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Cards on the Table: Critical reflections on a participatory research method

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Abstract This article critically reflects on the limitations and challenges of using Cards on the Table (COTT), a participatory research method used to evaluate experiences of participation in art projects. The focus of this article is on the application of COTT as part of our evaluation of BE PART, a four-year Creative Europe Program of the European Union that ran from 2019 to 2023. The COTT method is informed by community research and participation action research, but here we highlight the ambiguous and messy nature of researching with such a broad and varied network of communities. We illustrate the tension between our desire to research in a co-productive, community-led, and action-oriented way and the realities of conducting research with a vast network of participants and limited time and budget.

Keywords participation, evaluation, games, community research, convivial research, action research, participatory research, performance

INTRODUCTION

This article critically reflects on the limitations and challenges of using Cards on the Table[1] (COTT), a participatory research method used to evaluate the experiences of participation and co-creation in participatory arts projects. COTT is a game for two to eight players, which was created to encourage critical thinking around troublesome issues that arise at the beginning, middle, or end of a participatory art project. Designed by Ania Bas, Sian Hunter-Dodsworth, Sophie Mallet, Sophie Hope, and Henry Mulhall, COTT has been in use since 2016 in a variety of community, arts, and organizational contexts (Hope, 2022; Hunter-Dodsworth et al., 2023; Mackney and Orrù, 2023). The focus of this article is the application of COTT as part of our evaluation of BE PART (Hope and Mulhall, 2023), a four-year project co-funded by the Creative Europe Program of the European Union, which ran 2019–2023. Drawing on experiences of introducing, playing, and analyzing COTT in multiple locations and contexts, we explore the possibilities and problems inherent in involving a range of participants in researching their experiences of participation in cultural projects.

Our focus is on the methodological limitations and challenges of using COTT to research participation and co-creation across a participatory arts network. The reasons we have chosen to focus on COTT are threefold: (1) it is an example of a participatory research method where we, the researchers/evaluators, were not present; (2) it highlights specific challenges of researching meanings and experiences of participation using participatory methods; (3) it illustrates the tensions between our desire to use participatory and action-oriented methods and the reality of implementing those methods within a geographically dispersed network with limited time and budget.

COTT was designed to provide a space in which players can critically reflect on their underlying assumptions about participation by generating critical, reflective conversations that move beyond positive reflections and identify some of the tricky, messy moments of working together. As Mackney and Young (2022) have shown, taking an extended, longitudinal, and creative approach to researching participatory art projects can bring to the fore the "tensions and contradictions inherent

1 More information can be found at www.cardsonthetable.org

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in socially engaged arts practices" (Mackney and Young, 2022, p.397). We were not setting up a co-created methodology where participants were involved throughout the research process (from design to analysis); rather, the COTT method was used both as an evaluative in situ reflexive device and as a data-gathering method for our own research. COTT involved creating moments for critical reflection across the network, not to deny the power we held as researchers, but to encourage the extension of who can hold that power. On the occasions when games were audio-recorded, COTT became a data-gathering tool for us as removed researchers to listen, analyze, and compare conversations from different locations.

We begin this article by introducing BE PART and the EU and arts policy discourse it fits within. We then frame COTT in more detail and place it within the broader landscape of community-based research methods. We then divide our analysis into two sections: first, using COTT as a remote research method and the issues this posed in terms of sharing processes of facilitation and analysis; second, how COTT worked in various contexts as a convivial (Gidley, 2019; Nowicka, 2019) and messy (Cook, 2009) method that was used by participants to critically reflect on power relations (Hanson, 2013).

CONTEXT

BE PART aimed to "critically explore the politics and practices of participation in the arts field" (BE PART, 2023). The network involved ten partner organizations and a series of 'fieldworks' involving artists' residencies and commissions. The network also met annually for 'assemblies,' which offered partner organizations the chance to come together and explore ideas and processes relating to their participatory working practices. The BE PART website states that "together we test theoretical frameworks, develop practical methodologies of coming together and institute collaborative working models within the BE PART network and beyond" (BE PART, 2023). The network was situated within a broader European discourse of participation, a discourse that tends to see participation in the arts as a way of broadening civic and democratic involvement (Dupin-Meynard and Négrier, 2020; Hammonds, 2023; Robinson and Thinking Practice, 2023). In policy terms, Négrier (2020) suggests that art and cultural participation is the primary "tool for innovation in collective practices and for individual emancipation" (p.11). The attitude of the European Commission is that participation in culture generally contributes to a pluralistic society in which underrepresented and marginalized groups have greater representation (Dupin-Meynard and Négrier, 2020). BE PART also fits with the European Commission's policy principles of fostering mutual respect in and through intercultural dialogue and encouraging cross-cutting cultural production (European Commission, 2016).

