

**Exploring the Meaning of Participation in a Community Art Project:  
A Case Study on the Seeming Project**

### Abstract

In Australia, community art has drawn significant research attention in regard to its potential as a community development strategy. Despite the fact that researchers have presented evidence for the positive developmental outcomes of participation in community art projects, a gap remains in understanding how and why people's participation in a community art project can lead to those positive outcomes. Aiming to respond to this gap, this research explored the meaning of participation in a community art project from the vantage point of the people who experience it. Ten participants were interviewed about their participation in a community art project (The Seeming) held in Bendigo, Australia. Following thematic analyses we found that participation in arts practice facilitates positive developmental outcomes as it encourages dialogues and initiates the emergence of critical reflexivity among the participants. By participating in the project, the participants were exposed to stories, individuals and community groups that they never have contact with before. Later, this exposure encourages the participants to develop critical review on their previous knowledge and beliefs about themselves, others and their community. The finding highlighted the potential of community arts projects for promoting the creation of new relationships and new stories about community.

*Key words:* community art; participation; conscientization

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In Australia, community art has been positively valued as a community development strategy (Binns, 1991; Hawkins, 1993; McQueen-Thompson & Ziguras, 2002, 2004; Mills & Brown, 2004 ). Community art is a form of cultural practice in which art is produced and used by local people within their communities as an instrument for social change (Adams & Goldbard, 2002; Fotheringham, 1987; Kelly, 1984). As a community development strategy, arts practice has been used in various areas such as health, ecologically sustainable development, public housing and place, rural revitalization, community strengthening, active citizenship, social inclusion and cultural diversity (Mills & Brown, 2004). This article aims to contribute to the study of community art by bringing a social psychological discussion about people's experiences of participation in a community art project.

Historically, the community art movement in Australia found its momentum in the social and political struggles of the 1960s and 1970s (Kirby, 1991). But, the development of a community art movement in Australia had been underway long before this time. The idea of using community art as a social movement to organize and consciously engage ordinary people in cultural life has its origin in the radical movements of the socialist factions in Australia. Since the late 19th century, this political faction started to think that making cultural resources more accessible for all classes, especially for the marginalized, is an essential part of creating a more egalitarian, just and humane society (Kirby, 1991). However, later in its development, the profile of community art in Australia was shaped by the government's cultural policy. Since the 1970s, under the Liberal government, community art practice was constructed around the idea of recognizing the plural cultures that characterized contemporary Australia and the idea of using cultural practice as a way to foster a sense of community. This became a period when the practice of community art was oriented toward the framework of community development (Hawkins, 1993; Mills, 1991).

In Australia, the use of community art as a community development strategy has received substantial research attention in recent times (see Centre for Popular Education, 2002). The report prepared by the Centre for Popular Education shows that there have been many studies investigating the effectiveness of community art as a community development strategy. Yet, while researchers have presented evidence for the positive developmental impacts of involvement in community art projects (e.g., Flowers & McEwen, 2004; McQueen-Thompson & Ziguras, 2002, 2004; Mills & Brown, 2004; Sonn, Drew & Kasat,

2002; Williams, 1996), a gap remains in the understanding of the social and psychological processes by which participation in community art projects leads to positive psychological and social outcomes (Putland, 2008). Therefore, by exploring the meaning of participation in a community art project from the vantage point of the participants, we seek to investigate how involvement in a community arts project may promote positive psychological and social outcomes.

### *Studying the Meaning of Participation in Community Arts*

Along with its increasing popularity as a community development strategy, the practice of community art has evoked ongoing research attention. Generally, studies in this area are oriented toward providing evidence of the developmental impacts of community arts projects (e.g., Adams & Goldbard, 2000; Flowers & McEwen, 2004; Matarasso, 1997; McQueen-Thompson & Ziguras, 2002, 2004; Mills & Brown, 2004; Williams, 1996). The increasing interest of local governments and funding agencies toward the use of community art as a community development strategy has raised questions about its effectiveness. It results in a body of literature that is focused on providing evidence of the developmental outcomes of community art projects both at the personal and communal levels (Matarasso, 1997; McQueen-Thompson & Ziguras, 2002, 2004; Mills & Brown, 2004; Williams, 1996). Generally, the studies are intended to inform policy makers about the long term investment value of community arts.

