

ARTICLE NO 3**NAVIGATING THE ETHICS OF AUDIENCE PARTICIPATION****By Gareth White (UK)****Abstract**

The participation we ask for in applied theatre takes different forms, and the safety we provide to participants will have different meanings in these different forms. When we ask for audience participation — a move from the spectator role to that of performer — the feelings of anxiety that may result reflect genuine risks to self-esteem, public esteem, even psychological and physical well-being, but they also reflect the exciting and meaningful process of putting oneself on show. All procedures that bring people into performances can both encourage and limit the participants' agency. The interactions between risk, manipulation and the experience of the participant in audience participation are not problems to be solved in dogmatic terms, but key elements of the dramaturgy of audience participatory theatre. This article builds upon ideas presented by Anthony Jackson to suggest how this dramaturgy may be theorised.

Abrégé

La participation que nous demandons dans le théâtre appliqué prend diverses formes, et la sécurité que nous donnons aux participants aura différentes significations dans ces formes diverses. Quand nous demandons à l'audience de participer — un passage du rôle de spectateur à celui d'interprète — les sentiments d'anxiété qui peuvent surgir reflètent les risques réels à l'estime personnelle et publique, et même au bien-être psychologique et physique, mais ils reflètent aussi le processus excitant et riche de se donner soi-même en spectacle. Toutes les procédures qui amènent les gens aux spectacles peuvent à la fois encourager et limiter l'action des participants. Les interactions entre le risque, la manipulation et l'expérience du participant dans la participation de l'audience ne sont pas des problèmes à résoudre en termes dogmatiques, mais des éléments clés de la dramaturgie du théâtre avec participation de l'audience. Cet article est développé à partir d'idées présentées par Anthony Jackson pour suggérer comment cette dramaturgie peut être théorisée.

Sumario

La participación al teatro aplicado a la cual nos referimos toma formas diferentes, y la convicción que proporcionamos a los participantes tendrá varios significados según estas diferencias. Cuando pedimos una participación del público — una translación entre un rol de espectador a un rol de interprete — las sensaciones de ansiedad que podrían resultar relejan unos riesgos fehacientes hacia la estima de la propia persona, hacia la estima del público y hacia el bienestar físico y psicológico, pero también podrían reflejan el proceso entusiasmante y significativo de participación dentro del espectáculo. Todos los procedimientos que conllevan las personas a actuar pueden alentar y también limitar el desempeño de los participantes. Las interacciones entre el riesgo, manipulación y la experiencia de los participantes no son inconvenientes que se resuelven en términos dogmáticos, sino elementos clave de la dramaturgia del público teatral participatorio. Este artículo se basa sobre ideas presentadas por Anthony Jackson e infiere la manera con la cual esta dramaturgia puede ser teorizada.

Author's biography

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NAVIGATING THE ETHICS OF AUDIENCE PARTICIPATION

This article discusses how the dramaturgy of audience participation has ethical implications in educational theatre. I use examples from British Theatre in Education (TIE), but my observations are applicable to other variations on the form, to a broad range of settings and client groups where audience participation is a common practice — for example, in work with young people outside statutory educational contexts, or theatre for development. I do, however, narrow the field to consider audience participation separately from other kinds of participatory drama, proposing that when participation begins after the formation of an audience, and is interspersed with episodes of rehearsed performance, there are different priorities and different ethical issues at work.

Often, in applied theatre, participation by the client group is integral to the process from the start, or extended over much longer periods. This is not the participation with which I am concerned here, and though there is a range of practice in which these tendencies can overlap, the different conditions created by the establishment of a formal audience–performer relationship make the distinction worthwhile. Using two different examples from Theatre in Education, I focus on two aesthetic imperatives that arise in the use of audience participation, and explore their ethical implications. The instances I make use of here are not intended to be typical, though the techniques described will be familiar to many readers. Both pieces of work are to some degree influenced by Theatre of the Oppressed, but that is incidental: this is not a critique of Boalian practice or of any other trend in Theatre in Education or applied theatre, but of the potential hazards of participation in all kinds of audience participation. My examples have not been drawn from a disciplined documentation, but are recollections of moments in a career in practice that have given me cause for critical reflection, and as such they can be treated as possibilities for how troublesome practice might develop. As they are reconstructed entirely through the fallible processes of memory, I shall not mention the names of companies, projects or any individuals, and personally accept any blame for the failings of the work described.