The Evaluation of BE PART

We were commissioned as independent evaluators[2] of BE PART from 2019 to 2023 to develop, manage, and implement an evaluation methodology. Jancovich and Stevenson (2023) point out that ideas of participation can become purely symbolic,

> providing a flexible ambiguity which allows much of the cultural sector to rebrand their normal practices as participatory without challenging the structural inequalities acknowledged by policymakers. (p.83)

Matarasso (2019) also points out that the discourse associated with participatory art is "opaque beyond the art world (and perhaps within it)" (p.46), and that "what artists say about their projects might be idealism, jargon, or simply a response to expectation" (p.63). Working with our partner

2 We considered our role to be researchers who evaluate. We developed our brief and the research questions in collaboration with the partner organizations.

organizations, we wanted to challenge the symbolic functions and jargon of participation. Variations in the understandings of participation across the ten cultural contexts therefore became a key aspect of our evaluation. Our task as evaluators was to understand the experiences and meanings of participation from the perspectives of the participants and artists involved in fieldworks and of the staff of the partner organizations, to understand how they engaged with the BE PART network, and to identify any potential shifts in governance within partner organizations.

As researchers operating at a distance, with multiple partners and projects to attend to, we were unable to spend time in each location to build mutual trust and rapport. The geographic scope of the network, a limited travel budget, and perhaps most significantly, the spread of Covid-19 presented us with a challenge. Given these conditions, we developed a set of methods that had three purposes. First, they could be carried out by the partner organizations independently. Second, they could be used to connect people working in different contexts across the network to compare and share experiences. Third, they could generate data which we could use to analyze the activities of the network. We wanted to use methods that would be useful to the partner organizations beyond our evaluation and that could include a range of voices from different parts of the network.

In 2020 we held individual online meetings with the partners to identify their evaluation needs. We organized an online gameshow (co-hosted with artist Rebecca Davies[3]) as a way for those involved in the network to get to know each other. We then developed an evaluation 'kit,' which we sent to each of the partners at the end of 2020. This included three methods that could be used by people involved in the network themselves. Besides COTT, this included 'Blind Dates', another activity we authored in which two people who were involved met online and responded to a menu of questions. For the third method, 'Fieldnote Diaries,' we recruited diarists in each location, employing them to attend fieldworks as participant observers and to document and reflect on their experiences. We also conducted online semi-structured interviews with representatives from each partner organization. In addition to these methods, we were able to visit assemblies in Ljubljana, Ghent, and Riga, as well as fieldworks in Lumsden and Cork.

About COTT

COTT is a card game, and is generally played with a specific project or subject in mind. The game is structured around a set of quote, theme, and keyword cards.[4] The quotes are based on prior cultural evaluations.[5] Each player is dealt five quote cards, which act as their hand for the game. When it is their turn, a player selects a single quote card they would like to speak about. A keyword and theme card are then drawn randomly and the player has two minutes to speak uninterrupted about the cards. Everyone then has three minutes to respond, and then it is the next player's turn. When everyone has had a turn, a conclusion card is drawn, so that everyone can reflect on the game they have just played.[6] An example prompt from one conclusion card is: 'Which conversation would you like to return to in the future?' or 'Who is not at the table who should be?'

At the beginning of the BE PART process, we sent each partner their own pack of COTT. We asked them to play at regular intervals and to audio-record some of their games. Soon after sending out the packs, we held online meetings with each of the partners and explained the rules, and in some cases facilitated a first game for them. The partners arranged to play COTT with the people involved in the fieldworks, internally among the staff and between different configurations of artists, participants, curators, producers, and staff members. We also facilitated and observed games

3 www.rebecca-davies.tumblr.com/

4 For examples of each card visit: www.cardsonthetable.org/post/cott-norms-and-storms

5 For more information on the genesis of COTT visit: www.cardsonthetable.org/post/the-back-story-to-cards-on-the-table

6 A more detailed account of the rules is available here: www.cardsonthetable.org/play-the-game

between people during assemblies at which members of the network came together in person. All of the players had a shared experience of working together on a specific project or on the BE PART network itself. Some of the games were played during the process of a fieldwork, others after it had finished. Some of the organizations have continued to use the game internally between staff members and on other projects they are working on.

