Voice

Voice is a versatile term, used in research to describe the ability, mode, and/or right for individuals or groups to make their ideas, opinions, emotions, perspectives, and needs known to others. Similarly, to voice is to make such an expression, and to give voice to is to allow or support this expression. In the domain of action research, voice becomes more than just an innate way to express oneself, but also a way to participate and engage in conversations around social justice and change.

The first voice to consider is that of the researcher, whose feelings, experiences, interests, and positionalities cannot be divorced from the topic of study, and indeed, are often the basis for an inquiry. Most action research involves a measure of relationship and trust wherein both the researcher and those researched must allow each other into their lives in order to explore an issue together fully. The researcher must be aware of his or her own voice in order to remain transparent in advocating for the voices of others.

Voice can be a profound source of empowerment for all involved, but particularly for those parties whose voices have traditionally been marginalized, ignored, or completely silenced. Voice is a necessary aspect of agency, or the capacity to make choices and act for oneself, which for many has also been compromised. Action researchers who wish to validate the experiences
and “ways of knowing” of the participants in an inquiry are first tasked with uncovering the true voices of those participants, which are all too often influenced by undercurrents of power and privilege, cultural barriers, and similar inhibitors. Moreover, they must know where to find those voices.

Voice comes in many forms and serves various purposes, from personal to collective, private to activist. It is embodied not only in words, but also in silence, abstinence, action, demonstration, appearance, artistic expression, etc. It is not limited to traditional avenues of speech and writing, but can also be found through narratives and storytelling, photovoice (the use of photography to document one’s perspectives), inclusive debate and dialogue, and anywhere else individuals or groups have the opportunity to express themselves by whatever means necessary, and without limitation or judgment. There are voices of all colors, shapes and sizes, diverse in race, class, gender, age, and ability; and there are voices that require advocacy, such as those of the dependent and/or incapacitated, or the “voices” of the natural environment, non-human beings, and other entities or causes that need an interpreter. Finally, not all voices and expressions of voice can be objectively separated from one another, as they inherently co-exist in an ever-changing, interconnected web of stimuli and experience, of history and possibility.

The action researcher must consider all these facets of voice within the scope of a study. As a starting point, this entry will further explore issues of voice with regard to power dynamics, authenticity and ethics, and their accompanying implications for action research.

**Power Dynamics and Voice**

The main questions one must ask in regard to voice are: whose voices are being heard, who is listening, and why? In research, a voice is representative of something particularly intriguing to
the researcher, and is likely characterized by some sort of “otherness,” or previously misunderstood or missing perspective. Because power dynamics affect whether voices are heard and how they are portrayed or perceived, they also determine the hierarchy of knowledge within communities, institutions, and society. Those voices with the most power get heard, and additionally have the capacity to control how other voices are represented, which can often be worse than silencing these voices, and typically serves to reinforce unequal power structures. For many, fear of reprimand or retaliation has stifled their voices, so that their perspectives are only partly knowable, or worse, completely inaccessible.

Power also affects whose opinions and ideas matter and whose do not, such as when weight is given to the words of academics and other “experts,” but not to those of the population experiencing a subject first-hand. Action researchers, on the other hand, aim to use their scholarly influence to give voice back to the people in their research, recognizing that there are multiple truths, multiple ways of knowing beyond their own, and therefore seeking research conditions that foster visibility and safety for the expression of these alternative voices.

Participatory action research, for example, includes community-based “co-researchers” in a study, wherein the subject population of an inquiry is given power to co-create the questions, methods, data collection, analysis, and action of that inquiry. Overall, fair representation and breaking the barriers of hierarchical influence are vital to overcoming the adverse effects of power dynamics on voice. Research participants must be empowered to aspire, to be leaders, and to effect institutional, societal and political change for themselves.
Authenticity of Voice

Once a voice is allowed to surface, it becomes important to ensure the authenticity of that voice for research purposes. Culture, education, media, politics, etc. are highly influential and can either support or alter one’s authentic voice. This is not to say that such a voice can only exist in a vacuum—individuals are surely shaped by their experiences—but that an authentic voice should be a voice that truly speaks for itself. For instance, the unadulterated voices of youth are sometimes difficult to uncover beneath ideas and attitudes instilled in, and often expected of them, by parents, peers, and the culture in which they were raised. Likewise, personal challenges and self-perceptions can change the way one sees the world and his or her place in it. Hardship and marginalization are disempowering and can dilute a person’s ability to speak in his or her own interest. Here again, authenticity becomes entwined with power and privilege, where those voices with power are buoyed up by confidence, and those without are often shaken and unsure, internalizing structural failings as their own. Outwardly conveying one’s intuitive voice can feel dangerous or wrong in these instances, so it is necessary for researchers to establish a safe and trusting space for exploring true feelings and ideas.