Studies about the developmental impacts of community arts have raised discussions on how evidence of impact is collected and assessed. While studies on community arts have provided wider body of evidence, there are questions about the reliance on anecdotal accounts, selective case studies and small sample sizes (McQueen-Thompson & Ziguras, 2002; Putland, 2008). The use of anecdotal accounts are considered less convincing as it potentially becomes insufficient or overstated (McQueen-Thompson & Ziguras, 2002). Also, Putland (2008) notes that the emphasis on ‘evidence-based’ studies may “risks reducing the value and meaning of arts and cultural activities to narrowly defined functions, whereby art is seen as merely instrumental to prescribed social outcomes and public policy agenda”(p. 266) Similarly, McQueen-Thompson and Ziguras (2002) suggest that future research on community arts needs to focus more on the community arts’ participants’ “ways of evaluating their experience” rather than the needs of policy makers (p. 12).

This brief review suggests that studying the meaning of participation in community arts from the participants’ point of view is a relevant area of inquiry. Informed by the

literature above, we were interested in exploring the meanings of participation in a community arts project from the perspective of the participants. We were particularly interested in the meaning of participation and the implications of participation for how people viewed themselves and others. By understanding the participants' meaning of participation, we aim to outline the socio-psychological processes through which the experience of participating in community arts is translated into positive developmental outcomes.

Exploring the underlying socio-psychological processes of participation is considered important in the study of social psychology as it may describe the relationship between individual and society which is the central quest of social psychology (Campbell & Jovchelovitch, 2000). Based on this premise, Campbell and Jovchelovitch (2000) propose their theory of the social psychology of participation. Drawing on the Paulo Freire's (1972) notion of conscientisation, they view community participation as a social achievement rather than as a given social state, which involves the process of developing a community's critical awareness about its members and their living condition. Further, they argue that the development of community awareness involves the interaction of three social psychological elements which are social identity, social representation and power. Linking the three concepts, they explain that the act of participating may facilitate the emergence of community awareness as it provides an opportunity for "a community to state and negotiate identities and social representation which are, in turn, shaped and constrained by the material and symbolic power relations in which they are located" (p. 267-268). The link between participation, community awareness and social identity is discussed further in several other studies (e.g., Campbell and McClean, 2002; Campbell, Cornish and Mclean, 2004; Cornish, 2006; Siddiquee and Kagan, 2006; Ramella and De La Cruz, 2006). These studies underline the idea that the meaningfulness of community participation for those who are involved in it is related to its ability to foster individual and social awareness about social identities and social realities. Informed by these studies, we will use the findings of our study to reflect on the theory of the social psychology of participation.

### *The Seeming Project – Bendigo: History, Identity, Culture and Belonging*

The Seeming project is a community art project organized and facilitated by a Melbourne based theatre company called The Torch Project. The Seeming project took place in Bendigo, a big country town, in the north west of Melbourne, Victoria, from 2004 - 2005. Bendigo is one of the oldest towns in Victoria. As a town, it was built during the gold rush, following 'white settlement' in the area. The traditional owners and inhabitants of the land on

which Bendigo now exists are the Aboriginal people known as the Jaara Jaara people (Bendigo Tourism & City of Greater Bendigo, 2006). Today Bendigo is a country town made up of mainly people with Anglo Celtic backgrounds. In the 2006 Census, there were 81,939 persons resident in Bendigo with Indigenous persons comprising 1.1 percentage of Bendigo's total population. Meanwhile, overseas-born persons made up 5.7 percent of the total population. Most of the overseas-born population were born in England (1.7%) New Zealand (0.6%), Scotland and the Netherlands (0.3%) (ABS, 2006).