To ensure that our analysis for this article drew on experiences of COTT beyond our own, we drew on data that included mentions of COTT during the game itself (for example, if the group played one of the 'conclusion' cards at the end, this prompted critical responses to the game itself). We included references to COTT in our one-to-one interviews with the partners (we asked the interviewees to respond to questions about the evaluation methods, including COTT). We also drew on an interview with one of the partners, City of Women, specifically about COTT (Mulhall and Jež, 2023), and refer to responses we received via email to a set of questions about COTT from four of the partners. We acknowledge that because we were asking COTT players for feedback, they may have offered predominantly positive feedback. To try and combat this, the game itself includes an in-built feedback mechanism (through the conclusion cards), which, in our absence, tends to invite more critical reflections.

Theories and practices of participation in research

The development of COTT was influenced by the methods and critiques of community and participatory action research. We share with Stage, Eriksson, and Møhring Reestorff (2019) a concern for "the methodological potentials and challenges of integrating participation in the qualitative methodologies used to investigate cultural participation" (p.19). COTT was initially designed as a participatory approach to research, with the potential to produce "multivalent research outcomes in addition to traditional academic knowledge [that can include] potentially economically vulnerable institutions and cultural workers" (Stage et al., 2019, p.21).

Goodson and Phillimore (2012) define community research as the involvement of communities as co-researchers in the production of knowledge about their own community, in collaboration with professional social researchers, funders, and other groups (p.3). Rather than purporting to empower communities, community research generates new community-based knowledge about a particular context or issue. They say, "familiarity and understanding of the particulars of the local/community situation [can] emerge through tapping into the rich understanding held by people in particular contexts" (Goodson and Phillimore, 2012, p.8). In the context of BE PART, COTT games were played in different local contexts among people who had all experienced participating in a particular fieldwork as a local resident or member of a community group as a producer, mediator, or artist.

Like community research, participatory action research promotes participants' engagement in the co-production of research from start to finish, and aims to effect change in the situations being researched (Kemmis and McTaggart, 2005). The 'participant' is considered an actor/agent in the process, and their expertise, specialties, and critical knowledge are considered no less relevant than those of the researcher who may have initiated the research or project. COTT follows participatory action research in its emphasis on the participants in its consideration of how communicative acts are connected to their context and social interactions with others; however, the overall research design was established by us and was not strictly determined by the participatory action research approach. Blakey, Milne and Kilburn (2012) explain how participatory research frames knowledge as socially constructed and embedded: "knowledge is therefore indivisible from the knower" (p.108). This differs from conventional analysis, which often understands knowledge as "an object to be 'uncovered' from data via analysis (knowledge exists distinct from the knower)" (p.108). We were keen to avoid what Pickering and Kara (2017) describe as an epistemological approach to research

whereby "human participants are understood as sources of data. As such, once they have yielded that data, it becomes the property of the researcher, and the research relationship ends there" (p.300). Similarly, Mohan (2001) questions the assumption that "people being researched lack the capacity for self-analysis and that only s/he [the researcher] can truly 'decode' and 'interpret' reality for them" (p.161). COTT was developed with these points in mind, to introduce an intersubjective process of critical reflection that encourages players to see things from multiple points of view. As removed researchers and occasional facilitators of games during BE PART, we were generally not included in such intersubjective spaces. We listened to recorded conversations, but could rarely be actors in those communicative contexts.

Critiques have emerged in both academic and cultural sectors highlighting the dangers of tokenistic and exploitative arrangements in the field of participatory arts and research methods that treat participants as subjects of the research or material in an artwork rather than as collaborators (Bala, 2018; Banks et al., 2019; Goodson and Phillimore, 2012; Jancovich and Stevenson, 2023; Kemmis and McTaggart, 2005; Miessen, 2011; Reason and Bradbury, 2011; Walmsley, 2018). We take up Hanson's (2013) call for facilitators to critically reflect on how a desire to be participatory might "reinforce the very practices that in theory they were meant to change" (p.190). We acknowledge the importance of this literature, which reflects on the promises of participation and the supposed neutrality or removal of the researcher/artist from the participatory process. Lennette (2022), for example, points out that co-production can become a mantra used to make the researcher feel good as much as a critical approach to disrupting power relations within a research context (p.61). Although influenced by participatory action research, we recognize that terms such as participation and co-creation can be "buzzword[s] to legitimize existing – and at times harmful – practices that are in fact nonparticipatory" (Lenette, 2022, p.62).

