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Accessibility Is for Everyone: How to Rock Your ASA Presentation and Make it Inclusive

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We all have a lot on the line when we give professional presentations. We want to convey our research in ways that contribute to our areas, make connections with other scholars, and perhaps put ourselves on the radar of a few senior scholars in our discipline. The last thing most of us would want to do is to leave some of our audience members out of the conversation. Yet, scholars with disabilities often report that participating in professional conferences can be an alienating experience. Here, we provide some key tips that all of us can implement to make ASA presentations and workshops more inclusive.

Accessibility is about accounting for the diverse bodies and minds present in our communities and planning for this diversity. We often think that accessibility is about accommodating the needs of a few or compromising our presentation style or goals. Not so! There are a lot of fun, simple, low-cost or free changes we as presenters can make that will enable people with disabilities to participate fully in the important conversations we have at conferences. Besides, we all benefit from more accessible spaces. In this process, you will likely find new and creative ways of achieving your goals as a presenter and improve your work. These changes often benefit even those who don't identify as disabled. Plus, we're not talking about a small portion of society. The latest estimates from the U.S. Census show that nearly 20 percent of the U.S. population has a disability (Census Bureau 2012), making disabled people the largest minority in the U.S. Valuing all ways of being can be infused into the work that sociologists do, including how we present our research at conferences.

First Things First: Assume Diversity

- We often approach accessibility with the attitude that we will know when accommodations are necessary and make changes only when required. This often puts people with disabilities in difficult positions of having to decide whether to disclose hidden disabilities, of being singled out, or of being excluded from the conversation. The following actions should be a standard part of what and how we present. We should assume people with disabilities are part of our audience, because most likely they are!

Handouts

- It is a good idea to make available several print copies of the script of your presentation. You may include a disclaimer asking participants to refrain from distributing your presentation without your permission. Providing these print copies will benefit Deaf and hard of hearing audience members, sign language interpreters, and anyone who processes better through text access rather than auditory information.
- If you distribute any handouts as part of your presentation or workshop, include copies in large print (18-point font). In addition, have an electronic copy available on a jump drive for participants with print disabilities who use screen-reading software.
- Distribute both regular print and large-print handouts together so people can select which they want. It is fine to announce you have a jump drive available if anyone needs it.

PowerPoints

- Use a high-contrast color scheme (black and white).
- Use large fonts (44 point for titles, 36 point for information).
- Keep information displayed on each slide to a minimum.
- Use standard slide transitions and avoid decorative fillers.
- All videos shown should be captioned. Free captioning software is available online.

Speaking

- When a microphone is available, use it. Do not ask if everyone can hear you without a microphone. Doing so often excludes hard of hearing participants.

- If audience members do not have access to a microphone, repeat their questions into your mic.
- Always face your audience when speaking.
- Speak at a moderate pace.
- Try to be specific as you point to items on your PPT. Rather than saying, “This,” refer to “this graph.”
- Briefly describe the pertinent aspects of what you are displaying on the screen. This doesn’t require great detail, only to identify information relevant to the point you are making.
- Do not ask your audience to read information on your slides silently. If it’s central to your presentation, read it aloud or paraphrase.
- If sign language interpreters are present, speak at a moderate pace. Do not slow down or pause for them to finish. Direct your attention to the participant, not to the interpreter.

Small Group Activities

- Be mindful of the assumptions you make when developing group activities.
- When you ask people to move around a crowded room, you might be alienating participants for whom this is difficult.
- Be sure that all information can be received through multiple senses. Avoid activities that limit sensory input, (i.e. a game in silence).
- Be flexible. If you realize that every participant will not be able to participate in your planned activity, the activity should be replaced with another.

We hope these suggestions serve as a beginning list of actions to be mindful of as we come together at the ASA Annual Meeting each year. These practices might feel unfamiliar, or even somewhat daunting, at first; however, they become our “normal” when we imbed them into the structure of our presentations from the beginning. As sociologists, we can use this as a great reflexive way to engage with our research, our academic community, and our peers, disabled or not. And you might even find your presentations are better and more engaging for all. We are excited to encourage members to begin incorporating a disability consciousness into our conference space and to contribute to creating inclusive spaces. If you would like further information about how to advocate for disability issues in the ASA, you can reach out to the ASA Status Committee on Persons with Disabilities in Sociology. See you in August!

References

US Census Bureau. 2012. *Nearly 1 in 5 People Have a Disability in the U.S.* Census Bureau Reports.

<https://www.census.gov/newsroom/releases/archives/miscellaneous/cb12-134.html>.

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