

# Problematising the Problem:

## Exploring How Hearing Privilege Fosters Employment Inequality for Deaf People

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### ABSTRACT

Employment inequality is recognised as a problem for deaf people. What is rarely understood is that what often lies behind that inequality is less a “deaf-centered” problem, but rather the issue of “hearing privilege”. Hearing privilege refers to the unearned advantage granted to hearing people on the basis of their hearing identity in a society characterised by ableism. Despite a proliferation of research on the employment disadvantage experienced by deaf people, hearing people continue to dominate in leadership positions in deaf community voluntary organisations. By drawing upon scholarship from Privilege Studies and social justice education, this article “problematises the problem” by discussing the importance of viewing deaf people’s experience of disadvantage through the prism of hearing privilege. The article offers insight into how privilege awareness workshops can be hugely influential in educating hearing people about their privilege and encouraging them to take responsibility for challenging their unearned advantage.

### KEYWORDS

hearing privilege; hearingness; hearing identity; employment inequality; deaf people; disability; ableism

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## I. Introduction

*It isn't great news that a great deal of trouble surrounds issues of privilege, power and difference, trouble based on gender and race, sexual orientation and identity, disability, social class (Johnson, 2018, ix).*

The idea for writing this conceptual article emerged from my previous empirical research on deaf people's experience of employment discrimination in Ireland (O'Connell, 2022). The results of this particular study correlate with international research which found that deaf people continue to suffer significant disadvantages in the labour market, both in terms of their chances of obtaining employment and their potential to advance in work (Emmet and Francis, 2015; Punch, 2016). Research shows that deaf people experience high rates of unemployment, underemployment, lower pay, and greater job instability compared to hearing people (Punch, 2016). In a statistical study on employment outcomes among the deaf population in the United States, Emmet and Francis (2015) found that deaf people are twice as likely to be unemployed or underemployed. The significance of these findings is substantial in terms of the economic impact on deaf people and their career advancement (O'Connell, 2022). The root cause of this phenomenon was found to be audism, which denotes a preference for hearing people based on the belief that deaf people are biologically and intellectually inferior as a result of their *inability to hear* (Bauman 2004). However, the chance to further reflect on the study led to a realisation that the audism concept does not go far enough to address the problem. What is essentially missing is an analysis of oralism as an ideology asserting the belief that one must be *able to speak* to be considered "normal" (Anglin-Jaffe, 2015). The main difference between the two terms is in ability characteristics; audism is concerned with a person's ability to hear whereas oralism places great value in a person's ability to speak (Bauman 2004). The combination of the two concepts describes a specific form of ableism relative to one's ability to hear and speak.

In the context of this study, ableism refers to the beliefs and common sense ideas rooted in negative stereotypes, assumptions, and biases about the ability characteristics of certain groups of people (Campbell, 2009). As an "ideology of ability" (Siebers, 2008: 272), ableism asserts the belief "that a person's abilities or characteristics are determined by disability or that people with disabilities as a group are inferior to nondisabled people" (Linton, 1998: 9). Most Disability Studies scholars focus on the problem of ableism as one of disabled people's disadvantages while neglecting to examine how ability privilege is conferred to able-bodied people (Wolbring, 2014). As Johnson (2018) intimated above, the problem is not so much the disadvantages experienced by marginalised groups but the privilege conferred to dominant group members. In highlighting this problem, I call attention to hearing privilege that underlies many of the social issues deaf people face in their everyday lives. I am consciously aware that writing about hearing privilege is likely to provoke feelings of unease among hearing people, especially those unused to being defined or described by their hearing status (Robinson and Henner, 2018). Robinson and Henner see a connection between hearing people's anxiety and discomfort around deaf people and DiAngelo's (2018) "white fragility" theory. The term white fragility describes the emotional discomfort that white people experience when talking about racism. It is important to point out I am not intending to cast hearing people in a bad light. On the contrary. My intention is to raise awareness of the real "cost" of maintaining

hearing privilege. For McIntosh (2014), the cost of privilege arises when privileged group members lose out on potentially enriching relationships with disadvantaged group members.

By problematising the roots of hearing privilege, this study offers hearing people a way into forming more effective ally relationships with deaf people. The purpose is to show how they can take more responsibility for promoting social justice in organisational life rather than leaving all the hard work to deaf people in the struggle for equality. To meet these objectives, this paper starts by exploring the different types of privilege based on analysis of Privilege Studies and Disability Studies literature. The next section examines the literature on deaf and hearing identities to contextualise hearing identity as an unmarked or unexceptional social category. I explore these issues through the lens of intersectionality, which describes the way multiple social identities shape the realities of oppression and privilege (Crenshaw, 1989). Intersectionality theory suggests that privilege and oppression intersect with one another through different categories of race, sexuality, gender, ability, class, and religion (Johnson, 2018). One might have privilege in one context while experiencing oppression in another context. Men, for instance, may have privilege in gendered aspects of their lives but also be disadvantaged if they have a disability (Case et al., 2014). Intersectionality posits that people with disabilities not only have different types of disabilities but are also positioned within social categories of race, gender, class, age, and sexual orientation (Lundberg and Simonsen, 2015). Deaf Studies scholars have likewise theorised that deaf and hearing people acquire identities that intersect with other identities based on race, gender, and sexuality (Leigh, 2009; Stapleton, 2015). In the next section, I problematise the operation of hearing privilege in the contexts of “unearned advantage” and “conferred dominance”. The issue of employment disadvantage and discrimination is also explored. Finally, based on insights from the social justice education literature, I offer some practical suggestions for encouraging hearing people to take responsibility for challenging their unearned advantages.

## 2. Understanding Privilege

This section offers a critical exploration of the concept of privilege. The discussion is focused on exploring how privilege (and oppression) affect or shape the experiences of members of different social identity groups. Privilege is generally described as the benefits, entitlements, and advantages held by an individual by virtue of belonging to a dominant or majority social identity group that arise from the oppression or disadvantage of a minority group (Goodman, 2001).

### 2.1 Characteristics of Privilege

As intersectionality reminds us, the basic characteristics of privilege can be explained in terms of the distinction between *earned* and *unearned* advantage (McIntosh, 2014). Earned advantage is accrued as a result of acquired skill, talent, or asset, whereas unearned advantage or privilege is not the result of acquired skill, talent, or asset but rather membership of a specific social group based on race, gender, sexuality, class,

or (dis)ability (Bailey, 1998). Examples of earned advantage include working hard to afford a home and raise a family, or having a job where one feels a sense of belonging and prestige (Johnson, 2018). Black and Stone (2005: 244) provide a five-point definition of privilege in terms of advantage that is unearned:

*First, privilege is a special advantage; it is neither common nor universal. Second, it is granted, not earned or brought into being by one's individual effort or talent. Third, privilege is a right or entitlement that is related to a preferred status or rank. Fourth, privilege is exercised for the benefit of the recipient and to the exclusion or detriment of others. Finally, a privileged status is often outside of the awareness of the person possessing it.*

Johnson (2018) argues that it may be more useful to consider privilege in terms of advantage that is “automatic” rather than “unearned”. He reasons that seeing privilege as automatic makes more sense because in systems of inequality (e.g. institutions that promote ableism), members of the dominant group have a competitive edge over the disadvantaged group because they benefit from them without having to do anything to get it. It is automatic by virtue of being a member of a dominant social group (Wildman, 1996). Another important element underpinning privilege is “conferred dominance”, something that systematically “gives [one] permission to control because of one’s race or sex” (MacIntosh, 2014: 36). This type of privilege is synonymous with power entrenched in cultural assumptions of superiority, where one group is seen to be entitled to dominate another group. The benefits available to the privilege are enacted through systems created by those in power – people sharing the same privilege identity – who grant special concessions to the privilege such as automatic access to leadership positions, decision-making powers, networks, relationships, opportunities, control over social, economic, and political resources which are denied to members of other communities.

## **2.2 Privilege in Relation to Racism and Sexism**

In relation to male privilege, McIntosh (1989) noted that men are often unwilling to admit they have privilege due to their gender identity even though they may grant that women are disadvantaged as a result of a system of sexism. Although men may be willing to work to improve women’s status in society, they are often reluctant about giving up some or all of their power (conferred dominance) or lessening their advantage and entitlement gained from women’s disadvantage (McIntosh, 2014). McIntosh noted that most men are unlikely to notice their unearned advantage unless it is pointed out to them. She observes the way men’s denial manifests in several ways: by claiming that male privilege doesn’t exist, that institutional sexism is an illusion, a thing of the past, and that patriarchy is no longer an issue. Such denials have their roots in protecting and maintaining male interest and preventing self-awareness among men (Pease, 2016). Writing as a white woman, McIntosh (1989) observes,

*I realized that I had been taught about racism as something that puts others at a disadvantage, but also had been taught not to see one of its corollary aspects, white privilege, which puts me at an*

*advantage. I think whites are carefully taught not to recognize white privilege, as males are taught not to recognize male privilege (McIntosh, 1989: 2).*

By way of illustration, McIntosh identified 46 different examples of the daily white benefits and entitlements she enjoys, some of which include: seeing people of her race being widely represented in the media; being reasonably confident of finding a publisher for a paper on white privilege; being pretty sure of having her voice heard in a group in which she is the only member of her race. It is important to note that white people who receive these white advantages have not earned them from their own hard work but rather from their membership of a specific race and their position within an environment where racism is systemically unacknowledged. In such situations, being part of a white racial category provides them privileges that are denied to non-white people. As such, white privilege operates as “an institutional (rather than personal) set of benefits granted to those of us who, by race, resemble the people who dominate the powerful positions in our institutions” (Kendall, 2002: 1).