COTT uses the convivial method of a card game to facilitate critical reflection, enabling players to become co-researchers in the critical interpretation of their contexts. Hanson (2013) makes a distinction between reflection, which is about one's own experiences and actions, and *critical* reflection, which adds a layer of interpretation and analysis of the broader social contexts and power relations within which one is performing and experiencing one's actions (p.3). Norwicka also highlights how "participants of (research) encounters need to be equipped with skills to question that which seems to be a given, to place it in a larger context, and to excavate the hidden meanings" (Nowicka, 2019 p.27). Hanson (2013) raises questions as to the different ways in which critical reflection as a process can counter a techno-rational approach. By techno-rational, Hanson (2013) means using "techniques and activities" that meet predetermined goals (i.e., aims and objectives set by funders, rather than community researchers). Participatory research methods such as COTT aim to encourage *critical* reflection and analysis of the emotional aspects of participation and the inherent power relations (Hanson 2013, p.18).

We recognize that group critical reflection can be a messy process, and we appreciate that mess is "an integral and purposeful part of the process" (Cook, 2009, p.289). As well as embracing the messiness, COTT's familiar card game format fosters a convivial space. Rather than a formal agenda, quotes and keywords offer structure without imposing explicit rules on how and what to speak about. Through timed turn-taking, everyone is encouraged to listen and speak, rather than the most confident raising their voices. Norwicka (2019) refers to how "conviviality as a normative idea relies on the recognition of differences, equal participation, social justice and respect for autonomous individuals" (p.21). Of particular relevance to the COTT method, Cook (2009) refers to the significance of "multifaceted reflections" or "kaleidoscopic views" which, when brought together through collaborative/participatory research, can "provide opportunities for new ways of seeing, thinking and theorising" (p.280). The COTT method aims to accommodate players' "competing views through dialogue" (Clark et al., 2012, p.50), aiming to provide a space for "collective self-reflection as part

of the research process", which could host the "articulation of multiple perspectives" (Cook, 2009, p.279). In this sense, COTT aims to facilitate a convivial, "messy area… a forum for the exchange of perceptions and beliefs" (Cook, 2009, p.281) in which players begin interpretation of each other's views.

LESSONS LEARNED

COTT as a remote research method

We align with Hanson (2013), Clark et al (2012) and Cook (2009) in encouraging open discussion of power relations, not only during the COTT games, but also between the partners and ourselves. Hanson found, however, that a major challenge in practicing critical reflection was the lack of time and value allocated to it by organizations (Hanson, 2013, p.12), as well as the pressure (often from funders) to provide a 'quick fix'. This tallies with our own experience, as demonstrated by the time allocated by partner organizations to playing COTT and the pressure to collate reflections (rather than critical reflections) and statistics on participation for funders. Partners had to gather quantitative data for feedback to the funders and carry out our more formative evaluation tasks, often on top of already full workloads.

The COTT method was reliant on in situ facilitators (partners in the network) finding time to play the game, inviting people to take part, introducing the rules, audio-recording the games and, when necessary, translating the cards during games. We found that giving responsibility to the partner organizations to arrange and facilitate the games led to divisions between researcher and researched (Mohan, 2001; Lenette, 2022). This was primarily manifest through two factors: the at times ambiguous and culturally specific language on the cards, and the potential bias of the partners as pack-holders and facilitators. Another key issue was the lack of time allocated by partners to playing the game, directly relating to Hanson's (2013) point about lack of time and emphasis given to critical reflection.

The language used on the cards was sometimes difficult to access for non-fluent English speakers, but some players also found the language too abstract. Eight languages are used within the network, with English as the de facto lingua franca for the group; therefore at the outset the use of English did not seem problematic. The cards were developed in a UK context, and the budget for the evaluation did not stretch to translating the packs into multiple languages. We did encourage players to play the game in the language they were most comfortable using, and we then translated the transcripts; during other games, players translated for each other while playing. However, some partners did not think it was suitable to play the game as part of fieldworks because of a lack of engagement from the participants, or because the language used on the cards was too difficult or too specific, a well-documented issue within the arts field (Jelinek, 2013; Matarasso, 2019). In one context, a participant remarked how "all the players considered it was a good impetus to discuss the creation process. If the game were in [our language], we would certainly use it in many other circumstances." One of the facilitators remarked that:

> When we tried the game with younger or elderly people, we had some issues. Basically, we had to translate the cards as we played. Also, as some cues are quite abstract, it can take a round or two for people to understand what the game really wants from them.

