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Who gives “Voice” or “Empowers Migrants” in Participatory Action Research? Challenges and Solutions

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Abstract

Given the power relationships between researchers and participants in Participatory Action Research (PAR), this chapter challenges the assumption that migration researchers “give voice” or “empower” participants, and advances the idea that such researchers need to uncover their own voice in the research process through dialogue, interaction and reflection with their partners. In the literature review on PAR, the concept of “giving voice” is quite prevalent yet based on the author’s own qualitative/migration research, she would argue that the actual voice of participants themselves is seldom emphasized or revealed in qualitative/migration research. Paulo Freire’s concepts of dialogue, conscientization, and action for change underscored by his interpretation of voice, which recognizes that marginalized people’s voices emerge out of the conditioned silence created by differential power dynamics, is critically needed as grounding for PAR researchers. In critiquing the use of voice, the conclusion makes a plea for PAR researchers to engage in finding their own voice by embracing the notion of cultural humility.

Keywords: *The Giving of Voice; Participatory Action Research (PAR); migration research; emotional knowledge; cultural humility.*

Introduction

As a qualitative researcher, and a migrant myself invested in community ethnography and participatory action research (PAR), I am challenging the assertions of junior and senior scholars in social sciences and migration studies who proclaim when presenting their findings that they “give voice” and “empower” their participants.

While these naïve assertions may come across as benevolent, they also appear condescending and patronizing because there is an assumption that “voice” is theirs to “give”. I have witnessed this stance at conferences when researchers, whose participants and collaborators are present, speak for them as though they were absent from the room, or had no voice of their own.

The idea of generating data and text which “speaks for the other” not only distances the researcher from the participant but also creates a power differential which separates the two. In my personal PAR with migrants, that distance diminishes as my role of researcher becomes one with the participant, and power differences are collectively negotiated. Called into question is the role that the researcher engages in as he/she attempts to understand migrants since not all participation goes smoothly and may not lead to gaining voice nor change (Duijs, Baur, & Abma, 2019).

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Such concerns have spurred me to share not only the knowledge and skills gained over four decades of qualitative and migration research in different contexts² but to seriously question the proposition that giving “voice” is the sole prerogative of the researcher.

In this article, I critique the current fashionability of giving “voice” by focusing on the saliency of voice based on a cursory review of secondary sources published over the past ten years in qualitative and PAR research and more specifically “voice and empowerment in migration research.”³

Such a review focused on English-language qualitative/migration research literature published between 2009 and 2019 was conducted using Scopus, Social Science citations, Taylor and Francis, ERIC, JSTOR, Sage Journal, and Science Direct as databases which yielded close to 30,000 citations associating “voice” with psychology, organizational analysis, health, social work, education and social actions and “empowerment” to outcomes of groups, programs, organizational structures, processes and outputs in education, psychiatry and nursing. While this provided a global picture, the citations were general and not specific to PAR. A second cut on “giving voice in PAR” and “empowerment in PAR” was done which yielded over 20,000 results from which 8,000 citations associating voice and empowerment to women, students, youth and infrequently migrants were identified. A third narrowing of the thesaurus terms to “giving voice in PAR with migrants,” and/or “PAR in the empowerment of migrants” (excluding psychological, organizational, nursing and educational studies) identified 1,000 citations of which the abstracts selected indicated 100 dealt directly with voice/empowerment and migrants. Of these, 27 articles which addressed the extent and saliency of voice with migrants based on PAR were briefly reviewed for this chapter. A future paper will provide an in-depth analysis of the articles’ content.

Paulo Freire’s oeuvre and the author’s own writing about his work during the 1980s (Montero-Sieburth, 1985)⁴ is revisited as a means to ground PAR researchers in his assertion that voice can be revealed only through mutual dialogue and conscientization⁵. It should be understood that for Paulo Freire (1970), conscientization is a process of critical consciousness-raising in which marginalized people are enabled to develop the ability to think critically about issues of power in relationship to privilege and oppression in different local, national, and international spheres of influence and to be able to act upon these. Such awareness requires different levels of understanding of one’s consciousness leading to actual action.

I argue that in “giving of voice,” researchers first need to emerge themselves in the discovery of their own voice before uncovering the voices of participants.

