

The background of the entire page is a light beige or cream-colored map. On the left side, there is a vertical strip of the map that is highlighted with a semi-transparent blue and purple overlay, showing a grid-like pattern of streets and blocks. The rest of the map is faded and shows a network of roads and geographical features.

# BETTER

A FREEFORM EXPERIMENT  
IN CONSENSUS REALITY

# PROJECT SUMMARY

BETTER is a freeform game meant to explore themes of group dynamics, social pressure, and consensus reality. Each player is part of an experiment, testing a new therapy protocol that allows group opinions to shape individual reality.

BETTER requires four players and takes about an hour and a half to play.

## STUDY DESIGN

BETTER was written by Laurel Halbany. It is inspired in part by the Asch Experiments on conformity.

## ETHICAL OVERSIGHT

Research projects involving human beings should be careful to protect the mental and physical welfare of the participants. So should games.

Have an out-of-character, pre-game discussion about physical and emotional safety before play starts. Discuss what signals or code words (like “brake” and “cut”) players will use to signal that interactions need to slow down or even stop immediately. Some groups may prefer to have a list of topics that will be off limits in-game for discussion or character background.

In-game, the experiment protocol strictly prohibits physical contact between subjects. There should be no reason for players to touch.

While the game assumes an isolated, locked room where food and drink are prohibited, the players should feel free to pause the game if they have to get some water, take a bio break or otherwise attend to their well-being.

## PREPARATION

Print and cut out the Character Cards and the Attitude Cards at the end of these rules. Arrange the Attitude Cards into four stacks, face down, with two Soft and two Hard cards in each stack. A little later, these will be distributed to the players so they can build their characters.

Arrange four chairs so that they all face inward toward a central point. The chairs should be equally spaced, with enough room to let the players get up and switch chairs. Do not arrange the chairs around a table; the area in the middle should be empty, so there is no physical barrier to act as a buffer.

## METHODOLOGY

The game is played in four rounds. Each player has the same character =throughout all four rounds. However, the *roles* played by the characters change each round. These roles are determined which chair they are sitting in. When a character moves into a different chair, they are assigned the role associated with that chair.

At the beginning of the game, choose one chair; whoever is sitting in that chair at the beginning of the round takes the role of the Subject. The chair



directly across from it is for the Peer Facilitator. The chairs to either side are occupied by the Examiners. The roles assigned to these chairs stay constant throughout the game. When a person changes chairs at the close of a round, the role they will play in the next round also changes.

At the end of a round, everyone gets up and moves to the chair to their left. The Peer Facilitator and the Subject then become Examiners for the next round, while the Examiners become Peer Facilitator and Subject. Over the course of the game, everyone takes the role of the Peer Facilitator once, the Subject once, and an Examiner twice.

Hand out the Character Cards. Give everyone time to look over their cards, make choices about their background, and think about a character concept that fits the broad strokes of the character.

- **Patients** have a problematic belief or emotion. The character may or may not know that the belief or emotion is problematic.
- **Participants** do not have a problematic belief or emotion, or if they do, it's not the reason they are here.
- **Voluntary** means the character is here of their own free will.
- **Involuntary** means a person or circumstance (other than a problematic mental state) forced them to be here.

Each card lists two pairs of opposed statements. The player should choose

one statement from each pair. This is the character's **background**.

Next, the player should choose a belief or emotion, in tune with their character's status, that will be addressed when they are a Subject. For example, a Participant/Involuntary may have committed a crime and joined the experiment as a condition of parole, but believes their crime was justified. Another example might be a Patient/Voluntary who believes their enjoyment in harming others is immoral. While a player may choose multiple emotional threads for their character, ultimately only one will be addressed during their time in the Subject role, and it is up to the group which one that is.

After they have made their choices, distribute the Attitude Cards, which describe the character's approach to solving other people's problems. Hand each player a stack of Attitude Cards face down, making sure that players sitting across from each other get different stacks (i.e. one gets a stack of Soft cards and one gets a stack of Hard cards); this ensures that in every round, there will be one Examiner with a Soft approach and one Examiner with a Hard approach. Each player should pick one of the two cards and give the other back to you. These cards are kept secret; the players should not tell each other what they chose.

Once everyone is seated and has finished developing a character concept, it's time to begin the experiment. Explain to your players that the experiment is being conducted in room which they cannot leave before the experiment is over. Shortly, a researcher will give them instructions through a speaker.

Then read the 'Instructions' section to them out loud, pausing where indicated, and stating the 'name' of the character sitting in the Subject chair (Twill, Loden, Madras or Voile) where indicated. Once you have finished, the game begins.

# INSTRUCTIONS

Welcome, and thank you for your participation.

To protect your privacy, each of you has been assigned a pseudonym for the duration of the experiment. Do not reveal your real name to any other participant or ask any other participant to tell you theirs. I will pause while you take turns telling each other your pseudonyms.

Thank you.

The experiment consists of four rounds of therapy. In each round, one of you – beginning with [NAME], will be the Subject. The person sitting across from the Subject is the Peer Facilitator. The two people sitting to either side of the Subject are the Examiners. Each round lasts no more than fifteen minutes. It is the job of the Peer Facilitator to keep time and to call the vote.

At the beginning of each round, the Subject states their name, their background, and what has led them to participate in this experiment. The Examiners may then ask the Subject whatever questions they believe are necessary to inquire about the belief or emotion, and the reasons that the



Subject holds that belief or emotion. Only the Examiners are required to ask questions, and only the Subject is required to answer them. The Peer Facilitator may not ask questions.

I will explain the voting process shortly. Before I begin, please take a deep breath, inhaling and exhaling slowly. I will pause while you do so.

Thank you. The psychoactive agent used in this experiment has been aerosolized and was introduced into the air of the experiment room approximately twenty minutes ago. It is odorless, and you will not experience any side effects for the duration of the experiment. The agent permanently alters mental and emotional states in response to consensus belief.

When the Peer Facilitator announces that time is up, the Examiners and the Peer Facilitator determine which belief or emotion held by the Subject must be resolved. Once this has been decided, the Peer Facilitator counts to three, and on “three” each participant holds out their hand to indicate their vote. An open, flat hand is “yes”; a closed fist is “no”.

A majority “yes” vote means that the Subject retains the belief or emotion. A tie, or a majority “no” vote means that the Subject rejects it, absolutely and permanently. The effects of the psychoactive agent make it impossible to reject the results of the vote. It is final, absolute and irrevocable.

At the conclusion of the vote, please stand up and move to the chair to your left. When everyone is seated, a new round begins. The experiment continues

for four rounds, so that you will each spent one round as Peer Facilitator and Subject, and two alternate rounds as Examiners.

Please be assured that your participation will be of great scientific importance. We hope and anticipate that it is also beneficial to you.

## FOLLOW-UP

After four rounds, the experiment is complete and the characters are free to leave. That is, the game ends. Take time to decompress, discuss the emotions and experiences that came up during the game. Stand up and stretch. Pass around everyone's Character Cards and Attitude Cards. Make plans to get together for your next game.

## PUBLICATION POLICY

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## **TWILL**

### **(Patient/Voluntary)**

Your reason for participating in this experiment is to seek help for a serious problem. You made the decision to participate. Feel free to choose whatever reason you believe fits your status.

I regularly spend time with my family.

or, I don't have regular contact with my family.

I have a supportive family.

or, I have an unsupportive family.

## **LODEN**

### **(Participant/Voluntary)**

You don't think anything is wrong with you. There is some other reason that you have agreed to participate in this experiment. Feel free to choose whatever reason you believe fits your status.

I have been paid to be here.

or, I am here to help with important research.

My reason for being here directly benefits me.

or, My reason for being here only benefits someone else.

## **MADRAS**

### **(Patient/Involuntary)**

You are present without your consent; some person or institution with power over you gave consent for you. Feel free to choose whatever reason you believe fits your status.

Consent to this experiment was given without my knowledge.

or, Consent to this experiment was given with my knowledge but against my will.

Whoever made this choice for me had good intentions.

or, Whoever made this choice for me acted out of bad motives.

## **VOILE**

### **(Participant/Involuntary)**

You don't think anything is wrong with you. Someone, or your circumstances, forced you to participate. Feel free to choose whatever reason you believe fits your status.

I am here because of circumstances in my life.

or, Some person or institution forced me to participate.

I regret the reasons I am here.

or, I don't regret the reasons I was forced to come here, and I'm only participating because I have no alternative.

<p>[soft]</p> <p>The best approach to helping others is making sure they feel good about themselves, and that they believe themselves to be decent people.</p>	<p>[hard]</p> <p>The best approach to helping others is making sure they take a hard, honest look at themselves.</p>
<p>[soft]</p> <p>People should face adversity only if and when they're ready, so that it doesn't overwhelm them.</p>	<p>[hard]</p> <p>People should face adversity right away, even if it's painful, so they can overcome it.</p>
<p>[soft]</p> <p>Everyone deserves a second chance.</p>	<p>[hard]</p> <p>Everyone should accept the consequences of their actions so that they'll do better next time.</p>
<p>[soft]</p> <p>People can only change when they are ready and willing to change.</p>	<p>[hard]</p> <p>People need to be encouraged, and sometimes pushed, to change.</p>