Some of the Tunisian players found that the content of the quote cards "didn't really work in a non-EU context" and was not always easy to adapt to their situation. Part of the card design is that the language on the cards challenges a player's usual way of speaking. However, once used throughout the network in a range of languages, quotes formulated within a specific UK arts discourse proved

challenging to the point of alienating for some, producing a linguistic power imbalance between players and the wider project. Although we chose language for the cards that seemed general and applicable to many audiences, the BE PART experience showed that any research methodology needs to take into account the subtle and nuanced meanings of language in different economic and cultural contexts. Referring to Hanson's (2013) call for facilitators to critically reflect on their own assumptions, there is a danger that the language on the cards, because they were developed elsewhere, might exclude or alienate some players. We are trying to address this by including blank quote cards so that players can, over time, add their own quotes from the games they play and thus develop a more bespoke pack relevant to the contexts they are working in.

The game also relies on spoken language and on an expectation that people are confident enough to reflect on their experiences among the group. Walmsley (2018) highlights that participatory methods can be limited by their "reliance on individual coresearchers as competent commentators on their own experiences" (p.278). Although we wanted messy conversations to be "disruptive of habit and custom" (Cook, 2009, p.289), our approach could have benefited from acknowledging the reinforcement of English as the dominant language used across the network. Perhaps drawing and/or creative writing, as used by Mackney and Young (2022), for example, could have been a format for participants to respond and "overcome the limitations of a uniquely cognitive or linguistic approach" (Walmsley, 2018, p.278).

We gave the game to the partner organizations rather than to the artists or the community partners, and this also may have influenced how the game was played. Partners held the packs and could decide who to invite to the table, and may have chosen people who they knew would have positive things to say. While COTT enabled some players to reflect on the multivalent mess of participatory processes (Cook, 2009), by handing over the facilitation to the partner organizations, we perhaps allowed players the possibility of avoiding difficult conversations around failure (Jancovich and Stevenson, 2023). Referring to the participants they were working with on a fieldwork, one of the organizations said that if the participants' "engagement [had] been on a deeper level," they could have played the game. This assumes that a certain level of engagement is required for participants to be able to critically reflect on the process. The same person also remarked that it would not make sense to invite participants who were "less crucial to the project or less involved in the project." If we could have facilitated a card game with these 'non' or 'marginal' participants, such a game could have produced valuable insights countering a techno-rational (Hanson, 2013) approach to the evaluation. While the material generated through COTT reflected a wide range of voices, participant experiences were at times lacking. This reflects that pack-holders may be sensitive to inviting participants into reflective conversations. It may also indicate that critical reflection is not accessible or interesting to everyone.

Although we sent the partner organizations numerous prompts and reminders to play the game, we had varied levels of engagement from different partners. While the partners had signed up to take part in the evaluation process and to use the methods we provided, personnel changes over the four years proved problematic. Some packs were misplaced, and not everyone was aware of how to use the game, which affected how committed or confident people were in using COTT. Alone, none of these issues are difficult to solve, but a general lack of resources and language barriers meant that communication was not always fluid. Overall, between 2020 and 2023 six of the organizations recorded two games, three recorded one game, and one of the organizations did not record (or play) the game at all. This fits with Hanson's (2013) findings that a lack of time and value allocated to processes of critical reflection is prevalent within arts organizations. It could also have been because of the language barrier of the game being in English; there may also perhaps have been a reluctance to have these critical conversations with the people they work with. For example, one facilitator said, "It was sometimes hard for our team members to find the

time or to take the time, as not all of them understood at first its purpose." Without defined times and places to play, and experienced facilitators on hand, COTT was perhaps seen as a burden to some organizations.

Using the COTT method highlighted specific challenges relating to analysis, chief among which were these: 1) analysing experiences across diverse contexts means it is hard to compare data ; 2) the way analysis happens during the game is difficult to capture; and 3) extracting knowledge to be analyzed at a distance implies decontextualising experiences and leaving participants behind. The difficulty of carrying out participatory research followed by a comparative analysis is that the material was generated in very different contexts, with the organizations varying in type, purpose, and size. As one participant pointed out, there is also an East/West–North/South divide across the network in terms of pay and resources, one that directly fed into how a method such as COTT could be played in each location. The game was most useful when the focus was a specific shared experience/fieldwork happening in one location, such that it therefore reflected the immediacy of these sites and situations. The games played during the assemblies when members of the network came together were perhaps more useful as comparative analyses across these geographical divides. On such occasions, COTT provided a space for sharing approaches, problems, and experiences playing in their home contexts.