Other ways the authenticity of voice can be derailed are through misinterpretation and devaluation. It is all too common for displays of voice that do not align with “mainstream” societal norms to be misunderstood and/or quickly dismissed. Perhaps some might automatically interpret a teen’s loud music and non-conforming dress as rebelliousness. From that teen’s point of view, these may very well be to protest, defy or offend—or they may only be self-expression, voicing his or her tastes and ideas. This is why it is important to seek first-hand insight into the pertinent voices of a topic. A person or group can tell their own story if given the opportunity, so
it is in the researcher’s best interest to seek not only participants’ endorsement, but their direct input when making analyses.

One must also acknowledge that results may not be true for larger populations—may not be generalizable—but that does not make them any less authentic for the subject individual or group. This illuminates another notable barrier to authenticity, which is the common error of assuming a voice is always representative. As in: “Because this is the voice of a homosexual Latino man, working in this type of job, and living under these conditions, this must be the voice of any and all such homosexual Latino men.” While it can be valid that these men would have a lot in common, they are still individuals, and their life experiences, and how those translate into voice, are unique. The goal of action research is not to identify a singular voice to speak on behalf of a universal need, but instead to identify particular voices, which added to other voices can be a force for change locally, and eventually globally.

**Issues of Ethics around Voice**

It is often difficult in research to uncover voices that are authentic, unhindered by power structures, and most importantly, that are willing to tell their stories to outsiders. One of the greatest challenges action researchers face, despite their sincere desire to help historically disenfranchised people, is that based on past experiences these groups often do not trust the intentions or actions of researchers. Traditional methods have tended to exclude participants not only from the meaning-making of a study, but also from the end results and benefits. In the worst cases, people’s voices may have been used to cover up others’ manipulative practices, or decontextualized to support someone else’s agenda. Deserving, gaining, and keeping the confidence of one’s community contributors are primary ethical concerns for action researchers.
Further matters to consider include creating conditions for true collaboration, protection of participants, and acting on and disseminating the knowledge gained.

As previously stated, all researchers bring their own voices to the table, and transparency builds trust. Participants must not only see clearly the goals and methods of the research, but also the personal connections and aims of the researcher, opening dialogue on how the inquiry can support everyone’s ideals and interests. Ethical relationships in action research must go beyond the requisite, traditional protocols. The more researchers work on equal ground with community members, the easier it becomes for everyone to contribute their voices openly. Participatory research methods are the easiest way to ensure that all voices receive equal opportunity to affect the results of a study. Under ideal circumstances, there are no researchers and researched, only co-researchers and their topic of inquiry. The most accurate and rigorous results come from intensive collaboration between all voices within a research community.

In some research, participants take a great risk in expressing their voices. Extreme care must be exercised when evaluating the possible repercussions of a study. Practitioner action researchers, for example, often face pressures from within their organizations that may threaten their friendships, positions, or livelihoods if they voice unfavorable information about the organization or its other members. It is therefore imperative that researchers weigh the outcomes of their findings and how they plan to publicize them with the amount of risk involved for everyone who could be affected, and take whatever steps necessary to ensure no one’s well-being is jeopardized unwillingly.

A final distinction between the ethics of action research and traditional methods is, as implied, the action of the work. The goal of finding, listening to, and evaluating voices is not only to generate an academic product, nor to contribute to some abstract knowledgebase on a subject,
but also to deliver a measurable benefit for the participants. Action researchers may be under the same pressures to publish and circulate their work within academia as other researchers, but at the same time will want to have learned something new and made a difference in the lives of those they study. To do this, they endeavor to share results and actions with their partnering individuals and communities, and it is not uncommon for final reports to come directly from the participants, through public speaking, writing, the arts, and other forms of open expression and dissemination.

As the only life forms on earth capable of using sophisticated language, human beings appear evolutionarily inclined to make our thoughts known through use of a literal voice, and complex intelligence enables us to communicate in a variety of unspoken ways, as well as to advocate for others. These biological developments demonstrate that voice may be one of the most fundamental of all human abilities, important to our survival, well-being, and overall progress. Action research aims to support this capacity for voice through participatory and inclusive inquiry into issues that affect human and environmental flourishing on both the individual and universal levels.

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See also: agency, dialogue, experiential knowing, identity, interviews, narrative, oral history, photovoice, storytelling.
Further Readings:


