inequality regarding class, race, and gender (Brook, O’Brien, & Taylor, 2020). Either many of the participants were in the early phases of their career, or they were already managers in the cultural sector, and the projects became career development opportunities for relatively resourceful persons with a substantial level of educational, organizational, and sometimes economic capital. Whether or not this capital was mirrored in the social dynamics of the groups is more difficult to determine.

While the academic competences and organizational resources of the four co-authors of the guide in *Participate* were conspicuous, educational and organizational backgrounds in other phases did not seem to predict the participants' importance or role in the collectives in any straightforward way.

Even though both projects covered all expenses (in *RECCORD* including travel and accommodation), the projects implicitly favored centers with both time and money to engage in developing their institution. In *Participate*, the participants who quit were mainly from centers based on voluntary work and/or a very precarious economic situation. This underlines how precarious organizational and economic structures can become an important hindrance for being able to 'choose' to participate, and problematizes that participation begins with individual choice or autonomy. Rather it begins with having the sufficient level of resources and organizational backup *to be able to choose* to participate. Or in the words of Kelty: "(...) not everyone is granted autonomy to the same degree. And not everyone is free to engage in contributory autonomy" (Kelty, 2019, p. 20). Importantly, both projects also tried to level out access to resources, knowledge, and training by allowing very small cultural centers with limited resources to enter a network with larger cultural institutions. Thus, the project did not simply reproduce intersectional power inequalities, but also enabled an infrastructure for building relations and competences across regional, national, and institutional boundaries and hierarchies.

### **Failure**

As mentioned, Jancovich and Stevenson have argued that failures and unintended outcomes are often underreported compared to accounts of how participatory processes have delivered on the strategic goals they intended to fulfill. Participatory processes are in that way treated – as Kelty shows – as strategic instruments, and the process facilitators are framed as the persons responsible of steering the process towards success. The learning potentials of failures are therefore often overlooked in favor of positive anecdotes or reports.

Neither *RECCORD* nor *Participate* were designed to specifically ask for assessments of success or failure of participation in the centers. In different ways, they tried instead to address a variety of participatory practices that could be difficult, innovative, challenging, popular etc. In *RECCORD*, this happened through the inductive exploration of how participation was practiced and understood (rather than measuring participation against a norm given either in the centers' own mission papers or in the project). In *Participate*, it happened by using the forms (and potential effects) of participation as an analytical framework for the data collection. Both projects thus emphasized how participation could take a variety of forms and have various values for various people. This, of course, did not make questions of success or failure irrelevant or absent, but it made them more multifaceted and nuanced. In *Participate*, one participant for instance observed how her institution was so focused on attending cultural activities that they did not notice other forms of participation. And in the evaluation, the participants generally appreciated how the research process had made their own practices more visible, and how they had gained an increased consciousness of and a nuanced language to describe these practices.

However, failure was a difficult topic to address for some participants. In *RECCORD* participants for instance relied on other cultural centers as hosts during their field trip. Therefore, a certain level of politeness characterized the analysis of these hosting institutions. When one participant for example felt that she ended up in a host center with little activity and a lack of leadership, she struggled to handle this problem, as she was also dependent on the host for the field trip period. In *Participate*, the problem was rather that the participants could have a strategic interest in shedding a positive light on their own center, and their own role in it. Nevertheless, despite our worries about biased data collection in the participants' own centers, the willingness to address problems and

failures was bigger here than in *RECCORD*, probably because it had the potential of leading directly to local improvements.

In both projects, we as researchers tried to create a safe space for being open about problematic aspects of the individual centers, for instance by promising that we would anonymize or, if relevant, generalize findings. This implied that talk of failures was often disconnected from specific centers and treated as a more abstract or general risk facing any or one type of cultural institution. In *RECCORD*, the concluding conference may have reinforced this tendency to treat successes as specific/local and failure as abstract/delocalized, because all participants and hosts were invited to attend and share their experiences of the process. It would in other words demand a very particular interactional framework to downplay a basic human desire to avoid the social discomfort of being explicitly critical toward the work of a center. The collective would in other words need to approach the exploration of failure as crucial to learning and development – and not as a threat to social cohesion and conviviality.