Noble and Pease (2011) describe male privilege in relation to the employment of men and women. They noted that male privilege exists in organisations where women are largely absent in senior level and policy-making positions as most of these positions are dominated by men. The authors argue that institutional systems and structures of patriarchy inevitably serve to confer benefits and advantages to men at the expense of women. Evidence shows that in some organisations women constitute a large majority of the workforce while men dominate the senior level positions (Noble and Pease, 2011). While men may accrue unearned advantages in a workplace organisation, the collection of those advantages constitutes male privilege (Flood and Pease, 2005; Noble and Pease, 2011). Male privilege may take the form of favourable treatment or increased career opportunities reserved for men (Noble and Pease, 2011). When employment opportunities are restricted to men (and denied to women) they constitute *unearned* advantages. And sexism allows men to benefit from this unearned advantage while women suffer from experiencing unearned disadvantage.

### **2.3 Privilege in Relation to Ableism**

While McIntosh (1989) identified and labeled white privilege in relation to racism, a number of Disability Studies scholars have advanced studies on ability privilege in relation to ableism (Wolbring, 2014; Bialka and Morro, 2017). Wolbring (2014) introduces the concept of ability privilege in relation to the advantages – either unearned or earned – that able-bodied people have but are unwilling to give up in the name of social justice. Wolbring further notes that able-bodied people in positions of power may concede that systems of inequality place disabled people at a disadvantage, but are often reluctant to admit that this injustice gives them unearned or unfair advantages. For Bialka and Morro (2017), ability privilege sustains ableism and ableism confers privileges to able-bodied people while disadvantaging people with disabilities. The authors maintain that ability privilege gives able-bodied

individuals access to a world of opportunities and resources that are denied to people with disabilities. Being able-bodied is an asset that protects abled individuals from the ableism that people with disabilities experience in their daily lives. Being oblivious to the injustice inflicted upon people with disabilities is a privilege in itself. When presented with evidence of ability privilege, able-bodied people are likely to argue that advantages were gained through personal struggle and hard work. Bialka and Morro (2017) argue that ability privilege is not a reflection of skill, asset, or talent but is systematically given to an individual or group because of membership of the “normal” social identity group. Ability privilege is living under the assumption that everyone is able-bodied and can get around with relative ease and being oblivious to systems of ableism that people with disabilities face in their daily lives (Bialka and Morro, 2017; Wolbring, 2014). Able-bodied people in a culture of power often fail to see that their ability status grants them unearned advantages. This unawareness makes it easy for them to deny the existence of ability privilege and ableism. This perhaps explains why many social institutions (e.g. employment, education) are built with able-bodied people in mind with no thought given to alternative needs (Kendall, 2013). Following McIntosh’s (1989) invisible knapsack, Shea (2014: 41–42) built “an invisible crutch” of ability privileges afforded to her as an abled individual, some of which include:

*I can arrange to attend social events without having to worry about whether or not they are accessible to me; I can attend a parent-teacher meeting in school without having my ability level being called into question or blamed for my children’s academic performance; When I speak to someone “in charge,” I can be sure the person will make eye contact with me and not treat me as if I am stupid or invisible.*

Intersectionality suggests that different ability attributes are attributed to/conferred upon differently abled social identity groups. Some characteristics of ability privilege, for example, involve hearing people as the dominant able-bodied group managing and directing deaf-related issues. A number of Deaf Studies scholars have drawn attention to hearing privilege as a special unearned advantage reserved for hearing people, not because of talent or effort but rather for their hearing identity and connection to the “normal” social group category (Bauman, 2004; Gournaris and Aubrecht, 2013; O’Connell, 2022). The key to understanding hearing privilege is “hearing identity”, which is the basis from which hearing people receive material advantages at all levels over deaf people (Sutton-Spence and West, 2011). Understanding hearing privilege therefore requires an examination of identity in connection to the hierarchical social position of deaf and hearing people.