Two troublesome examples

The first example concerns a volunteer for an image theatre exercise, part of a performance in a school hall for an audience of around a hundred Year 9 students (aged thirteen to fourteen). A boy climbed on to the stage to join a series of tableaux showing reasons for taking a car to school, his idea being that it ‘makes you look cool in front of your mates’. The problem arose when it became clear that his ‘mates’ didn’t think he could be cool at all, and took the opportunity to pursue a (probably long-standing) campaign of bullying: to make comments about his weight, his personal hygiene and his intelligence. The name-calling was not subtle: his status as whipping boy seemed to be so taken for granted by a large group of students that for this boy to put himself on display like this was an open, irresistible invitation to ridicule him. The teaching staff did not seem surprised, though of course they made efforts to restore order; it took the removal of one of the most vocal boys to allow the activity to continue without interruptions. The boy’s reaction was stoic: he held his pose, and hid any distress caused by the name-calling. The exercise involved the volunteers building their image, and then repeating it at intervals as a larger ‘sculpture’ was assembled around it, and every return to the image provoked more abuse and hilarity.

The second example is not of a single incident, but of a sequence that concluded a half-day interactive performance concerned with bullying (as subject-matter, this time, rather than unintended consequence), where adult professional actors played children of the same age as the audience — usually a class of state school students in Years 7 to 9. After an hour-long forum theatre process, in which a ‘victim’ character has been replaced many times by students, and many solutions to his problems examined and discussed, students are asked to hot-seat a character who had been involved in all of the action, but as neither victim nor oppressor. Having witnessed and explored so many different ways of stopping the bullying behaviour of the antagonist, the students are primed to ask the character about her role in the situation; they are eager to tell her that she had a responsibility to intervene to protect her friend. Protesting that she is afraid to do this on her own, she asks them whether they will help her, and they readily agree, upon which the bully appears, again tormenting his usual victim.

Generally the students protest, and when the bully refuses to do as they say, the students become aggressive and sometimes violent with him. At that point, an actor in role as a teacher steps in and rebukes them. The students are told to return to their places and, in a very forceful tone, are asked what they were doing and why. The bully receives a sympathetic hearing from the teacher, but soon he and one or two of the most aggressive students are sent out of the room 'to stand outside the head teacher's office' to await further interrogation.

Here, then, are two examples of audience participation and three issues that arise from them: the risk of public humiliation; how to keep people safe; and the manipulation of participants into action they cannot choose themselves. I would like to discuss these issues in more detail, to establish how they relate to each other.

Frame analysis and audience participation

Both examples concern audience participation, rather than participatory drama. When participation begins after the formation of an audience, and is interspersed with episodes of rehearsed performance, there are different aesthetic priorities and different ethical issues at work from those that appear in other kinds of participatory drama. Where we have the time and space to build group trust, and a common way of working, and where an event is set up and perceived as participatory and everyone expects to take part — whether they welcome this prospect or not — there are different material conditions operating.

There is a growing body of theory that discusses the transformation of 'ordinary people' into performers that happens in audience participation. O'Toole (1976) describes levels of peripheral, extrinsic and integral participation, and Jackson (1997) names a number of 'Inner Frames' that include the 'investigative' and 'involvement' frames. Practitioners who have theorised their work showing some similar concerns include Izzo (1997), who focuses on the 'temenos' or free space of play in participation, Schechner (1973, 1979), who expresses anxiety about manipulation and aggression, and analyses the different orientations of 'intrinsic' and 'accidental' audiences, and Augusto Boal (1979, 1992), who gives us ideas of coercion, rehearsal for revolution, and the spect-actor. Of all these useful and interesting contributions, it is Jackson's work to which I will return as it connects with a body of theory that develops themes that could be of particular importance.

Jackson draws on Erving Goffman's *Frame Analysis* (1975) to describe the different ways in which we experience and understand audience participation. He describes a 'pre-theatre frame' in which audience members are prepared for the theatrical experience. In this frame, they are still in one of their everyday roles — as students perhaps, or as 'theatre-goers'. In the 'outer theatrical frame', a theatrical space is established and along with it the theatrical contract: the audience members now take on the role of 'onlooker'; they recognise the distinction between theatrical space and normal space, and the expectations placed on their behaviour (that they will watch) and that of the performers (that they will perform). Within this outer theatrical frame, the 'narrative frame' and 'presentational frame' operate, where stories are told or shown: these are the frames of conventional theatre. The 'investigative frame', however, gives the audience a task to undertake, and so a more active role to play. The 'involvement frame' will usually place the spectators in role, and this is where Jackson locates the heart of Theatre in Education practice: the activities where the audience and performers occupy the same space, physically and imaginatively, and where the audience members have become participants with a significant influence over the action.

Frame Analysis develops a vocabulary to describe how we organise our perceptions of the multitude of different situations we observe and in which we find ourselves. We look at our experiences in different ways, bringing to them different assumptions about their meaning: we place them into frames that enable our understanding. As well as structuring our perceptions, frames allow us to manage the different parts of life, and our behaviour in social life in particular. Goffman's idea is that these frames are made up of 'organisational premises' (Goffman 1975: 247) which make the situation real to us as well as manageable: we have ways of understanding what kind of activity is going on, and what kind of behaviour is appropriate and beneficial to us. When Goffman uses frame to describe our functional understanding of interactions in everyday life, he indicates a network of shared assumptions about what an interaction means for its participants, and what is appropriate behaviour at these interactions. When Jackson invites us to think about theatre in this way, he tells us that theatre is social life, understood

differently to the other parts of social life, but still using the same ways of distinguishing its parts, and distinguishing it from what goes on around it.

In Chapter 8 of *Frame Analysis* (Goffman 1975: 292–93), a very useful set of terms is presented to describe the way frames are anchored to each other. Goffman uses particular terms for the different kinds of anchoring. ‘Episoding conventions’ of a frame are the signals or conventions through which an activity is ‘marked off’ from other activities, from the ‘ongoing flow of surrounding events’. This might be the opening of a curtain in a theatre, or merely the opening remarks of a conversation. These conventions help us to learn from others what kind of activity is going on, and to signal what role we are going to take in this activity and when we are doing so. They also allow us to move from one mode of behaviour to another, because the conventions used have made it clear and acceptable to all that a change in frame has happened.

The ways that roles in a frame can be cast are via its ‘appearance formulas’: an appearance given by a player in a frame is never entirely divisible from the person who gives it, so ‘casting’ a person in a ‘role’ as part of a frame makes the other roles they play, and our ideas of them as a person, available — thus bringing meaning to the activity. ‘Resource continuity’ is the way in which individuals bring aspects of themselves to different roles and maintain a connection across various activities: among other things, this might constitute an individual’s *style*, but it is also the recourse of the framed activity to the cultural and personal skills they possess. ‘Unconnectedness’ is the irrelevance of much of the context of the frame to the meaning or the pursuit of the activity within it. Much of what surrounds us during most kinds of interaction is incidental, though it is fair to say that the higher the degree of formality in a situation, the more likely it is that the context is being used to ‘stage’ the interaction in some way. A conversation in a corridor may be implicitly framed as such for the sake of its informality, but it can hardly be said that the other people passing by, the carpet and the lighting are activity within the frame. A conversation in a manager’s office, however, takes place in an environment that has been at least partly arranged for such a purpose, and may have been specifically staged for a particular conversation. The relative position of chairs to desks, for example, or the prominence of relevant paperwork, can be seen as playing important parts within the frame.

All of these notions are different ways of describing the connectedness of action in the frame to action in other frames that precede and succeed it. When Goffman makes a defence of the notion of ‘the human being’, it is not because he wants to persuade us to believe in an essential soul or subject independent of the things that we do, but because such an idea is fundamentally important in the way that we anchor our behaviour — because we do, in a practical sense, believe in a single indivisible self that connects all of our actions and experience, and act accordingly. What this theory is unpicking is the way that any activity, however much it separates itself from other parts of the lives of participants, is still grounded in them.

