

Game-Based Technique for Studying Identity Change in Disturbed Communities

Elisabeth Kovtiak 
Charles University, Czech Republic

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18778/1733-8077.20.4.03>

Keywords:

Authoritarian Regimes; Ethical Considerations; Game-Based Research; Identity Transformation; Projective Techniques; Sensitive Topics

Abstract: Studying social identity change in non-standard contexts is always challenging. This article presents a new research technique that allows researchers to obtain rich and ethical data even in adverse and fragile conditions. It is based on the popular associative card game and combines projective and game-based data generation methods. The game component adds a playful atmosphere to the research environment and encourages interaction, while the projective aspect allows participants to express identity elements more easily. The features of the new technique presented in this paper are demonstrated through a case study of the post-2020 Belarusian diaspora. In addition to data generation, I describe a coding process that blends deductive and inductive approaches and show how textual and visual data can be analyzed together. Finally, the advantages and disadvantages of this innovative technique are assessed, including creative expression, a safe space for dialogue, and the ability to capture nuanced perspectives.

Elisabeth Kovtiak is a qualitative researcher and a sociologist. She is a PhD candidate at Charles University, Prague. Her doctoral dissertation focuses on the transformation of collective identity in Belarus. She obtained her M.A. from the University of Lancaster, focusing on post-communist nostalgia in

her master's thesis. Her academic interests include collective memory and its manifestations in art and public space, the role of art in political activism, and identity in transitional post-socialist societies.

email address: elisabeth.kovtiak@fsv.cuni.cz

Studying social identity transformation requires careful and delicate methodology, even in the most favorable conditions. Identity research in a disturbed authoritarian society such as the Belarusian one, which has undergone horrific and traumatic collisions in recent years, poses a real methodological challenge. Conducting qualitative field research is complicated, as the political environment hinders scholarly inquiry. Apart from that, people are often reluctant to partake in research because, fearing the consequences, they do not trust strangers who want to explore their beliefs and attitudes. They may be apprehensive about talking to researchers, unwilling to disclose their concerns and grievances openly, and, in some cases, they may be accompanied by a minder, concerned they are being watched, or doubting the researcher's lack of affiliation with the regime (Morgenbesser and Weiss 2018); Janenova 2019

Conventional field methods may, thus, not be suitable for studying identity in a divided and traumatized society, urging researchers to develop new methods sensitive to these challenges. It is salient to understand power dynamics and address issues like access to participants, fear of reprisal, and self-censorship (Koch 2013). Those willing to conduct research in such a "closed context" (Koch 2013) have to find gatekeepers and consider building a formal or informal team to help navigate the authoritarian landscape and close the gap between a researcher and potential respondents (Glasius et al. 2018; Morgenbesser and Weiss 2018; Janenova 2019). Authoritarian and conflictual settings also require researchers to be particularly mindful of the ethical implications of conducting their studies. They need to ensure that their methods do not put participants at risk and that they respect their privacy and confidentiality. Thus, being aware of power dynamics,

protecting sources' confidentiality, building relationships with local collaborators, and being transparent about the research methods and findings are essential to successfully conducting the field stage in an authoritarian context (Glasius et al. 2018).

Besides the political and ethical concerns, researchers should also be prepared to adapt their methodologies and data collection techniques to fit the unique circumstances and challenges presented by the actual socio-political situation. In Belarus, for example, the level of repression at the moment is so intense that conducting other than state-sponsored research there puts both researchers and participants at great risk. The only feasible possibility for an independent study of actual Belarusian identity is to focus on the nationals living outside of the country. Due to the high sensitivity of the topic and the fact that even after leaving the country, many refugees do not feel safe and fear that they might be under surveillance by both external and internal security services (Rudnik 2021), conducting research in the refugee diasporas requires similar measures that are needed for the domestic context. The fundamental difference is that the level of fear is lower abroad, and technically, the chance of real consequences is minimal. However, there are additional aspects that make conventional methodology not a fully appropriate tool in such complicated conditions. Employing standard in-depth interviews and focus groups entails a risk of the research participants hesitating to answer some questions, as they may find them disturbing and re-traumatizing.

Another threat is that research participants will struggle to find an authentic yet acceptable answer because the topic discussed may seem too complex for them to articulate their position consistently. For example, asking about the national future can be ir-

ritating for participants because they may not know the answer, even though they have thought hard about it for a long time. Vain guessing would not be entertaining for them, and instead of a saturated answer, a researcher might be left with the remark that it is not worth discussing as no one knows the answer. Or, instead of sharing their thoughts, uneasy participants may reproduce something they read in the media, thoughtlessly repeating someone else's message. Therefore, to ensure the research is both safe and fruitful, we need to employ techniques that enable participants to freely express the whole scale of their opinions and sentiments without being afraid of harmful consequences, for example, revealing their identity or re-traumatizing.

Combining Projective and Gaming Approaches in the Creation of a New Technique

This paper introduces a novel technique of qualitative data generation that has been designed to cope with the challenges of studying identity transformation among the Belarusian diasporas. It combines projective and gaming dimensions. Both are used to capture various manifestations of identity phenomena and to add a playful atmosphere to the research setting, encouraging more open answers. The principle of projective techniques is to use verbal or visual stimuli to reveal internal content, such as subjective theories, emotions, and attitudes, whose expression is constrained by social norms or psychological barriers.