With COTT, the analysis started at the table. Resonating with Hanson's (2013) definition of critical analysis, Blakey, Milne and Kilburn (2012) define data analysis in community research as "what happens when you put your personal knowledge and understanding into a bigger picture" (p.107). This process stands alongside more academic approaches to formal coding and is based on research participants questioning their own assumptions and looking for patterns and explanations. This frames knowledge production as inherently shared and always in dialogue. For them, community analysis is "a collective process: bringing people together (including different ages and different ethnic backgrounds) to share and discuss their experiences" (p.107). COTT facilitated such interactions. We then listened to the recorded games, identified themes between them, and wrote up key findings. Walmsley (2018) asks if such methods are "genuinely bidirectional processes" (p.283). He highlights that even if a more level power dynamic between researcher and participant is found, "control, at least in academic research, (and copyright) generally remains with the scholar" (p.283). COTT went some way toward facilitating a multidirectional exchange of experiences, but control over the analysis and research outputs was predominantly led by us. When we collated the recordings and started listening back, we added further layers of analysis, acknowledging this process had already begun without us.

COTT as a convivial method for critically reflecting power relations

As well as being records of conversations for us to thematize, compare, and feedback to the network, the conversations themselves were, at times, spaces for critical reflection as the groups listened to and interpreted the experiences of participation they shared (Hanson, 2013; Clark et al., 2012 and Cook, 2009). The timed aspect of the game format interrupted existing hierarchies between arts organizations, artists, and participants. The two-minute rounds gave all of the players the opportunity to share their experiences from 'kaleidoscope' perspectives (Cook, p.280). As we were not present at most of the COTT games, we were reliant on these rules to provide a framework for "guided introspection" whereby players were tasked to "think aloud about themselves and their actions" (Wallendorf and Brucks, 1993, p.341. Quoted in Walmsley, 2018, p.277). This often revealed that roles (and responsibilities) varied, and that power, rather than being fixed in these roles, circulated. This was in part because the game is structured in a way that invites players to develop critical reflections in a convivial way (Gidley, 2019; Nowicka, 2019). This sociable nature of COTT held open "a safe space in which competing and incommensurable claims to truth [could] be spoken, and where differences can be worked through" (Gidley, 2019, p.133).

In line with Norwicka's (2019) reference to tools for excavating hidden meaning (Nowicka, 2019) and Hanson's (2013) move from reflection to critical reflection, we found that when we listened back to the card games, we could hear players connecting their individual, everyday experiences of participation with the broader structures of participation. Players often moved from personal reflections to critical reflections, connecting their experiences to broader structural frameworks and power relations of participation (Hanson, 2013; Blakey et al., 2012). This indicates that new knowledge was taking shape between the players. One facilitator commented that subjects raised through the cards "help [them] to discuss more challenging things." During another of the games, one of the players stated how "the cards made us approach things from new angles," suggesting a shift from a descriptive or intuitive mode of thinking toward a more analytical one (Cook, 2009, p.281).

Further to this, the game encouraged a sense of self-critique that was complex but also routine and ongoing (Lury and Wakeford, 2012, p.6). While this was not the only occasion for critical discussions to take place in the thick of participatory projects, the game opened conversations about failure, conversations that are difficult and often avoided (Jancovich and Stevenson, 2023). This was reflected by one of the facilitators of COTT, who suggested the game allowed them:

> …to be honest and tell someone they've done badly or if my feelings were hurt in the working process. Self-censorship is taken away because what we say can be seen as just part of the game. It makes it a lot easier to talk about how things didn't work well and to find the weak points in a process.

This points to how when players were faced with a certain combination of cards and asked to respond, they became freer to speak openly because they could use the cards as a cipher to address more difficult issues. In this sense, the game at times helped players speak beyond personal status or the hierarchy of workplace frameworks (Goffman, 1981). Like a focus group setting, COTT allowed for issues to be raised that we could not foresee and allowed participants to comment on each other's articulations (Cronin, 2016; Nyumba et al., 2018). This relates to the role played by collective critical reflection in addressing and combating confirmation bias (Walmsley, 2018) or a techno-rational approach (Hanson, 2013), so as to allow players to hear contradictory voices that do not necessarily align with predetermined agendas. As in any interview scenario, however, players were selecting what to tell the group. This may have been influenced by who was sitting at the table (such as a line manager) and the fact that the game was being audio-recorded for research and evaluation purposes.