### 3. Identity Matters

Historically, the study of “deaf” and “hearing” identity constructs typically problematises the “othered” status of deaf people in society. Deaf Studies has historically neglected to examine both sides of the deaf-hearing binary paradigm when addressing ableist inequality affecting deaf communities. This happens because there is less

scholarship about the role hearing identity and “hearingness” play in sustaining hearing privilege and ableism. To understand the role of hearing privilege in the oppression of deaf people, it is necessary to focus attention on the social construction of hearingness and the social and political significance of hearing identity.

### 3.1 Hearing Identity

What is “hearing identity” and what does it mean to be “hearing”? Intrinsically, there is some tension inherent in those questions as they force people to begin to perceive and define their identity as “hearing” rather than simply assuming that hearing is “normal” and understanding themselves as the “same as everyone else” (Sutton-Spence and West, 2011). Hearing, in this context then, is a sociological, rather than audiological, concept. As such, there is no absolute consensus on what the term means. The process of constructing a hearing identity is political given its connection to issues of power and power relations (Bauman, 2004). Within deaf communities, hearing people are traditionally identified as “members of the majority group of oppressors” (Sutton-Spence and West, 2011: 422). Sutton-Spence and West suggest that hearing identity is constructed on the basis of a difference from deaf identity as it constitutes social norms of being “culturally hearing” relative to behavioural norms of hearing, listening, talking, and speaking. The key to understanding hearing identity as a social group is based on knowing how it opens doors to material advantages and privileges that are routinely denied to deaf people in all levels of social, economic, and political life. As Bauman (2004) estimates, culturally hearing people represent 99% of the world’s population, a majority status that places deaf people in the minority social group category. This numerical advantage (including the audiotically “hard of hearing”) allows hearing people to have greater social power than deaf people. Hearing identity is therefore connected to power and privilege.

Bauman (2009) maintains that hearing identity is rarely acknowledged as a significant social category. He suggests that many, if not most, hearing people rarely give much thought to this aspect of their identity. Writing as a hearing person, he revealed how he once experienced an evolving consciousness and how awareness of his hearing identity changed that consciousness:

*Perhaps the notion of “becoming hearing” may be best explained through personal example. I myself “became hearing” when, at the age of twenty-one, I began working as a dormitory counselor at a residential school for deaf students. Prior to that time, I was simply a person so accustomed to hearing and speaking that I could not recognize they were the warp and woof of my everyday consciousness. It was only through the sudden contrast with a majority of deaf people at this residential school that my status as a hearing person became evident (Bauman, 2009: 240).*

The above comment underscores the point that hearing invisibility can be challenged by the presence and influences of deaf people. How one comes to an awareness of this aspect of identity is dependent on local context and, in Bauman’s case, it’s the residential school for deaf children. As opposed to mainstream society,

there are a number of deaf community domains – schools for deaf children, deaf voluntary groups, service provider organisations, residential homes for elderly deaf adults, sign language interpretation agencies – where the majority of leadership and management positions are occupied by hearing people (O'Connell, 2021). When located in such places, hearing people are compelled to acknowledge their sense of “hearingness”, which is an attribute of being recognised and treated as a hearing person (Sutton-Spence and West, 2011). While deaf people embody a stigmatised identity (O'Connell, 2016), hearing people are broadly conceptualised as “regular” or just “normal” (Bauman, 2009). Johnson (2018) succinctly describes this line of thinking when he writes about the normalness of privileged identities:

*People are tagged with [...] labels that point to the lowest-status group they belong to, as in “woman doctor,” or “black writer” but never “white lawyer” or “male senator.” Any category that lowers our status relative to other categories can be used in this way.*

Goodman (2001) argues that people “tend to indicate the identity of individuals only when they are not what we consider the norm, otherwise their social identity is assumed and unnamed” (14). When people refer to individuals with privileged identities, they don't refer to them as a “hearing doctor” or a “hearing journalist” but rather, just a “doctor” or “journalist”. They will, however, refer to a “deaf job seeker” or “deaf employee” because the stigma attached to deaf identity makes it significant as a negative trait that requires adjustment. In that sense, hearing people, as members of the privileged group, have the unique luxury of rarely noticing their hearing identity (Bauman, 2009).