Researchers using projective techniques assume that participants will transfer their unfiltered perceptions, theories, feelings, and desires onto neutral or ambiguous objects to avoid potentially unacceptable outcomes being attributed to them (Branthwaite

2002; Porr et al. 2011). In conventional qualitative research, for example, focus groups, dealing with loaded and controversial topics sometimes leads to conflicts between the participants who have different viewpoints, which ends up in emotional distress for the participants and, at times, results in silencing experiences and opinions that are not shared by the group's dominant voices (Smithson 2000). The game dimension, on the other hand, stimulates active engagement in interactions and reduces interviewer bias, as participants comment on the game process itself rather than focusing on identity differences or conflicts between them (Rowley et al. 2012).

Since people, as individuals, are reflexive beings who perceive themselves, have conceptions of themselves, communicate with themselves, and act toward themselves (Blumer 1986), any research into social identity has to acknowledge its processual and interactive character and devise its methodology to best capture it. Conventional techniques, such as in-depth interviews or focus groups, are suitable for situations of liberal, free speech allowed in societies where people can express their attitudes, opinions, or sentiments in a similar manner both within and outside research situations. They can use the same words when talking with the researcher and with their colleagues or friends, and they listen to these words when they watch the news or read magazines. In societies where freedom of expression is perceived as institutionally restricted, people use different linguistic registers when speaking within and outside trusted circles and resort to using euphemisms, jokes, and allegories when talking about sensitive topics (Astapova 2017; Rohava 2018).

Therefore, projective and game techniques have a greater potential to capture this communicative and identity parallelism because they allow the use

of hyperbole, irony, humor, allusion, and imaginary associations to express identity-relevant content that cannot be communicated overtly. Through promoting creative and playful expression, individuals can delve into the depths of their emotions and thoughts, giving voice to the incomprehensible aspects of traumatic events. This allows the research to benefit from using a more sensitive methodological approach, especially on topics that are difficult to verbalize, such as community and identity change issues (Askins and Pain 2011; Coemans and Hannes 2017; Dunn and Mellor 2017; CohenMiller 2018).

Photo-Elicitation and Games as Research Techniques

The new association game relies on a combination of two particular methods of qualitative research—photo-elicitation and games. Photo-elicitation has been extensively used in the study of topics related to memory and identity as visual stimuli “evoke deeper elements of human consciousness that do words” (Harper 2002:13). Images used as props in interviews help think about complex or sensitive topics that cannot be asked directly, either because the researcher does not know what is relevant to the participant or because an explicit question might cause embarrassment, affecting the quality of the interview. It can also be difficult for a participant to reflect on their identity, as this concept can seem abstract and vague to them. It is easier to react to and elaborate on concrete identity-relevant visual representations. Interacting with pictures encourages people to take a stance and perform their identity rather than just speak about it, especially if the discussion takes place in a group (Smith, Thomas, and McGarty 2014).

Reflecting on artistic images as opposed to conventional realistic photographs can reveal new con-

textual and relational meanings that the author of the image or the researcher who selected it may not have initially contemplated (Vila 2013). Last, but not least, as Lee Parker (2009) suggests, photo-elicitation facilitates communication between strangers, which is critical for participant-researcher relationships and group communication. The interpretative openness of artistically modulated images serves as a common ground for collective interaction. When discussing sensitive or even distressing topics, finding common ground is critical. Hence, using visual artifacts during the group interviews aids in the generation of data to shed light on a subject that is hidden from the researcher but obvious to the participants.

Photo-elicitation usually involves participants identifying the content of the images presented, commenting on them, recalling their memories, and, ideally, telling the stories evoked by the images. When the topic is sensitive and complex, participants tend to be cautious, mostly commenting on the visual surface and not engaging in the discussion. Game components were included to address this issue and to make the discussion both more interactive and less centered on the events depicted. The aim was to add an element of entertainment but also to allow for more comprehensive data collection on participants’ perceptions and experiences of the art.

In implementing the game elements into photo-elicitation, I was inspired by several studies that employed card-based games to generate data (Barker 1979; Rowley et al. 2012; Hájek et al. 2019; Martin and Strengers 2022). Gamification principles can, generally, significantly increase the richness of spontaneous data and participants’ engagement (Bailey, Pritchard, and Kernohan 2015). David

Barker (1979) used traditional African board games to explore local farmers' attitudes and cultural contexts. Such an approach was implemented to ensure the research techniques were appropriate to the community and appealing and entertaining enough to keep the informants' attention throughout the research process.

The main emphasis of David Barker's (1979) work was on the potential benefits of using the activities that are usual for participants' pastimes to help them open up. Thus, by engaging in familiar activities, participants from any community are more likely to feel comfortable and willing to share their experiences and perspectives. This approach fosters a sense of belonging but also creates a conducive environment for building trust with the moderator and within the group. Cards can be used to support semi-structured interviews when the content on the cards is textual and helps focus on a concerned topic (Rowley et al. 2012). Moreover, participants sorted and ordered cards to create groups or sequences, which were subsequently discussed. Custom-designed card games can also be employed in research on neoliberal subjectivities (Hájek et al. 2019) or in raising awareness of renewable energy availability (Martin and Strengers 2022). During the group interview, participants were asked to match cards displaying thematically driven notions with cards bearing various propositions. The aim was to stimulate discussions not only about the correct pairing of notions and propositions but also to encourage participants to search for, to win the game, less obvious or conventional yet plausible arguments.