The convivial aspect of the COTT method provided moments for critical reflection (Hanson, 2013) between people who were working together but would not usually convene to have these critical discussions. For example, one of the games was played by staff during a team retreat and "highlighted some collective needs [and] reflections." The facilitator of that game reflected on how COTT "allows us to think of our practice, how we work and approach projects, which is not something we often consciously think about." In another example, a team who led BE PART in their organization used COTT to discuss the themes and issues coming up through the fieldworks with the production team, who were responsible for budgets but not aware of the broader objectives of BE PART. For them, the card game was "an easy way to jump into all those questions." When partners did engage with COTT, it offered a chance to speak and listen to people from different perspectives (Cook, 2009): as one player pointed out, the game "forces you to articulate your thoughts but at the same time, it doesn't put you under the spotlight as much because everyone is playing the same game, with the same cards." Another facilitator referred to COTT as a 'fun' way into conversations, to break the ice between people who are "not quite on the same wavelength… even between strangers

who are together in a project, I find it very good." Another player also felt that for "someone who doesn't feel comfortable to communicate about something, then [COTT] gives you a tool where you can lean in and say your point of view." For another, playing COTT meant they could address questions with people who might otherwise be reluctant to answer.

> So, the content of the cards doesn't have to be revolutionary, but the structure of the game is such a useful tool. Games can open a space for discussion because you can get information from people without trying, by just, you know, playing the game.

Another facilitator of the game stated, "We find it quite a useful tool because it gives voice to everyone in the group...". They went on to talk about how COTT can

> balance discussions very well, without putting anyone in a position of advantage. The variations in power between producers, artists, and community members can vary a lot. If you say "Okay, now let's discuss," those power imbalances really come out.

Informal exchanges facilitated by a game of COTT enabled players working on specific projects to share experiences and a 'softer,' more convivial way into tricky conversations that might otherwise be difficult to have. We found that in some cases this assisted the participants in questioning fixed categories (Nowicka, 2019, p.27) which, in a wider context, contributed to challenging existing power relations. However, even though players could 'pass' on their turn and the timed aspect helped non-dominant voices to be heard, inserting a game like COTT into a situation inherently involves the imposition of the power of a partner organization or researcher. These examples highlight COTT's dual nature: it is both freeing in terms of the conversations it creates, but also potentially harmful if participants feel forced to have a conversation they would rather not have. The question of *who* suggests it is time to play a game of COTT might influence the extent to which power imbalances are disturbed.

The timed nature of COTT (two minutes for a player to speak without interruption, and three minutes for the group to respond) meant there was no single leader of the conversation. One player referred to the role of the moderator who, because of the structure of the timings,

> can't give more attention to one player than another, and this allows the moderator to be more neutral. It really balances the power around the table, giving everyone an equal opportunity to share and have room to explore their thoughts.

The timed element perhaps allowed for conflicts, misunderstandings, and uncertainties between players to be voiced. For example, in one instance COTT was introduced by an artist to a group they were working with to create a space where each person present could have an equal say in the process. This was because, as is often the case with participatory arts projects, there were inherent power relations between the artist, who initiates the project, and the participants, who get involved at a later stage. COTT was used by the artist to have that conversation, as they explain:

> The reason why I wanted to play this game and not start the meeting by saying something, was because I didn't want to grab the microphone… I wanted to try to make it equal. So, you can continue because you… have your space…

The game went on to highlight discrepancies between the group's experiences and to tackle some of the miscommunication and expectations they had of each other. At times the exchange is tense,

as people try to explain their positions and be honest about their feelings. For example, during one of the games, a participant in a fieldwork expresses how they did not feel like an artist because they did not initiate or lead the process, despite the project trying to encourage everyone to take on or share the responsibility or power associated with the identity of 'artist.'

The conviviality of the game unearthed conflicting experiences that had been *felt* but not spoken about up until that point, creating 'messy turns' that brought together "a range of knowings to harvest new meanings for practice from the debate" (Cook, 2009, p.286). We found that the game has the potential to suspend hierarchies relating to various project roles (artist, participant), but was most useful in allowing players to acknowledge those positions and speak openly about them, rather than dissolving them altogether. Power relations were perhaps made more obvious when conflicting narratives of a shared experience came to the fore. The rules and timings of the game meant that players were able to hear versions of events that contradicted their own.