In conclusion, using examples from my own PAR research where voice is critical, I introduce the notion of cultural humility (Ross, 2010; Rosen, Mc Call and Goodkind, 2017) which is derived from social work, medical education and community-based education, because I believe having

² The qualitative and PAR research I have conducted has been in the: 1) U.S. with Latino migrant families and communities; 2) Latin America, with marginalized youth in Costa Rica, indigenous groups in Mexico and Guatemala, urban and rural school youth in Honduras; 3) Spain with Latin American migrant families and youth; 4) the Netherlands with Moroccan Dutch, Turkish Dutch high school students and Mexican families and youth of the second generation.

³ The extent and saliency of voice with migrants based on PAR were briefly reviewed for this chapter. A future paper will provide an in-depth analysis of the articles’ content.

⁴ The author reviewed Freire’s *The Politics of Education* in 1985, then worked with him on a two day Conference on Community Engagement in 1987 at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and later in 1996 served as his interpreter at a ASCD Conference a year before his death.



“humility” will help university researchers diminish the power dynamics inherent between themselves and vulnerable migrants, develop collective consciousness, and lead to co-membership, co-authorship and co-mentoring in the migration research process.

The “Giving of Voice ” in Qualitative Migration Research

The notion of “giving voice” as well as that of empowerment have become clichés in qualitative and migration research because it enables the researcher to extrapolate meanings from the participant with little thought to the underlying power dynamics between researchers and researched. More often than not, even though the notion of empowerment is widely found in the literature, it is subsumed under voice and is ambiguous and not fully explained (Ucar Martinez et al., 2016). Thus these terms are overused and are problematic because they do not consider what is not said or when participants remain silent.

Working with diverse ethnic populations, many of whom are traumatized, disenfranchised or marginalized by their migration odyssey, often implies that on their own, researchers are able to give voice and legitimize their standing. Because vulnerable migrants are seen as unable to vocalize their given situations, their oral statements become represented and interpreted through the written word of the researcher.

Thereby, in the process of interviewing, dissecting lives and recording observations, the researcher’s pen may overtly diminish the status of the migrant as a competent and capable knower. As Hendricks (2003:471) points out, “Just as it is invalid to speak for another, it is not true action for those who are leaders to think without another rather than with another. This constitutes an act of domination. To do so is to set oneself apart as belonging to ‘the class that knows’ -apart from others and to reflect a paternalistic and neo-colonial bias of the researcher that postulates: ‘I can grant you say a say in what you represent.’”

As Coddington (2017) stipulates, the colonized voice becomes accessible to the researcher, and marginalized people in telling their stories may even feel empowered, but such a process may also negate their own agency. In fact, “repeated stories of passive victimization become subsumed into a coherent recovered individual self, which again erases power inequalities and structural context” (Coddington, 2017:317).

Evident from the literature review is that “voice” is salient and extensively used in many disciplines. Methodologically diverse and without clear definitions, it is a highly-complex theoretical notion used to frame given situations or as a profile of differential power relationships such as those found between university researchers and migrants, teachers and students, clinicians and patients, adults and youth (MacDonald, 2012; Bergold and Thomas, 2012). Since power is vested in the positions, roles and dynamics found in each of these relationships, decoding the power dynamics entails a critical eye (Borg, et al. 2012). The concept of empowerment on the other hand, is often used to describe projects, programs or processes affecting people in which an intervention has taken places, such as the empowerment of women, children, and youth but is is also frequently used as an adjective, referring to *empowered* women, *empowered* migrants without detailing how the power of individuals to make choices or changes has been reached.

Voice is also framed within a dialogical-epistemological perspective, which can present challenges that range from a person being unwilling to use voice, to a critical researcher attuned to sensitive reflexivity and able to gauge his/her own power (Selener, 1997). It is also viewed within a social research stance which requires participation but distancing on the part of the researcher and

the participants in order to gain a balanced and realistic representation of facts and stories (Brown, 1985).

There is a need to deconstruct the power relationships within PAR and to view participation “...as a human right and a process of critically questioning and challenging unequal power relations” (Van Wijnendaele, 2014). That participation needs to be understood as Van Wijnendaele argues not only at the individual and local levels but more importantly, at the institutional and the structural levels where the challenges that ensue require uncovering dominant discourses. To paraphrase Freire, it is only in those instances where dominant discourses become dismantled that spaces for reinvention and reconstruction are created.