Inspired by Barker's (1979) board game technique, which creates a conducive environment for building trust between participants and the researcher,

and the gamification approach to exploring participant subjectivity (Hájek et al. 2019), I adapted a popular pictorial card game. The adaptation involved customizing the game cards, introducing specific rules, and creating a unique scoring system to suit the research aims. The game was thus used to generate verbal data from members of the Belarusian diasporas in Poland and Georgia. It allowed for open discussions and provided data on participants' views on the protests, the Lukashenko regime, solidarity, and heroism, as well as perceptions of the country's past and future and other relevant issues in the Belarusian context.

The Creation of a New Game

Dixit® is a popular board game designed by Jean-Louis Roubira and published by Libellud. The game's core concept revolves around shared knowledge and imagination. The players use fantasy-illustrated cards to convey abstract concepts or ideas through verbal clues without explicitly revealing their cards (see: <https://boardgamegeek.com/>). The game has several accessories, such as a board used to track players' progress or a set of voting tokens for the players to express their guesses. In each round, one player becomes the storyteller or "active player." The active player selects one of their cards from their hand and gives a clue or description related to the image on the card. The clue can be a word, phrase, sound, or even a gesture. The other players then choose one card from their hand that most closely matches the clue given by the storyteller and place it face-down on the table. All the cards are shuffled and revealed anonymously so the players can vote on which card they believe belongs to the storyteller based on the given clue. They accomplish this by selecting their voting token in secret and laying it face-down on the table.

The scoring system is designed in such a way that motivates the storytellers to choose cards and clues that are relatable to many so they will be chosen, but not too directly, so not every player will vote for their card. Thus, this scoring system encourages the storyteller to be creative and thoughtful when providing clues. It also pushes the guessers to think critically and strategically when making their selections. This balance keeps the game engaging and competitive.

The original Dixit game served as a starting point for this study. However, it was significantly modified to support the research aims and make the process easier to minimize distractions for the research participants. Specifically, a set of 54 images and symbols related to Belarusian society, politics, and culture was created. These cards featured artwork by Belarusian artists and nowadays reportage and archive photographs relevant to the Belarusian context. The cards were designed according to “pro-protest,” “pro-regime,” and “neutral” themes to reflect the scale of opinions. This distribution was applied when selecting the images that should be included in the deck. This logic was internal to the researcher, and there were no markers that would tell the research participants to which category the researcher attributes a card. In the “pro-protest” category were artistic images and reportage photos from the independent media, depicting the protests or symbols of the resistance, such as a white-red-white flag. The “pro-regime” category consisted of photographs taken from official resources depicting police, rallies in support of the regime, and red-green flags. The neutral images were mostly archival photographs of everyday life from the 2000s, 1990s, and the Soviet era, with no obvious connection to protest or regime iconography. All the cards were transformed into

paint-looking images using a Prism software filter to make the cards look similar in terms of stylistics and color palette. Additionally, this helped make the images less concrete and more symbolic, making the players pay less attention to the details.

Association games offer a high degree of freedom, so a set of contextual keywords (clues) was provided to guide participants’ narratives and maintain focus during the game, covering Belarus’ political situation, human rights, democracy, and other relevant topics. The initial set included the following clues: Belarus of the past, Belarus of today, and Belarus of the future; pride of the country and shame of the country; the split of the society and solidarity of the society; a civil feat; patriots of their country. These keywords were selected to encompass various aspects of the political situation in Belarus, including human rights, democracy, and active and obedient citizen positions. However, participants were also encouraged to suggest their keywords. The original voting system of Dixit was also altered—each participant had a unique token (small toys, coins, and stones were used as the tokens) and expressed their guess by placing their token on a selected card. To eliminate the possibility of strategic calculations, everyone voted simultaneously after a signal given by the moderator. Each time a participant’s card was chosen, they received a point, and the score was kept by the moderator on a piece of paper. This was done to simplify the process and encourage discussion based on the images presented rather than keep the participant’s focus on the scores and competition. In the original game, the explanations of the card choice are not an obligatory part of the game process. Thus, the moderator explicitly asked the participants to elaborate on their choice of the card.

A Combined Analysis of the Generated Visual and Textual Data

The game sessions were recorded, and each card layout was photographed. The recordings were transcribed with the names of the images to which the players were referring, as it was rare for the participants to mention the specific name of a card during the discussions. Atlas.ti software was used for coding, allowing analysis of both textual and visual data. The coded sections of text were also tagged with an indication of the image to which the text was related. Following Jennifer Fereday and Eimear Muir-Cochrane (2006), I coded using a hybrid approach combining deductive and inductive coding. Some codes were created before and during the game, as keywords used in the game also became codes. Participants' choices in the game served as valuable keywords for code generation during the coding process. This approach facilitated a comprehensive analysis of both textual and visual data, which improved the overall understanding of participants' interpretations of the associations evoked by the cards.

The coding process began with deductive coding. To describe how certain phenomena are perceived, I created a codebook that described political and personal positions and assisted in dividing the analyzed material into general modes of "passive/obedient" and "active/obedient," as well as "passive/disobedient" and "active/non-obedient" positions. I also considered and coded the speaker's position when discussing actions or phenomena: "happens to me or us," "I or we do," "people like me do," "others do," and whether these actions are supported or condemned. A nuanced analysis of the speaker's stance and attitudes toward different behaviors is indispensable because players' expressions in as-

sociation card games are highly contextual, and during the game, they often resort to sarcasm and irony, which makes it misleading to take what was said literally. Thus, it is important to capture these nuances, especially in deductive coding, to ensure that the quotes and their understanding remain intact, preventing any potential distortion or misinterpretation in future analysis.

Apart from that, a set of codes emerged inductively during the coding process to mark important points. For instance, "relationship with the police," "street art," "admiration for protesters," "attitudes to solidarization," "collective action," "individual action," and "clash of epochs." The codes were applied both to the images and the text but in a different manner as only the text contained participants' interpretations. A noteworthy advantage of combining visual and textual data is the ability to analyze the collected data from various perspectives. It is possible to examine which images and statements are associated with the codes and the game's keywords and observe discrepancies between what is depicted and what is said about these images. On the other hand, it allows us to explore what associations and opinions images evoke and how diverse the associations can be. This method also facilitates a deeper understanding of the underlying meanings and interpretations that people may have of the material being discussed.

Analyzing the Ideas about the Past, Present, and the Future of Belarus

In this section, I will show what data are generated by the game and how these can be fruitfully analyzed. I first focus on the temporal dimension of identity that is evident in the data, as this is crucial for understanding identity change. I then turn to

a more complex analysis of the data generated by the interactions between participants.

When prompted with the keyword “Belarus’s future,” the participants typically selected cards depicting peaceful protests to talk about the positive outcomes of the protest for the future, a picture of a stork behind prison bars as a pessimistic variant of events, and a card with an angel girl as a description of the country’s peaceful future. However, the link between the participant’s interpretation and the card was not as straightforward as it could seem from such a simple classification. For example, by selecting cards depicting protests, players did not necessarily imply that Belarus will face a new wave of large-scale protests in the future: “Maybe luck will turn that way. Not that the future is in the rallies but rather in these people” (P12). Thus, protests and rallies can be part of the transition to a “brighter future” and more freedom in the country, but the protests can also be interpreted as a sign of the emergence of a new identity—courageous citizens. To put it differently, the picture of the protest symbolizes that the future depends on people with a proactive stance: “Women made this protest, and these women are the future of Belarus” (P6).

The majority of cards the participants linked to the clue “Belarus of the present” depicted the actions of police and army, the work of the housing and utilities sector in destroying protest murals, and propaganda symbols on empty city streets. Based on the selected images, it can be suggested that participants may perceive their present as a time of government repression, censorship, and a visible military and police presence, which could be indicative of a challenging and constrained social and political environment, like in the following quote: “A bunch of cops are clearly trying to squeeze people out of

the square. Of course, this picture is from November 2020, but if we take it allegorically, it is a continuation of the attack on people and civil society” (P4). The participant’s expression starts with an identification of the factual content of the picture and transcends it into her political opinion about the regime. The combination of the picture and the interpretation generated in the game allows the authenticity of the participants’ opinions to be ascertained. The mere opinion that the regime or the police are attacking civil society may be a partisan cliché. On the other hand, an interpretation of the card limited to a simple description does not imply a personal opinion. Only the combination of a factual description of the specific event evoked by the image and the subsequent general opinion demonstrates the authenticity of the political position expressed.

The cards chosen to represent the “Belarus of the past” were mostly associated with the Soviet era. However, they also contained references to the 1990s as a different era from what the country is plunged into now. The year 2020 is also often seen as something irretrievably gone. Here, the advantage of the association card game for identity research is that participants perceive the cards dually as direct references to the past (the past being the signified) but also as specific representations of the past (the past being the signifier). They have interpretive freedom in choosing one or the other semiotic perspective. The first perspective is taken in the following statement, in which the participant describes his reasoning about what period is depicted on the card based on the helmets of members of special armed forces intervening in public spaces: “Well, this isn’t 2020. Look at the helmets, that was a long time ago. They weren’t hitting hard back then when the OMON still had white helmets... not bloodied [helmets]” (P13).

The second mode of interpretation can be observed in the statements of another participant who interpreted the images symbolically, where what is depicted is considered by the participant as a symbol of the past: “Again, old architecture and slogans—symbols of violence, on which the Belarus of the past relies” and “Inflating the cult of the Great Patriotic War—it smells... appealing to outdated values from the past” (P4). One and the same card can at one time be interpreted in a primarily factual way. At another time, its status as a document of the past can be deconstructed. It depends on the game situation. The analysis then requires a certain semiotic skill on the part of the analyst.

Unlike in an elicitation interview, which tends to produce a consistent narrative, in the card game, interpretive consistency is not required. The association game format allows the participants to express their ideas even if some thoughts may be contradictory. This does not embarrass the informant, as the game setting removes the responsibility of forming a linear narrative from the informant. Similarly, in the authoritarian context, irony and even sarcasm are quite often ways to express opinion indirectly, keeping interpretative openness for security reasons. In discussing the keyword “Belarusian beauty,” one of the participants chose a card depicting a group of soldiers. When explaining her choice, she used the word *krasaucy* [handsome men]. This word was used by Lukashenko (as broadcasted on Current Time) when praising the riot police who protected him in August 2020. Since then, this word has become an ironic nickname for the riot police. If the participant had not demonstrated that she used this card as ironic and used a meme quote to justify her choice, it could have been interpreted that she did indeed think the Belarusian riot police are an embodiment of

Belarusian beauty. A researcher has to be attentive to the informants’ intonations and be well aware of the context. If a researcher is unsure about the implied meaning, it is recommended to clarify the situation by asking additional questions. This can be attributed to the limitations of the method, but such sarcastic statements can also occur during interviews, so working with qualitative data in general involves sensitivity to tone and context.

Interactions within the Game and Their Importance for Analyzing Identity Change

When researching a vulnerable population or doing research in an authoritative setting, standard in-depth interviews and focus groups run the risk of the participants being reluctant to answer certain questions because of their disturbing or re-traumatizing effects. The association game, similar to what Barker (1979) observed in his experience with a traditional board game, allows for the creation of a conducive environment for building trust. Trust is not between specific individuals in the real world but between players in the game world. The premise of the game is the mutual recognition of the participants as players and the rules of the game as a framework for mutual trust.

In a sense, the game creates a safe environment for this to happen. In other words, the game environment puts participants who do not know each other on an equal footing so that they can act within their player roles, helping them overcome the fear of expressing inappropriate opinions or sharing challenging experiences. This is also the reason why participants often explained their choices one at a time, without too much interference with others’ answers. Also, because their relationships

were horizontal, there was little pressure from authority, and the participants behaved fairly equally. Occasionally, however, some interactions made it possible to observe how attitudes toward certain issues are formed and identities are performed in confrontations. For example, dialogues between the participants were valuable in examining their understanding of the differences between Belarusian and Byelorussian identities and how the aesthetics of Belarus differ from the aesthetics of Byelorussia. Byelorussia (Belorussiya) is an outdated name for Belarus, which is still used in Russia, or even BSSR (Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic), as the country was officially called when it was part of the USSR.

P1: [Interpreting the image of Women in White protest] I would say that this is not the beauty of Belarus but of Byelorussia.

P2: Yes! Yes.

P3: BSSR.

P1: No, not the BSSR. There was no such openness [in demonstrating the violence] in the BSSR.

By using the old names, Byelorussia and BSSR, the research participants indirectly but clearly distance themselves from those they see as members of the out-group. In these interpretive discussions, one can observe how different epochs of Belarusian history are understood, how the boundaries between historical periods are defined, and, more importantly, how they translate into boundaries between social identities and social groups. Thus, it is not primarily about the past but about the constitution of an out-group comprising those Belarusians who cling to the values of the past. It provides an insight into how participants conceptualize what is characteristic of the “new” Belarus.

Figure 1. A card depicting a man with a flag while his shadow resembles an armed policeman



Source: Self-elaboration.

The association games with fantasy images provoked discussions that developed around sensitive topics. This was made possible by a game situation that turned participants into players who could afford to make risky interpretive moves. In the course of conversations about the meaning of the cards, participants sometimes questioned the morality of certain statements or created a consensus vision of new moral rules. For example, the importance of

excluding and not forgiving all people who are in any way connected to power structures was considered, as was the idea of people working for the security forces of the system. The discussions were often inspired by ambiguous images on the cards (see: Figure 1).

P6: It was a mistake [for a friend of mine] to initially go there to study [in the police school] and to be a policeman in our country, in general. It was his mistake.

P7: They lure you there with money and benefits...

P6: Yes, yes, but he had ambitions; he wanted to be a detective...

P1: There is nothing shameful in the profession of a policeman, but, unfortunately, [not] in our country...

P6: But they are students, they were not asked, no matter what they studied. They were put on the bus, and they could not do anything because they would lose a huge amount of money—10,000 [EUR]. It's terrifying for them.

The interview is very morally and personally loaded, as some of the participants may have friends or relatives in state structures. One of the interviewees (P6) even explicitly mentions his friend. The context of the game, however, absolves the participants of much of their personal accountability because what is apparently at stake is, for all practical purposes, a plausible interpretation of a fantasy card depicting a civilian holding a small flag, who has a shadow in the form of a policeman. The card seems highly relevant to the situation in Belarus, but it offers not one but several interpretations. Thus, the game favors interpretive relevance over moral relevance, especially in the case of fantasy cards, which creates an ethically safe research environment if the rules of the game are followed.

Figure 2. A card depicting Alexander Lukashenko standing in front of WWII veterans



Source: Self-elaboration.

Cards with realistic content proved to be a stimulus for controversy, too. A card that depicts Alexander Lukashenko standing in front of WWII veterans (see: Figure 2) sparked a moral debate about respect for people based on their age or status, which was culturally determined in previous stages of Belarusian history.

P8: I've been to conventions like that—these old stumps, one old guy in charge.

P9: Why do you say that about veterans?

P8: It's not the veterans, it happens at all the events, you go there, and it's like you're in a retirement home.

P9: That's ageism!

P8: Ageism?! Have you been to any of these events?

P9: I have.

P8: Didn't it seem like it was all senior citizens? Ageism or not, I felt like I was in a retirement home at a gathering.

P10: Maybe it's to contrast with the leader? He's younger in comparison to them.

P11: But this "young one" [Lukashenko] doesn't listen to the veterans, who are smarter and older.

P8: There is no feeling that they are smarter than you, and you are a fool. The feeling is like you are in a retirement home for the mentally ill at a meeting.

As in the civilian-policeman picture, the game setting makes space for a safe discussion about various actors in Belarusian society. The participants do not search for an interpretation of what is in the picture, but what value to assign to the meeting of Lukashenko with the war veterans from the perspective of the new Belarusian identity. This dialogue reveals that although there is some age-based respect inherited from the past, it nevertheless questions the idea of respecting someone purely on the basis of age. They condemn ageism, but at the same time, articulate the idea that Lukashenko is the president of only the old generation.

Since the "new Belarusian" identity is actively transforming at the moment, contradictions are not surprising. Observing its development or attempts to achieve it can be fruitful for understanding the principles on which identity is formed or, at the very least, valuable in recognizing ambiguous and potentially controversial themes inside the group, preventing the establishment of a homogenous community. Thus, for studying identity, discussing images

that are signs, in a semiotic sense, to the research participants can be more productive than conducting semi-structured interviews. When responding to direct questions, the participant may filter more of what they say by thinking about how they want to be perceived by the interviewer. Reactions to visuals may be more spontaneous since they contribute to the construction of the conversation's logic. In another example, one participant confessed to her situation in response to a picture of soldiers.

P2: *Krasaucy* [handsome men] are the riot police [ironic]. I mean, I know people like that because my dad was always in this structure, because my relatives were there, and he left after compulsory military service and he knows, we constantly had people who are proud to be like that... They're *krasaucy*! How they celebrate Airborne Day! How they show off!

By saying this, she reveals belonging to a family where some are part of the army or the police. She is not proud of this but rather mocks their pride in belonging to the security forces. This partly shows the path she has traveled in transforming her identity and how her views have changed.

Another participant, when seeing the image that depicts people creating protest graffiti on a fence at night, shares her background and activism in 2020.

P1: I live... I lived in Zavodsky district and I have this exactly same fence outside my house, and we used to go and paint it at night. *Shariki*, *Partizanka* [colloquial names for Minsk districts located in the industrial sector] have a lot of such fences there... There are *stalinkas* [Soviet houses built in the 1950s], 3-5 story houses, and such fences, there are a lot of such fences there next to the private sector. It looks like where I grew up.

The participant responds to the visual stimulus and talks about her neighborhood where she grew up, which gives us an insight into her experience of belonging to a social group—a person from the outskirts of Minsk whose family most likely belongs to the working class. We also learn from her statement, “I live... I lived,” about her continued identification of herself as a person from this neighborhood of Minsk despite being in exile.

The memoir of her and her friends creating street art in her neighborhood portrays her as someone who protested by engaging in coordinated art interventions. Thus, from this short excerpt, we learn several important things about the participant’s identity, which might have been untold as something that could be considered unimportant or unsafe to share. Thus, the lack of direct questioning and interaction, primarily with images, can prompt the articulation of things that might not have come up in a coherent discussion within the interview. It is documented in the participant’s reaction to a picture of a girl hugging a soldier, a photo taken during the protests in August 2020.

P1: These people [riot police]... did you notice that many of them spoke Russian with a Russian accent? Not with our accent?... Those who hugged, for me, it’s a no. This is the most important mistake of the protest. [Those girls] should not have approached them at all. They should have known for sure that they were outcasts.

She discursively distanced herself from the representatives of the security forces, calling them “these people,” showing that she does not consider them to be like her and separating herself from them even in her speech. Afterward, she suggests that the riot police who scattered the protests were not even Be-

larusians but Russians. In this way, she not only further alienates them but also indirectly expresses the idea that Belarusians would not be capable of such a level of cruelty toward their fellow citizens. It is another example of when seeing an image stimulates an emotional, albeit controlled, reaction and brings up something that might not have been in focus during a conventional interview.

Ethical Considerations and Methodological Limitations

Ethical Considerations

Throughout the research process, ethical considerations were of the utmost importance. The sensitive nature of the subject, which involves potential risks to participants or their families, can understandably cause hesitations and concerns about disclosing personal information. In general, the concern of people in the Belarusian diaspora about the possible consequences in Belarus or for their families creates a certain level of worry and awareness of the risks, which makes them cautious about openly discussing their political views and participating in activities that concern this sphere (Rudnik 2021). It is essential to respect their need for confidentiality and to protect their identity and personal data throughout the research process.

Verbal informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation were maintained to protect the rights and privacy of the participants. Participants were also free to withdraw from the research at any time. In addition, the most provocative visual content on the game cards was evaluated and removed after the test games were completed. To implement safety protection techniques, I adopted principles proposed by Raymond Lee (1993), which involved

“de-jeopardizing” and “de-sensitizing” sensitive topics. “De-jeopardizing” aimed to distance specific responses from the participants’ identities, while “de-sensitizing” focused on fostering an atmosphere of openness and trust. Thus, the research had limitations concerning gaining systematic knowledge of participants’ backgrounds and experiences, as the participants were reluctant to share personal background details due to the political focus of the research. For example, I could not use a questionnaire to gather personal information about the participants on the recruitment stage, nor could I interview them about their backgrounds before the game sessions. Instead, I had to rely on information they freely shared during the game sessions, which did not provide a complete picture of their backgrounds and views. These circumstances influenced the interpretation of the data. Instead of relying heavily on the backgrounds of the participants, the emphasis is more on the insights they provided during the game sessions.