Risk in audience participation

One conclusion to draw from this sense of connectivity is to take a different theoretical emphasis, that all public interaction carries the danger of becoming performative, in Austin’s (1976) simple sense of the ‘perlocutionary’ enunciation, which has lasting effects upon the speaker as a social subject. This is not to deny ideas of disconnection — of liminality, carnival, play or the ‘no- penalty area’ — but to acknowledge their limitations. Though we may be free to adopt other personae in drama, there is always some chance that our action will be taken as a reflection on our ‘real’ selves that what should be disconnected will remain connected. Performing in public is risky, as Goffman (1969) observes:

An action staged in a theatre is a relatively contrived illusion and an admitted one; unlike ordinary life, nothing real or actual can happen to the performed characters — although at another level of course something real and actual can happen to the reputation of performers qua professional whose everyday job is to put on theatrical performances. (1969: 246)

Without the rehearsal and training that professionals expect, the risks for audience participants are in some ways greater.

When we are talking about audience participation, there are a number of genuine risks involved in performing in public. There is the risk of taking part in an activity which may turn out to be not enjoyable,

or which might actually be distressing. There is potentially a physical risk involved in the activity to be undertaken and, in some circumstances, there may be a risk that a performance will bring some sort of serious consequence after the show is complete — this, for example, is a real possibility for participants in Theatre of the Oppressed in a site of conflict. What is most likely to prevent a person from participating, however, is the risk of embarrassment — of giving a performance that causes a loss of face. To expose your thoughts or emotions in a public event like this is risky — there is a chance of public embarrassment by revealing too much or by failing to look competent, presenting a performance that does not match the role we have taken in the drama, or people's expectations of decorum and control that are associated with our everyday roles. We go to extraordinary lengths to 'save face' in everyday life, to protect our role-positions and other people's perceptions of them; we even go to some lengths to protect other people's 'face':

When an individual employs these strategies and tactics to protect his own projections, we may refer to them as 'defensive practices'; when a participant employs them to save the definition of a situation projected by another, we speak of 'protective practices' of 'tact'. (Goffman 1970: 25)

People are likely to employ defensive practices in avoiding public performance, and have a right to expect that facilitators of audience participation will demonstrate tact in the way they engage with their participants, and that steps should be taken to protect their dignity.

These actual risks may not, however, be as important to the procedures of interactivity as the perception of risk in the minds of the participants. People feel that if they take part in a performance they must acquit themselves well, and if they don't they will be shown up as being inadequate to the task — or worse, as being guilty of having a perception of themselves as good performers when they are not. Many people — perhaps a majority — are shy of performing in public, and especially of the idea of audience participation in the theatre, and will need encouragement and a procedure specifically designed to help them overcome these reservations. Participatory drama takes this issue for granted in a way that is not often considered relevant to performers in most performance traditions. Workshop leaders of all kinds do not think of their group as a passive audience, but as participants from the start, and know that this participation must be managed. As Hahlo and Reynolds (2000) acknowledge at the beginning of their discussion of how to build an effective workshop:

Those taking part, especially if it is a new experience for them, have to be encouraged to get to a point where they can begin to take small but significant personal risks, and prick the bubble of inhibiting self consciousness. The workshop leader ... won't physically or even metaphorically have to drag spectators into active participation; but she or he will inevitably gently need to persuade and cajole sometimes reluctant spectators into positions where they can become active participants in making a dramatic event of their own. (2000: XXIV)

Note that here they refer to spectators who must become performers, even though they are writing about people who have come to a workshop and not to a performance: their dramatic event is not a fully public one, but still there is the difficult transition to be made from being a private person to being a performer. In these cases, the job will be made easier by the fact that people attending a workshop anticipate that they will be required to participate in some way, but nevertheless people are still often inhibited. The good facilitator will have a number of strategies for overcoming these inhibitions. These strategies may be as simple as gradually building up involvement over several sessions, or they may disguise participation by asking only for verbal contributions from more inhibited participants, or involve raising the tempo and physicality of the activities through games and move swiftly into physical role-play. It is considered vital that participants who feel safe enough (protected from embarrassment and physical harm) are able to engage wholeheartedly in the activities, and thus can be enabled to do things that they would not have expected, to surprise themselves.

I cannot speak for the boy in example one. He may have perceived a risk in getting on to our stage, but if he did he overcame any reservations. In facilitating this event for him — perhaps somehow persuading him that the activity would not bring him harm — we put him into a risky situation and facilitated, as well as his performance, the opportunities of his bullies. We cannot know all the meanings of this performance. Certainly this was a significant moment for him, a gesture of defiance, perhaps merely another incident among many. However, we didn't offer a way to turn the interaction into an

unquestionably positive experience: the boy completed his task with commitment and gusto; he was given a round of applause and thanked by the performers; but for him and for the boys who laughed at him, this performance could not be detached from the continuity of his place within the school pecking order.

Manipulation and coercion

The risk of embarrassment has a controlling function in everyday life: it prevents people from following their impulses. As facilitators, we try hard to help people overcome this kind of fear, but in doing so we may be in danger of leading them into areas that are genuinely risky. Certainly there are ways and means in the procedures of audience participation to produce the actions that we, as facilitators, want. In the 'episoding conventions' used, the invitations that are given to people to participate by facilitators imply, suggest and instruct the kinds of interaction they want. Once the interaction is underway, they act in ways that continue to narrow the field for the participants drawn from the audience. Even without being manipulative, facilitators are bound to control the performances given in many ways. Paradoxically, it is when facilitators fail to control performances that they are most in danger of exposing participants to much of the risk I have just discussed.

In my second example, there are a number of overt facilitating techniques at work. The instruction given before hot-seating is the most obvious of these, an episoding convention where the students are explicitly told what they are to do, without being given a dramatic role, by a member of the company who is also out of role. This is the last point in this sequence at which the students are instructed in such clear and open terms, but there are many more pieces of interaction which guide their behaviour, limiting the range of possible interactions that they are likely to follow. First, the hot-seated character leads the conversation towards the subject of the bully and his victim. When she asks for help, and when she asks the students what they will do next time they see the bully, she leads them to make decisions and promises about their future behaviour — often explicitly asking them 'Will you help me?'. Sometimes she leads the conversation in a particularly manipulative way by ignoring suggestions that they should immediately tell a teacher, as happened on some occasions in this work.

Second, when the bully appears — usually behind the hot-seated character so that the students see him before she does — a different kind of interaction is introduced without the need for instruction, but also without an articulation of the role that the students are to take. The invitation to begin a new kind of drama — the episoding convention — is subtle, but the change is quite significant: the students no longer ask questions in a detached way, but in a fully dramatic interaction with a character who recognises them as people within a drama. When he reacts to their criticism of his behaviour with 'So?' and 'What are you going to do about it?' he guides them into a stronger assertion of what they have come to believe is right. The range of action available has been mapped out for them by the actions and words of the actors, so that one course of action seems to be the most appropriate expression of their developing attitudes to the characters of the play. It is still possible for the students to behave 'responsibly' — to reason with the bully perhaps, or to offer to fetch a teacher — but it is those who shout the loudest who are heard at this point, and there are always a large enough number who have been persuaded to shout.

Third, when the 'teacher' joins this scene, it is a logical extension of the interaction with the bully, but it is an event that often seems unexpected to the students. It takes some moments before they realise that this character expects them to behave in role as his students, and that they are to be held responsible for their actions within the dramatic frame.

This sequence has several functions within the program: it reintroduces the figure of authority in school situations, and demonstrates the difficulty of communicating with such figures about relationships amongst students; it raises the idea of how it is possible to become a bully without intending to; and it leaves issues to be taken up and discussed in classroom work with teachers, but in a way that is climactic as well as open-ended. It may be that this dynamic effect of the closing sequence was as important to the company as any other reason to conclude the program in this way. It *is* manipulative. The students do not make informed choices about their actions because they are not informed about how the action will develop, while the actors know very well what is likely to happen and how they will

respond to it. The students become objects in the drama rather than its subjects.

If control is inevitable, but manipulation generally undesirable, there needs to be both a way of distinguishing between them, and of knowing which parts of a procedure of interaction can feature in them. Boal has expressed his own attitude to work which imposes ideas upon people, but is he right to call the ideological coding that he perceives in tragedy (and the rest of the tradition, by extension) 'coercion'? Dictionary definitions suggest that coercion is a forcible control, usually by indirect means but against the will of the subject, and not necessarily against their interest. For Boal, the 'coercive system of tragedy' is against our interests but not against our will, as it is disguised within generic conventions and persuades us undetected. In this it is closer to what Althusser (1970: 19) called the 'ideological state apparatus' than to the 'repressive state apparatus' that exerts what my dictionary tells me is coercion. Its influence is insidious, and hidden.

In audience participatory theatre, we might put it that there are 'repressive' and 'ideological' systems at work, or something like them — obvious influences that can guide participants into certain actions, and less obvious influences that will also guide, but through the way participants think of themselves in relation to the issue. Picking up on what I have read into Goffman, the influence of the pre- and outer-theatrical frames is that they contribute to this interpellative influence. If coercion or manipulation is a process that works more by indirection than direction, this subtler influence will serve it well. In my second example, it is calling on the students' experience of their lives outside the drama, in the context of their feelings about the drama, that leads to their actions. They are called upon to be outraged at bullying behaviour, to take the role of the caring outsider and then, when challenged, to transform this into the attitude of the angry mob. The timidity of one actor in role, and the aggressiveness of another, is the active agent of this transformation. This is coercion into action, not into ways of thinking. The kind of coercion, and ideological influence that Boal cites in 'Aristotle's Coercive System of Tragedy' also applies, and might ultimately be the one about which we have to be most concerned. Audience participation is a powerful interpellative system in itself. It hails the participant with its invitation to join in the action, and it gives the participant actions to undertake, whether they choose their actions themselves, are simply given them or are manipulated into them.

Negotiating risk and manipulation

I do not, however, want to argue for participation to be used sparingly, or for participants to be treated with kid gloves. There are different aesthetics at work during audience participation, different pleasures for the audience — whether they participate or not — and different provocations to thought and feeling. Both risk and manipulation are necessary to these aesthetics, and they are crucial to the dramaturgy of the audience participation procedure. Being on show like this does bring a risk of embarrassment or ridicule, but this is because of its performativity, its capacity to be meaningful in a way that is both public and personal, and lasting — that becomes part of our sense of self. The power-play that is an inevitable aspect of a process that involves interaction between un-equals, between the prepared, professional performer and the spectator who surrenders the safety of the crowd, connects with this performativity. The purpose of Goffman's frame analysis is to show how all perception and communication is structured by interaction with others, but a key phrase for him is the 'definition of the situation' (Goffman 1975: 1), which is often contested between interlocutors. In audience participation, the control of the definition lies almost irrevocably with the theatre practitioners, and not with the participants. It is a struggle to give a good performance of the self in an interaction that has been so powerfully structured by others.

Other aspects of the process have more in common with participatory drama of other kinds: the contact with unfamiliar roles that we get from 'living through' drama; the heat of experience 'in the moment'; the possibility of reflection on this afterwards; the contact with the sensible, thematic content of the drama. But the fear and the thrill of stepping into a drama, the feeling of taking action in a situation that is only marginally under our control and has some visible, immediate consequence, does more than colour these experiential processes — it structures them entirely.

Classroom drama or workshop drama, work that only separates the audience from performers momentarily for an exercise or the showing of some work, involves these risks and power-plays too. Here the facilitator has to lead people into action and persuade them to risk public performance, but with

more time, space and opportunity to focus the process on the participants rather than a separate group of performers. Workshop participants can be given more control and initiative, and when they put themselves on show they can do so on an equal footing with other participants. This suggests — I think in line with common sense — that the power of participatory drama for learning is easier to harness in the workshop or the classroom than in participatory interludes in theatre performances. It also shows how audience participation can play a part in educational work at the theatrical end of the scale, to enhance the power of the experience for any audience, through a specific kind of dramaturgy. The elements of this dramaturgy that I have highlighted here, however, operate in the sphere of self-presentation, and so provoke ethical dilemmas that can be both unpredictable and ambiguous. It must be permissible to invite people to take risks, to put students into situations that they will find meaningful, memorable and threatening, but there have to be limits to the amount of risk of public embarrassment that we bring to our participants. It might sometimes be considered worthwhile to coerce, but the point must be found where acceptable play with people's agency becomes an unacceptable manipulation. Audience participation is playing *with* people, both in the sense of joining with them as equals and of playing with them as objects. Whether we play with participants like collaborators, rather than like gods or wanton boys, will be the defining characteristic of theatre that seeks to share agency: of applied theatre. Good practice in audience participatory applied theatre depends upon the judgments that are made while balancing manipulation and freedom, safety and risk. Our participants' safety and understanding cannot be taken for granted, but neither do we have much time to attend to them: audience participation is different from more extended forms of participatory drama in that it asks the facilitator to write these choices about risk and manipulation into the procedure before knowing the participants and without the same chance to step back from the work and rethink.

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