Grounding Migration Researchers by Revisiting Freire’s Use of Voice

Paulo Freire’s (1970, 1985) enunciation of voice is essential to PAR. Presenting the concept as one that exists in those who are oppressed as a cognitive challenge, of “speaking the word...[as] a human act implying reflection and action...it is a primordial human right and not the privilege of a few” (Freire, 1985:50) becomes a means to be heard and to break out of the culture of silence. Freire argues that in their situation, “prevented from having a ‘structural perception’ of the facts involving them, they do not know they cannot ‘have a voice.’... They cannot exercise the right to participate consciously in the sociohistorical transformation of their society, because their work does not belong to them” (Freire, 1985:50).

While Freire admits that “Men are not built in silence, but in work, action-reflection.” (Freire, 1988:76), he stipulates that “all men and women in the world and within the world can transform the world and break out of the “culture of silence”, or the closed system that oppresses and immobilizes them” (Freire, 1985:44). Yet to break out of such silence, migrants, as well as others, need to understand the power of cultural forms such as the state and its agencies, and technology and ideology which bears down on them but also becomes internalized by those oppressed. Such power can be both negative and positive, dialectical and repressive which “works both on and through people” and exhibits “...behavior in which people resist, struggle, for their image of a better world”, explains Henry Giroux (Freire, 1985:xix).

Avoseh (2005:377) argues that “Dialogue is thus established as the end of the culture of silence and the start of the process of empowerment in the learning environment.” This requires a process of denunciation of the culture of silence, to affirm the right to say words, which becomes the process of self-empowerment and allows one to acquire a critical conscious to deconstruct power relationships. Thus, as Freire states: “no one conscientizes anyone else. The educator and the people conscientize themselves” (Freire, 1985:125).

Yet while the notion of empowerment is often attributed to Freire, according to Stromquist (2014) it does not appear in his books. Instead it becomes an extension of his consciousness-raising which is multidimensional requiring “...the development of skills and strategies to engage in political action, beyond awareness-raising and beyond reflection of one’s social and economic environment” (Stromquist, 2014:548). Thus before any empowerment takes place, the acquisition of respect and humility are fundamental mechanisms (Freire, 1985) that researchers need to have in understanding oppressed peoples, gaining their trust, validating their knowledge and comprehending their communication with the world they inhabit.

⁶ Brackets are inserted by the author to transition the sentence.



Participatory Action Research (PAR) Research Experiences

In my own research trajectory, I have learned the efficacy of power sharing through listening to those voices where the common thread that unites researcher and participant can be identified, be it centred on solidarity, emotional sharing or need for action. For example, in the 25 years of working with migrant groups in the city of Chelsea, Massachusetts, it was the Latino community which embraced me as a migrant and Latina, shared family celebrations with me and saw me as a researcher who could represent and communicate their interests at the university or public policy level, while the Anglo-American principals, teachers and community members barely knew my name and referred to me as the “Spanish lady”.

Another way that researchers are able to shed their “objectivity” in favour of “subjectivity” is by getting close to migrants, knowing who they are, setting up collaborative research agendas, gathering collective data, and following the types of decision-making that ensues from in-situ research to create changes that are local, constructive, and challenge social structures. An example of this is a PAR project on bilingual education which I carried out with indigenous groups in Guatemala. Being a “Ladina” meant I had to squat with men in circles for several days discussing different approaches in the use of languages and culture in the development of their own national bilingual education program, PRONEBI. As an outsider, imitating their ways of knowledge sharing gained me a place at their table and a voice. Their voice, in turn, was expressed in the development of their own bilingual curriculum at the national level.

Understanding voice also requires researchers having political savvy. In a PAR project in a U.S. school, where I trained Latino parents in leadership and research, I was exposed to local politics in action. The school’s Latina principal, hoping to encourage South and Central American parents to join the English-speaking Parent Teachers’ Association offered the Spanish-speaking parents English lessons and the Anglo teachers Spanish so that they could better communicate with each other, but also to help their children to become bilingual. The memo she sent to parents requesting their participation created such a strong reaction from one Anglo parent who sent a rebuttal stating “In America, we only speak English”, that other parents rallied against the principal and the school board suspended her. The Latin American parents who had found their “voice” through our PAR challenged the decision and defended her in court, but to no avail (Montero-Sieburth, 2011).

A significant PAR project, where teachers and students found and expressed their own voice for action was a collaboration initiated by me between Charlestown (Massachusetts) High School⁷ and the Harvard Experienced Teachers Program (1988-1990), in which graduate students, teaching fellows, high school students and teachers focused on the attendance patterns of students and the practice and perspectives of teachers and administrators. The resulting collaborative report and recommendations were presented by Charlestown teachers and HGSE faculty at the American Educational Research Association Meeting in Boston, 1990 and updated at the high school thereafter until 1992. Such positive outcomes have cemented PAR in my research methodology.

PAR is a dynamic educational process that enables social investigations to take place and calls into action solutions that are collaboratively arrived at and can realistically be implemented. An

⁷ Charlestown High School was one of the most segregated schools in Boston but with busing, black, white and Latino students were integrated at the time of our participation. The outcomes of the project yielded oral histories of Charlestown residents and teachers, reflective observation of a teacher’s classroom, development of choreographic scores, a videography of the school, and a system to profile students so teachers could develop personal relationships and relevant curriculum.

example of this is the training and research project I conducted with migrant Latino parents in one Boston school. Parents were trained to collect, interpret and analyze data that would enable them to understand the education their children received. Parents observed and interviewed teachers and administrators and found out, that although the headmaster advocated publicly for bilingual education, teachers hid Spanish reading materials, the library had only English language books and teachers who spoke Spanish were told by the headmaster to only speak to students in English. When confronted with the collected evidence, the headmaster had no other recourse than to change his policy and was monitored by the newly-trained Spanish-speaking parents on his progress (Montero-Sieburth, 2007).

PAR can be life changing for some while for others the fact that it is highly demanding, time intensive, and longitudinal often detracts from its implementation. Yet for Vollman et al. (2004) not only does PAR foster community development, but it also leads to capacity building, empowerment, access, social justice and participation. From the examples cited above, PAR concretely serves as a non-invasive tool to access migrants, their everyday life, while at the same time, fosters their decision-making and community development.

Reconstructing Voice and Empowerment with Cultural Humility

The notion of cultural humility used in social work, community-based education and medical education (Rosen, McCall & Goodkind, 2017) is useful in constructing the notion of voice for PAR in migration research.

Cultural humility⁸ offers a lens to consider the researcher's own cultural competence. Ross (2010:316) argues that cultural humility is more dynamic than cultural competence because it requires a commitment to ongoing self-reflection and self-critique, particularly identifying and examining one's own patterns of unintentional and intentional racism. He acknowledges that "proponents of this concept argue that it is not a lack of knowledge about culture, but rather the practitioners' beliefs and attitudes about people who are different that leads to ineffective practice and perpetuates inequity"(Smith et al., 2007; Tervalon & Murray-Garcia, 1998 cited by Ross, 2010:317)

Required is a life-long commitment by researchers to self-evaluate and critique themselves in situations where they need to redress power imbalances and develop non-paternalistic and mutually-beneficial partnerships in relationships and community building that lead to empowerment.

Embodied in this thinking is the attainment of openness, self-awareness, egolessness, self-reflection and supportive interactions (Foronda et al., 2016). Through numerous personal interactions in my research trajectory, I have been most fortunate to have gained a strong sense of cultural humility through mutual collaboration with my participants. This has been particularly born out when they have co-authored research reports and shared presentations.

Co-authorship became a privilege and working with teachers and later my graduate students as co-authors allowed me to understand the struggles they encountered in finding their own voice and how I, in return, found mine. Over the years, even though co-writing⁹ is more protracted and

⁸ Cultural humility arises from a combination of varied influences from participatory research, to social work theories, medical education practices, Asian medicine, etc.

⁹ Close to 15 articles have been co-authored by me, with colleagues, graduate, undergraduate students and participants from the field in participatory research projects.



demanding, it has proven to be a process of mutual mentoring and establishment of trust, both for my students and my participants and, most importantly, for me. In my research and writings, I have shared the joys and sorrows of students and participants alike, partaking in their graduations, weddings and funerals, all of which have made me part of their emotional growth and recognition of their own power. This process has bestowed on me the gift of Freire's *conscientizacao*.

Finally, I have learned that voice only has meaning when it is shared. I cannot give voice, but I have the skills and empathy to uncover the voice that is present in the lives of my participants and collaboratively make it evident as well as useful for change. I have also learned to be an engaged participatory researcher involved with the lives of participants. It is in this process that critical knowledge blended with emotion and a sense of voice can overcome injustices.

In a real sense, participatory action researchers need to know their own voice before they assume they can uncover it for someone else. More importantly, we need to heed Freire's (1985:199) words: "We need to be subjects of history, even if we cannot totally stop being objects of history. And to be subjects, we need unquestionably to claim history critically. As active participants and real subjects, we can make history only when we are continually critical of our lives."

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