In addition to the safety measures, the participants’ emotional reactions to the memories and images were a major concern. During the sessions, I remained attentive to any signs of tension, distress, or discomfort and offered participants the option to leave the discussions if they felt overwhelmed. Despite intentionally choosing the most non-violent images to avoid the risk of triggering the participants, some visuals, such as official state symbols and mere depictions of police, caused distress in some participants. Some confessed that looking at these images was not easy for them, and they expressed difficulty processing such content. On the other hand, several participants reported positive outcomes, and in post-game conversations, they shared that they felt some therapeutic effect and ease at the end of a game session.

Some participants expressed that, despite the initial distress caused by the images, they gradually began to feel more at ease as the session progressed. Indeed, the research’s interactive and supportive environment seems to have enabled them to gradually overcome the overwhelming emotions evoked by the images. The process of playing and discussing the games provided them with a safe space to process their emotions and thoughts. In this research, it was especially important to acknowledge the sensitivity of the subject matter and the potential emotional impact it may have had on the participants. Thus, the research approach, which included game-based methods and emphasized participants’ freedom to share at their pace, contributed to the creation of an environment in which the emotional aspect was respected.

Attitudes and personal experiences of participants were discussed concerning political and social conflicts and the transformation of social norms and behaviors that the Lukashenko regime considers illegal. In addition, issues related to personal and collective trauma often came up in the discussions. The use of a game-based approach, rather than traditional interviews and focus groups, avoided direct questioning that might have made participants uncomfortable or anxious. This allowed participants to share their experiences and perspectives through a medium that provided some distance and comfort. At any point when I wanted to clarify their accounts because I did not fully understand their point, I emphasized that they were under no obligation to answer any question that made them feel uncomfortable and that they could only share as much as they felt comfortable. Furthermore, this discussion was easier for the participants because they were asked to comment on their choices within the game rather than commenting on real situations or opposing the

views of their teammates. This aspect is important to bear in mind when analyzing the interviews, as participants in a projective research game may hide their opinions behind their player role. This means more freedom of expression but also the possibility of game-biased statements. Therefore, when analyzing, it is necessary to interpret the interview as a whole or as a set of significant components rather than dissecting it into statements that could be made for the sole purpose of the game without any transcendence.

Methodological Limitations

The game technique presented in this article has several advantages for studying sensitive topics in challenging political contexts. However, there are some methodological limitations that are important to discuss, as well as provide some transparency about the card creation process.

The most evident research limitation is that research participants do not share deep emotions, personal recollections, and their ideas as elaborately as they could in the setting of in-depth interviews, which makes the findings somewhat shallow. However, this is a price that has to be paid to talk about topics many Belarusians avoid unfolding. Also, it was balanced by the flexibility and spontaneity of the answers that the game-based research technique has brought.

Another limitation of this technique is related to a potential bias of a researcher in the selection and creation of images in the card deck. The cards can influence participants' responses and shape the direction of the discussion as they have to choose from the images selected by the researcher and reflect on them as well. It is important to acknowledge

that complete neutrality in image selection is almost impossible to achieve, and the final deck is affected by the curatorial decision-making I did as a researcher. To minimize the risk of having a severe level of influence, I conducted a series of pilot games with a preliminary set of cards. This experimental deck was tested within several pilot sessions. Feedback from these sessions was used to refine the set of cards and to make decisions about removing images that were seen as provocative, triggering, or offensive and adding several topics that some pilot research participants said they were missing.

Another problematic issue of this methodological approach is facing superficial or "strategic" responses in the game instead of genuine ideas and personal recollections. I observed that some participants focused more on "winning" the game without deep engagement with the keywords. To address this problem, I kept emphasizing the importance of meaningful discussion during the game and invited deeper reflection on participants' card choices after each round.

Conclusion

The use of an association card game as a research methodology has proven to be a valuable and innovative approach in the context of a repressive political regime and the challenges associated with studying sensitive topics. From the customization of the game deck to the careful consideration of ethical concerns, this article has highlighted the key elements of this methodology. One of the approach's distinguishing characteristics is its ability to foster discussions on sensitive and complex topics such as identity transformation and political change. The methodology respects participants' need for confidentiality while also encouraging them to explore

their thoughts and emotions through creative means by creating a safe and engaging space for them to share their perspectives. Due to their engaging and interactive nature, card games, and association games in particular, can be a valuable alternative to traditional research methods, for example, focus groups, when studying highly sensitive topics.

The game setting creates a relaxed and enjoyable environment for participants, making them feel more comfortable and open to expressing themselves, which leads to richer and more authentic responses, providing valuable insights. Research games are also helpful in reducing potential biases and social desirability effects, as they allow research par-

ticipants to hide behind the player's role and talk more openly without being afraid of being judged for their attitudes and beliefs. The researcher's influence is limited, as the approach allows the discussion to be mostly moderated by the game itself, and the pressure from the researcher's direct inquiries is minimized by the game environment. Thus, this research methodology, based on an association card game, provides a novel and effective approach to studying sensitive topics in a difficult political context. It not only provides useful insights into participants' experiences and perspectives, but it also serves as a model for conducting research that prioritizes ethical considerations and participants' well-being.