Within The Torch Project itself, The Seeming is one among several other community art projects that come under a program called 'Re-Igniting Community' (RIC). Based on an evolving community cultural development process that began in 1999, RIC is a community building initiative that uses arts to engage diverse communities in a process of making art with professionals to grapple with issues of *history, culture, identity and belonging* (Flowers & McEwen, 2004; The Torch Project, 2005). Between 1999 to 2006, The Torch has worked with 25 local communities around regional and metropolitan Victoria blending art and community building strategies. In general, the aim of each RIC project is to increase local capacity to lead and manage culturally diverse communities (The Torch Project, 2005).

The Seeming project was the major Re-Igniting Community project for 2005. The company worked with the communities in and around Bendigo for almost two years, resulting in increased engagement in the arts and a play called The Seeming. This project was developed in partnership with, the City of Greater Bendigo, the Bendigo and District Aboriginal Co-Op (BDAC) and St. Lukes (a local NGO which took a role as the local coordinator of the project).

The play was performed not only in Bendigo, but also in several regional communities around Bendigo. It involved 125 performers. Most of them were local community members. Seven local artists were involved and together with two professional artists from The Torch they made the core cast. The performance also involved Indigenous ceremonies and dances. The Bendigo Pacific Islands Association dancers and the Central Victorian Women's choir joined for the final shows. The project as a whole involved 26 children. Over the three week tour, The Seeming drew almost two and a half thousand audiences (The Torch Project, 2005).

The Seeming tells about a mythical town called Dinkum. Dinkum is portrayed as an old gold mining town. The drama in The Seeming is developed around the plan of re-opening the mine and how the town becomes divided between those who support and those who are against the plan. Not only that, apparently, the plan to re-open the gold mine opened up an untold (hi)story about the town. According to legend, Sir Richard Dink long ago discovered

the fabled Dinkum Gold Seam. One hundred and fifty years ago, Richard was the Chief Magistrate and a generally important person of Dinkum. He was a highly articulate, charming, learned man who liked to get his own way. It was Richard who allegedly discovered the fabled gold reef. The alternative story is that, 150 years ago, the reef was discovered by his Indigenous 'native policeman', Billy Birandee. Billy knew his rights and could claim the gold found. In a rage Richard killed Billy and it is seen by Sun Li, a Chinese miner from another field. Richard solves this by accusing Sun Li of the murder and, as Magistrate, had Sun Li hung. It is the consequences of this untold (hi)story that becomes the main drama in *The Seeming*. It is manifested in the tensions, confusion, rumours, and humour that developed among the current descendants of the first generation of Dinkum in the way they react to the plan of re-opening the mine.

To some extent, the story mirrored Bendigo's history as a town in which goldmining was a defining historical episode. An old puppet head (mining headframe above the shaft) located in the center of the town now is one of Bendigo's historical landmarks. However, the meaning and significance of this historical episode was experienced differently by the Indigenous people and the 'European settlement'. How Bendigo as a community defines its identity is influenced by how this version of history is constructed and negotiated. Given this background, presenting *The Seeming* was an invitation to the community to re-look at how the history of the region had been officially written and the implications for different people from different groups in the community.

### **Method**

We developed the research methodology by adopting the general principles of qualitative research. In general, qualitative researchers are concerned with meaning. "They are interested in how people make sense of the world and how they experience events" (Willig, 2001, p. 9). This general characteristic complements the research aim as we were interested in exploring the meanings of participation in a community arts project from the perspective of the participants.

### *Research Process*

This research process started when we contacted The Torch project in 2005 and stated our interest to do a study on one of The Torch's community art projects. From this initial contact, The Torch project recommended us to do study on *The Seeming* project as it was the latest project that they had just finished in 2005. There had been studies on The Torch's

previous projects (e.g. Flower & McEwen, 2004) but there was not any for The Seeming. Following several initial discussions with The Torch project we were connected with St Luke's, a non-government organization that became the local partner of The Torch project. Later, St Luke's facilitated access to the local community members who were involved in the project.