### Scale

Our last concept, scale, relates to the spatial and temporal dimensions of participation, or more specifically, to the critique that (lacking) structural changes are downplayed in favor of reporting local successes and organizing participation around temporary projects. This objection to participation is important to Cooke and Kothari, who see local interventions highlighted at the expense of an interest in structural and contextual inequalities, and to Jancovich and Stevenson, who criticize the tendency to focus on positive anecdotes and ignore more general failures.

Kelty's approach to scale is different. For him, the problem of participation is not that it is too local or small-scale but rather that its global spread has led to a standardization of participatory tool kits that are used in multiple, different contexts. Whereas the cases of participation that he is interested in often begin as small-scale, speech-intensive engagements and unfold as "vibrant, lived experience", the efforts to spread and format participation are "almost guaranteed to privilege an instrumental outcome over a particular kind of personal experience" (Kelty, 2019, pp. 260-261). Instead of scaling up participation, he therefore suggests making, and exploring, participation as long-term and durable processes, and to give it "more stability, mass, permanence in collectives that can persist over time and can incorporate expertise into their work and become more expert by virtue of that" (Kelty, 2019, p. 260).

In our projects, the question of scale is important. On the one hand, we did exactly what Cooke and Kothari, and Jancovich and Stevenson criticize. The heterogeneity of the cultural centers, the affective ties among and between hosts, participants and researchers, and our aim of mobilizing an interest in participation among both the participants and other cultural centers all made it tempting to focus on local successes and positive anecdotes. In our dataset, we had many accounts of the "vibrant, lived experience" of participation, mentioned by Kelty, and in a way, it would seem insensitive not to acknowledge and look for new insights in these small-scale, but also often deeply personal, testimonies of participation that makes a difference. In *RECCORD*, we had the intention to uncover the regional, and in *Participate*, to uncover the organizational conditions for participation in the centers, but particularly in *RECCORD*, and partly in *Participate*, we realized that the datasets were much richer sources of knowledge on lived experiences than on structural inequalities. An exploration of these would thus require another methodology.<sup>3</sup>

On the other hand, we also partly did what Kelty criticizes. We developed a tool kit for the first project, which was also used in the second, and afterwards we made a short and easy-to-read guide, hoping that the tool kit could be of use in other cultural centers and institutions. We do, however,

<sup>3</sup> In *Participate*, a quantitative survey to a higher extent enabled analysis of structural conditions and inequalities (Hansen & Nordentoft, 2020). However, this was not part of the participatory methodology.

find it important that this was an initiative of the participants in the second project who had found the tool kit very useful. And we tried to make participation a long-term and durable process within the two projects and, in a Danish context, between and beyond them. At the time of writing this, we are considering developing a new project (*Participate 2.0*) in collaboration with some of the participants from *REccORD* and *Participate*. The permanence is further generated by KHiD, The Association of Cultural Centers in Denmark, which have been and still are engaged in making the topic of participation a long-term issue of concern among their members. Finally, the long-term perspective is generated by individual participants, who have incorporated the knowledge from the two projects into their own work (in independent publications, seminars, strategies, and practices). In this way, at least some of them do what Kelty asks for: they “incorporate expertise into their work and become more expert by virtue of that” (Kelty, 2019, p. 260).

## CONCLUSION

In this article, we have scrutinized the methodologies of two research projects, and developed a self-critical evaluative framework based on six concepts that help highlight core ideals and dilemmas of participatory research. The notion of ‘unpredictability’ enabled a reflection on the projects’ ability to be open to and affected by the research process itself, despite the rather systematic set of defined data collection tasks; ‘friction’ allowed for considering the meaning of the relative lack of disagreement and conflict during the projects; ‘autonomy’ highlighted how the participants’ ability to affect project processes was not always easy to evaluate partly due to a lack of knowledge about their experience of the projects; ‘inequality’ directed attention to how economical and educational circumstances might have filtered certain participants’ and centers’ ability to choose to engage in projects; ‘failure’ made it possible to reconsider how to produce a framework where failures could be addressed as an opportunity to learn more than as a social threat; while ‘scale’ helped stress the importance of avoiding too temporary forms of participation, but also how longitudinal engagements can sometimes evolve from project-based collectives that actively take over and prolong the outcomes and impacts of those projects. As we see it, these six concepts are useful remedies for thinking about, designing, and evaluating participatory research processes beyond a mere focus on power transfer or co-decision. In that way, they offer nuanced reflective resources for avoiding – or at least learning from – the tyrannies and pitfalls of participation.

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