CONCLUSIONS

In this article, we have tried to offer a reflexive account of the COTT method by focusing on its use within BE PART and scrutinizing how it relates to the critical literature on community and participatory action research. While we understand the potential for knowledge to be co-produced collectively, involving various professions and publics (Barry and Born, 2013, p.245), our analysis points to the difficulties of putting this into practice.

Although we understand ourselves to be situated researchers, in that we reject the notion of ourselves as neutral and understand research as a process of permanent partiality (Haraway, 2004, p.31), this position was challenged when it came to reporting and summarizing the whole BE PART process. Our physical distance from each context moved us toward a more non-participatory analysis. This article and the evaluation report, for example, are authored by us, rather than the broader team of participants and co-researchers we worked with. However, rather than being a purely extractive data-gathering tool, COTT facilitated conversations among peers 'in the field,' acting as a space for critical discussion and 'messy turns' (Cook, 2009) in the process of knowledge production.

While COTT demonstrated some limitations as a remote research method, it did create a structure in which players could critically reflect, connect, and compare each other's experiences. In this sense, the game satisfied the participants' desire for a space for exchange and informal interaction, helped to alleviate many anxieties and barriers between partners, and to some extent leveled a felt power imbalance between organizations. Our findings build on participatory action and community research methods by making the case for in situ knowledge production that starts by and for people in the field, rather than purely as a data-gathering exercise for remote analysis. While COTT provided a structure for collective analysis of power relations, Hanson (2013) highlights the need for time, institutional freedom, and a willingness to be vulnerable (p.12). The time allocated to evaluation and critical reflection at an institutional level, even when presented in game form, was limited across the BE PART network. Similarly, English as the dominant language perpetuated by the cards highlights a linguistic power imbalance, excluding those who are less fluent. Representatives of partner organizations were our main point of contact: they became the pack-holders and mediators of the game, reenforcing the power held by organizations as budget-holders, programmers, and facilitators across the network.

COTT and similar participatory methods have the potential to generate a convivial space in which community-based and situated interpretations can contribute to wider ideas of knowledge production. The COTT method worked best, for example, when players came together to share experiences of something they were working on together. This could be a localized art project, a program of work in an organization, or a broader inquiry such as BE PART. Critical reflections (Hanson,

2013) were often played out in these game scenarios. Recorded conversations also offered multiple perspectives that could be compared around emerging themes. However, we found that, while the game was a useful tool for embedded, formative evaluation in which players could critically reflect together, as a form of data collection for remote analysis as part of an official evaluation, the game can also become an extractive and 'techno-rational' tool (Hanson, 2013) that risks supporting existing narratives rather than unpacking them. In such situations, the players might feel coerced into sharing experiences and the game might not move beyond personal reflections, leaving remote researchers to interpret the data at a distance.

In conclusion, COTT offers a tool that is both internal and formative for groups to critically reflect together. Even if not fully participatory, COTT can still, when recorded and analyzed across case studies, offer insights that can be fed back to the groups and externally. A further step would be to explore ways to build thematic, comparative analyses into the process, perhaps in another game format. With adequate resources at organizational, infrastructural, and broader policy levels, this would allow for the research to be situated at local and interpersonal levels, and thus to connect wider groups of players with the aim of disrupting confirmation biases, existing assumptions, value systems, and power relations across projects and networks.

AUTHOR BIO

Sophie Hope is a practice-based researcher and Lecturer in Socially Engaged Practice at Guildhall School of Music and Drama, London. Her work is often developed with others through the format of devised workshops exploring subjects such as art and politics, physical and emotional experiences of work, different perspectives on socially engaged art, and the ethics of employability in the creative industries. She is a Trustee of Take a Part and was a senior lecturer at Birkbeck, University of London (2010–23), where she taught on the MA Arts Policy and Management and developed Corkscrew, a forum for practice-based researchers.

Henry Mulhall is a practice-based PhD student at Birkbeck, University of London. His research looks at how constellations of practice form between art organizations and community groups in the Union Street area of Plymouth. He uses film, text, and diagramming techniques in his practice-based research. He is an arts evaluator and has recently worked with Cambridge Council, The Line, and The Barbican. Along with Sophie Hope, he is co-lead for Cards on the Table, a game that helps mediate difficult moments in collaborative practices.

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