### *Participants*

After approval was received from the Victoria University Ethics Committee and St Luke's Bendigo, interviewing of participants commenced in July 2006. With the assistance of St Luke's, we sent the invitation by mail to 25 community dwellers who were volunteered in The Seeming to participate in the study. They were involved in the project either as steering committee members, performers or audiences. Eight women and two men replied to the invitation. Based on the contact list for those involved in the project it was evident that the entire project involved more women than men. The participants' ages ranged between 30 to 60 years. Participants were employed in different professions including, for example Teaching, Arts, some worked in a government Department and, others stayed at home parents. Table one contains information about participants including pseudonyms, ethnic heritage and roles in the project.

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### *Interview Process*

Interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview guide. The formulation of the questions was guided by the conceptual background of The Seeming project as developed by The Torch project. The Seeming project was conceptualized to cover four themes, *i.e.*, history, identity, culture and belonging. These four themes were elaborated in the interview questions. In term of the story performed in the play, for example, participants were asked about the meaning of the story for them and what story meant in terms of the way they experienced their community. Participants were also asked how they experienced the project as a whole, what they learnt from their involvement in the project and how it affected the way they feel about their community and their connections within the community. Each interview was conducted face- to- face at a time and place convenient to the participant and lasted between 30 to 60 minutes. All the interviews were recorded using a tape recorder with



permission from the participants. Line by line transcription was made following each interview.

### *Data Analysis*

We used thematic qualitative analysis as outlined by Charmaz (2000, 2003) and Willig, (2001). This involved line by line reading of the verbatim text, coding and categorization. The coding process was done without applying a preconceived category or code to the data. Instead the codes used to organize the data were created by defining what we understood from the data, that is, the codes developed emerged as we scrutinized the data and defined meanings within them (Charmaz, 2000, 2003; Willig, 2001).

After finishing the coding process, the next phase of data analysis was to create conceptual categories or themes. This is a process of creating a major concept or label that groups together instances of events, processes or occurrences which share central features or characteristics with one another (Browne, 2004; Willig, 2001). This process was followed by developing analysis for each theme.

### **Findings and Interpretation**

We set out to develop an understanding of the meanings people construct about participation in a community arts project. Data analysis led to the construction of three inter-related themes that describe how the participants valued their experiences with The Seeming project. The creation of settings in which people can come together is a key aspect of the arts project and participants valued the project for its ability to: provide a space and voice for the marginalised, create social connection, and challenge prejudices and stereotypes. For some participants participation promoted a sense of worth.

### *The Meaning of Participation*

We started the study with an assumption that the power of this kind of community art project is in the story performed in the play. We saw the story as an invitation for people to re-look at the history of the region and to reflect on the different ways of looking at the town's history – silenced and invisible versions of history. The findings, however, show that it is not the story that is central for the participants. In the participants' accounts, the value and meaning of participating in such project is mostly associated with the process of actually being together with other people in their community, especially in the context where interactions across social groups are very limited. For the participants the value of this project

lay in its ability to bring together diverse people in the community. For them, this togetherness is in itself sending a strong social message which perhaps is stronger than the messages embodied by the story performed in the play. The quotation below illustrates this point:

I don't know what they [audiences] actually get out of the story. But I think everyone would realize, how big and rich it was to have so many people, different ages and cultures, how difficult that is to bring a project like that together...the acting in it was good, the story was good. But, the best thing about it was to me, was that it's able to be done and to bring all that together, those cultures and intergenerational – Catherine (Anglo-Australian)

In other words, what was valued by the participants was the process of creating a sense of 'we-ness' between different groups of people which are distanced or disconnected to each other before. The quotation from Ericka below illustrates this point:

People embraced this [The Seeming] as, "no matter where we come from we are all the same"...that's the first time around Bendigo. People from overseas are stuck in their own little group, like we have a Dutch Australian Club here in Bendigo, we got German Club in Bendigo, we got Italian Club in Bendigo, we got the Chinese Association, we got the Philipino Association and they are just stuck in their own little group. This [The Seeming] brought them out as a community – Ericka (Anglo-Australian)

In the participants' account, it is through the conversations and the dialogues which were developed along the project, their togetherness was shaped. Later, this togetherness made it possible for the participants to have new or different experiences and understandings about themselves, other people and their community. Among those new or different experiences is the opportunity to voice and listen to stories about the community which are not widely accessible or recognised. For example, the history of indigenous people in the region, the story of elders and young people who felt disengaged from the community, and the story of those from ethnic minorities who felt isolated were surfaced.