References

- Askins, Kye and Rachel Pain. 2011. "Contact Zones: Participation, Materiality, and the Messiness of Interaction." *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 29(5):803-821.
- Astapova, Anastasiya. 2017. "Rumor, Humor, and Other Forms of Election Folklore in Non-Democratic Societies: The Case of Belarus." *Folklore: Electronic Journal of Folklore* 69:15-48.
- Bailey, Peter, Graeme Pritchard, and Hugh Kernohan. 2015. "Gamification in Market Research." *International Journal of Market Research* 57(1):17-28.
- Barker, David. 1979. "Appropriate Methodology: An Example Using a Traditional African Board Game to Measure Farmers' Attitudes and Environmental Images." *The IDS Bulletin* 10(2):37-40.
- Blumer, Herbert. 1986. *Symbolic Interactionism*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Branthwaite, Alan. 2002. "Investigating the Power of Imagery in Marketing Communication: Evidence-Based Techniques." *Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal* 5(3):164-171.
- Coemans, Sara and Karin Hannes. 2017. "Researchers Under the Spell of the Arts: Two Decades of Using Arts-Based Methods in Community-Based Inquiry with Vulnerable Populations." *Educational Research Review* 22:34-49.
- CohenMiller, Anna. 2018. "Creating a Participatory Arts-Based Online Focus Group: Highlighting the Transition from DocMama to Motherscholar." *The Qualitative Report* 23(7): Article 17.
- Dunn, Victoria and Tom Mellor. 2017. "Creative, Participatory Projects with Young People: Reflections over Five Years." *Research for All* 1(2):284-299.
- Fereday, Jennifer and Eimear Muir-Cochrane. 2006. "Demonstrating Rigor Using Thematic Analysis: A Hybrid Approach of Inductive and Deductive Coding and Theme Development." *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 5(1):80-92.

- Glasius, Marlies et al. 2018. *Research, Ethics, and Risk in the Authoritarian Field*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Harper, Douglas. 2002. "Talking about Pictures: A Case for Photo Elicitation." *Visual Studies* 17(1):13-26.
- Hájek, Martin et al. 2019. "Uneasy Neoliberal Governance in Low-Trust Society: Barriers to Responsibilisation in the Czech Republic." *Sociological Research Online* 25(2):201-218.
- Janenova, Saltanat. 2019. "The Boundaries of Research in an Authoritarian State." *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406919876469>.
- Koch, Natalie. 2013. "Introduction—Field Methods in 'Closed Contexts': Undertaking Research in Authoritarian States and Places." *Area* 45(4):390-395.
- Lee, Raymond M. 1993. *Doing Research on Sensitive Topics*. London: Sage.
- Martin, Roger and Yolande Strengers. 2022. "Playing Games with the Weather: A Card Game Method for Engaging Households in Conversations about Renewable Energy Generation and Everyday Practice." *Geographical Research* 60(4):575-588.
- Morgenbesser, Lee and Meredith L. Weiss. 2018. "Survive and Thrive: Field Research in Authoritarian Southeast Asia." *Asian Studies Review* 42(3):385-403.
- Parker, Lee D. 2009. "Photo-Elicitation: An Ethno-Historical Accounting and Management Research Prospect." *Accounting, Auditing and Accountability Journal* 22(7):1111-1129.
- Porr, Caroline et al. 2011. "The Evocative Power of Projective Techniques for the Elicitation of Meaning." *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 10(1):30-41.
- Rohava, Maryia. 2018. "Identity in an Autocratic State. Or What Belarusians Talk about When They Talk about National Identity." *East European Politics and Societies* 32(3). doi: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0888325417741343>.
- Rowley, Jennifer et al. 2012. "Using Card-Based Games to Enhance the Value of Semi-Structured Interviews." *International Journal of Market Research* 54(1):93-110.
- Rudnik, Lesia. 2021. "Naskol'ko bezopasno osusaut seba belarusy za granicej? – Centr novyh idej [How Safe Do Belarusians Feel Abroad? Center for New Ideas]." Retrieved August 25, 2023 (<https://newbelarus.vision/belarusians-safety-abroad/>).
- Smith, Laura G. E., Emma F. Thomas, and Craig McGarty. 2014. "We Must Be the Change We Want to See in the World': Integrating Norms and Identities through Social Interaction." *Political Psychology* 36(5):543-557.
- Smithson, Janet. 2000. "Using and Analysing Focus Groups: Limitations and Possibilities." *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 3(2):103-119.
- Vila, Pablo. 2013. "The Importance of Photo-Interviewing as a Research Method in the Study of Identity Construction Processes: An Illustration from the U.S.–Mexico Border." *Visual Anthropology* 26(1):51-68.

Citation

Kovtiak, Elisabeth. 2024. "Game-Based Technique for Studying Identity Change in Disturbed Communities." *Qualitative Sociology Review* 20(4):60-76. Retrieved Month, Year (http://www.qualitativesociologyreview.org/ENG/archive_eng.php). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18778/1733-8077.20.4.03>