#### *Giving voice to the silenced*

...that to me it is what The Seeming was, you think you know the dynamic of the town... and all the rest of it...but under the ground there are all these unresolved issues from loss of culture, loss of land, loss of everything in justice you know...that's to me what it was about – Joss (Indigenous Australian)

As illustrated by this quotation, giving voice to the silenced means that, for some of the participants, The Seeming made the invisible visible – it surfaced issues of dispossession

and loss of culture. The participants valued The Seeming for its ability to highlight, groups' of people, local histories and cultures that had not been represented. Participation in The Seeming facilitated awareness for some participants about hardship that the Indigenous people have endured. One of the examples is reflected when an Indigenous elder who participated in the project shared with the group that she never had connection with her Indigenous roots, not until she was 42 years old because she was separated from her family at a very young age.

Another participant's comment illustrated how he experienced The Seeming as a way to reignite what has been 'missing' from his culture and to reclaim its place in the community:

...we used to have ceremonies when everyone comes together and meet and communicate and everyone know each other business...that's what has been missing for a while. And now when we had something like that [The Seeming] come along, you got the elders coming from different areas and the kids come and sitting down with their grand parents and watching it for, you know things like that for the first time...it was a great thing to bring us together...it brought back a lot of the communication in the community... - Bob (Indigenous-Australian)

The value and meaning of community art for a local community is often linked to its ability to reignite people's ties with their local or traditional cultural heritage that has been dismissing because of the increasing domination of global culture (Haedicke & Nellhaus, 2001). Nevertheless, given the Indigenous background of the participants, it seems that such reflections are not only telling about the effect of the increasing domination of global culture which is eroding traditional communities' connection, especially young peoples' connection to their cultural roots. Often, for Indigenous people, the process of cultural globalization is more a factor that may complicate or perpetuate their sense of loss for their tradition and culture which was started earlier since the history of colonization (Smith, 1999). This may explain why the two Indigenous participants above valued the Seeming as an opportunity to reignite their connection with their culture and history.

### *Creating social connection*

Another enriching experience valued by the participants as a result of 'coming together' as a group was the opportunity to make connections with people from various groups in the community with whom they never have contact before. This finding supports previous studies in this area which note that facilitating 'social connection' is the most commonly reported impact of community art (Flowers & McEwen, 2004; Matarasso, 1997; Mills & Brown, 2004; Williams, 1996). Participating in the project facilitated social

connections among individuals and social groups in the community who were previously isolated from each other. For example, Catherine recalled The Seeming as a way to establish an intergenerational connection between her as an elder and the young people in her community:

People say to introduce children to different cultures, but it's just as difficult for people my age. We are not going out where these things are happening. Children have that opportunity at school because they are mixing with others. But older people like me don't have that opportunity...I don't really interact with younger people in my own community...So, it's good being part of that [The Seeming] as well...it [The Seeming] gives you some way of connecting with those young people – Catherine (Anglo-Australian)

Besides intergenerational contact, facilitating intercultural contact is a feature within this theme that is highlighted by most of The Seeming participants' interviewed. For example, Terry (Asian) stated:

...I have never worked with any Aborigine. I have been in this country for more than 30 years, but I have never worked with the so called the Indigenous people. This is my very first time having such close contact with the Indigenous people and so, I've been in the cultural desert for all these years you know...I knew nothing of them, only what I read in the papers and what other people tell me. So, I find that it's such a privilege...it's actually very enriching for me

These findings support the idea of community art creating a space for people to reclaim a history and make a connection with the past. As stated by Rappaport and Thomas (1996), “[r]estorations of community histories are important for forming and informing the human subject and developing community solidarity” (p. 330). In the case of The Seeming, participation in a community art project has facilitated the participants to explore and listen to different stories about the community. In turn, by engaging neglected voices and stories, dialogues are fostered. It is the dialogues that encourage people to affirm each other's cultural identity which often becomes the basis for social exchange (Haedicke & Nellhaus, 2001; Sonn *et al.*, 2002).

### *Challenging prejudice and stereotypes*

It is commonly believed that one way to dismiss prejudice and stereotypes is by making direct contact with those one has prejudices or stereotypes. This commonsense view seems to be evident in this study. Having social connections with people from diverse groups has enabled the participants not only to acquire 'new' understandings about other people or groups but also encouraged them to re-look in a critical way at their 'old' understandings about other people or groups. It is here that the participants were facilitated to question the

taken for granted way of thinking about themselves, other and their community. For example, one participant experienced The Seeming as an opportunity to break down barriers which discouraged young people from community involvement:

...with teenagers involved, I think break down barriers because normally teenagers uninvolved and adult don't normally hang out with teenagers. So, age didn't really matter. That was probably the most important thing in the whole play was that age didn't matter – Miranda (Anglo-Australian)

While based on observations about school students' learning, Aron (Anglo-Australian) offered the following:

...from my conversation with the students who were involved for them, one of the really good things was getting to spend a lot of time with Aboriginal people and also with one of the actors who is Chinese and that seems to breakdown a lot of stereotypes about, you know, about Asian people, about Indigenous people, because they actually had, you know, worked with them all the time and get to speak to them a lot

Breaking down stereotypes about people from a particular group is not the only feature that is represented in this theme. The theme also tells about breaking down the pessimism that some of the participants have about the possibility of having a multi-culture and intergenerational project. Having a community project, which involved people from various cultures and generations, is a rare event in the town. Therefore, the meaningfulness of The Seeming is framed in its ability to breakdown the common believe that it was impossible to have such a project. Joss's (Indigenous Australian) comment illustrates this point:

...the things [previous events before The Seeming] that were happening, were happening more in isolation, not involving the wider community...people might think, "O, well, this isn't for black *fellas* or the other way around, well this isn't for white *fellas*" you know, ... I think it [The Seeming] really just brought out how diverse the community is

In this account, it is the dialogues or the 'coming together' aspects of the project that enabled people to challenge the prejudices and stereotypes they have about others and their community. As noted by Ramella and De La Cruz (2000), this current study also finds that the inter-subjective and communicative aspects of participatory process have enabled the process of reflexivity among the participants which in turn enabled them to have a critical perception on their world. It is this critical perception that eventually encourages the participants to question prejudices and stereotypes (Haedicke & Nellhaus, 2001). This may explain why some of the participants emphasized the importance of the process of 'being together' more than the art work itself.

*Encouraging personal change*

In addition, some participants reported that the ‘coming together’ aspect of the project enabled them to challenge not only the way they look at others but also how they see themselves. This was represented by the participants’ who valued The Seeming as a community project that gave them opportunities to build their skills and capacity. This opportunity, in turn, can stimulate positive personal changes that bring confidence and pride.

The types of personal change that were experienced by The Seeming participants were varied. It can be small such as learning more about another culture’s rituals through experiencing The Seeming as a defining experience. This is evident in Bob’s reflection:

It was such a wonderful, wonderful experience, and I don’t know how you could talk about it really. For me personally, *yeah*, just give me more self confidence in what I done, you know. At that stage when these fellows grabbed the whole of me, I was in the bad depression stage, I was on medication and all these type of stuff, you know... and *yeah*, The Seeming helped me get through all of that... It meant a world to me to meet these people.

The experience above shows that participation in The Seeming encouraged the participant not only to question the way he defines and portrays other people but also the way he defines and portrays himself. One ironic consequence of being marginalised is that people start to internalize the way they have been unjustly portrayed in that marginalisation process (Campbell & McLean, 2002; Moane, 2003). Therefore part of the meaningfulness of The Seeming was in its ability to make people problematise the way they identify themselves. It is this point that is captured within the theme of ‘encouraging personal changes’. One participant’s reflection is underlining this point:

...it brought up, it brought huge self esteem back in to many human beings that I know that didn’t really have self esteem and confidence and that they can actually play a role in the community and succeed. So that’s what I love about the whole Seeming play... I think that was the role of the whole play was to give people self esteem, confidence and be happy about their own culture – Miranda (Anglo-Australian)

The findings of this study resonate with findings in previous studies that have shown that community art can have positive effects in creating social connection, addressing social barriers and promoting personal development (e.g., Matarasso, 1997; McQueen-Thompson & Ziguras, 2002, 2004; Mills & Brown, 2004; Williams, 1996).

## Discussion

In this study, we aimed to explore the meaning of participation in a community art project from the vantage point of the local people who experience it. From these personal meanings we would like to outline the processes whereby people's participation in a community art project facilitates the emergence of positive psychological and social outcomes.

The findings suggest that the process starts when participation in the art project provides the participants with an opportunity to create togetherness which facilitated the development of critical dialogues among them. Through dialogues the neglected experiences and stories in the community are reignited. Exposure to and engaging with neglected and invisible experiences and stories facilitates social connections among the participants. It gives them a base to develop confidence and a sense of 'we-ness' as a community because it disrupts the intercultural and intergenerational gap in the community. It is evident in the participants' reflection in which they shared that by participating in *The Seeming* they were able to have contact with people from different cultural or age groups for the first time. This experience opened an opportunity to share experiences and stories and feel a sense of connection as a community.

Later, by having connections with people from different groups and being exposed to the alternative narratives, the participants are facilitated to develop critical reflexivity about themselves and their community. The experience encouraged the participants to start questioning the taken for granted beliefs and knowledge they had been accustomed to. It is evident in the participants' reflection in which they shared that participation in *The Seeming* has facilitated them to breakdown the stereotypes and prejudices they have about people from particular culture or age groups. This is akin to problematization "where the people involved are forced to review their actions and opinions about daily life events considered not only as ordinary circumstances, but also as inevitable ..." (Montero, 2009, p. 80).

Critical reflexivity fuels the process of identity transformation as it enables the participants to problematise the way they had been defining and representing both themselves and their community. It is here that we support the theory of the social psychology of participation proposed by Campbell and Jovchelovitch (2000). Although we did not explicitly consider the concept of social identity and social representation in our analysis, we found that the meaningfulness of community participation for those who are involved in it is related to

its ability to foster individual and social awareness. The emergence of this awareness is facilitated by dialogues in which people may assert and negotiate their identity and the way they have been socially represented.

Based on this finding, we concur that 'conscientization' is central to the meaningfulness of people's participation in a community art project. The concept of conscientization explains that community participation may provide a collaborative learning environment which could initiate critical dialogues and awareness among individuals about the conditions that shape their life experiences and their community (Daniels, 2003; Freire 1972, see Montero, 2009, for a discussion of liberation methods). This critical awareness in turn may provide the impetus to take critical action to change those conditions.

The development of collective critical awareness is a process which takes time to evolve along the period of participation. Given this it would have been ideal to follow participants through the entire project. A limitation of the current study is the fact that it was undertaken months after the project took place. This decreases the possibility to observe in more detail the processes of personal and collective identity transformation. Therefore we suggest that future projects may benefit from researchers engaging alongside communities and external agents and documenting the processes of how participants build dialogues among them as part of the process of community arts practice from the inception through to the end of projects. Nevertheless, this retrospective study has afforded the opportunity for participants to reflect on the meanings they derived from participation in a community arts project. We have brought community arts practice into conversation with the social psychology of participation and highlighted the potential of community arts projects for disrupting taken for granted ways of living and creating spaces for constructing new relationships and new stories about community.

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Table 1. Participant roles in the project and ethnic heritage

Pseudonym	Ethnic heritage	Role in Project
Aaron	Anglo-Australian	Steering Committee & supporting teacher for students involved in the project
Bob	Indigenous Australian	Actor
Catherine	Anglo Australian	Steering Committee
Erika	Anglo Australian	Supporter for young people involved in the project
Joan	Anglo Australian	Supporting teacher for students involved in the project
Joss	Indigenous Australian	Singer
Julia	Anglo Australian	Steering Committee
Miranda	Anglo Australian	Steering Committee
Sylvia	Indigenous Australian	Steering Committee
Terry	Asian	Actor