### 3.2 Deaf Identity

Historically, there are two distinct ways in which deaf identity has been understood: from the audiological and the sociological perspectives. The first perspective defines deaf identity in terms of biological classification based on physical and audiological characteristics, such as hearing loss or impairment. This view is often associated with the individual model of disability, which focuses on the person's impairment – that is, the limitation on the task that an individual can perform (McDonnell, 2016). This limitation is perceived to reduce the deaf person's productivity and restrict ability to perform a work-related task. As McDonnell observes, the individual model is commonly assumed by the medical profession, a view often shared by many hearing employers who perceive deaf people as a form of negative human capital in the labour market. By contrast, the sociological perspective defines deaf identity as denoting a way of life based on sign language and deaf culture (Leigh, 2009). The sociological construction of deaf identity can be emphasised by the use of the capitalised term “Deaf” to denote a socio-political stance against dominant pathological views of deaf people as deficient (Oliver, 1990). This standpoint has strong connections with the Social Model of disability, which argues that the problem of disability lies not in an individual's impairment but rather in the attitude of those in power and the labour market environment, which create barriers to full participation:

employers will not hire deaf people, either out of ignorance of their capabilities, or to avoid adapting their working practices to accommodate the varying needs of potential employees (Punch, 2016).

#### **4. Deaf People's Employment Disadvantage**

Many Deaf Studies researchers have highlighted deaf people's experiences of employment disadvantage associated with hiring practices, income, working conditions, promotion practices, and the distribution of work (Punch, 2016; Bowe et al., 2005; Houston et al., 2010; Emmet and Francis, 2015). Ubiquitous in these examinations is evidence that habitual practices and structural constraints within the workplace continue to impede deaf people's career progression and profoundly undermine their health and well-being (Stam et al., 2013). Securing employment seems to be particularly difficult for deaf people; they are less likely to be employed than hearing people with or without disabilities (Rydberg et al., 2009). Those who do find work are more likely to be employed in part-time and low-skill jobs (Emmet and Francis, 2015) and earn less than hearing people (Houston et al., 2010). There is also evidence that some deaf people may be less likely to engage in self-directed or autonomous work than their hearing counterparts (Sommer Lindsay, 2022). Despite the ability and interest in work in many cases, deaf people continue to experience significantly high rates of unemployment, underemployment, lower pay, and greater job instability compared to hearing people (Punch, 2016). Rydberg et al. (2009) report that the majority of deaf people in Sweden work in jobs for which they are overqualified, while deaf college graduates take longer to secure jobs compared to hearing graduates.

In terms of the individual causes of deaf people's employment disadvantage, analysis of ableism seems particularly apt. Disability scholars such as Berghs et al. (2021) have focused on ableism as a barrier to equality of employment opportunities and fair recruitment practices. Berghs et al. argue that people with disabilities experience ableism in microaggressions, internalised ableism, and constant monitoring of their bodies and work practices by able-bodied people in power. The authors point out that people with disabilities carry the burden of having to educate their employers about their conditions and the necessary reasonable adjustments required at interview and in the workplace. Many people with disabilities, including deaf people, will not have a choice about disclosure which puts them at risk of experiencing discrimination. The endorsement of such beliefs is related to prejudice ("That's right, deaf people are incompetent") and negative emotional reactions ("I cannot communicate with them"). Many hearing employers hold negative views about deaf people which emphasise stereotypes of incompetency, inferior intelligence, low motivation, and dependency (Lott et al., 2019).

It may be difficult to challenge prejudicial attitudes and stereotypes because deaf people are often underrepresented in professional and managerial careers and tend to lack institutional authority and decision-making powers (O'Connell, 2022). They are more likely to experience lower paid and less prestigious positions in an organisation.

Given their disadvantaged status compared to hearing people, they are less well positioned to address employment inequalities (Gertz, 2008). Ableism also has the effect of limiting deaf people's career choices; they are more likely to seek work in the deaf community non-profit voluntary sector than in the mainstream labour market (Young at al., 2000; Punch et al., 2007). For deaf people, working in the deaf community domain is more appealing compared to the mainstream, since the impact of ableism is significantly decreased and they are more likely to work with staff fluent in sign language and knowledgeable about deaf culture. The desire to work in a non-profit deaf service workplace is perhaps understandable given the additional logic, experienced by many deaf people, to serve within the deaf community. However, evidence shows that deaf people continue to face barriers to employment opportunities in these places, particularly where there is an overrepresentation of hearing people in management and leadership roles (O'Connell, 2022). O'Connell (2022) reports incidents of employment and workplace discrimination against deaf people in Irish deaf charity organisations. Many of these service-provider organisations consist of advocacy groups and associations, leisure centers, sports clubs, educational and residential institutions and interpreting agencies (Coogan and O'Leary, 2018).

The dominant voluntary sector industry in the Irish deaf community has been the focus of much criticism from deaf social movements since the 1980s, which has characterised it as oppressive, disengaging, and disempowering of deaf service users (Crean, 1997). Disability Studies scholars understand these groups to be "traditional voluntary organisations" (Oliver, 1990) or "social welfare agencies" (Drake, 1994), which are distinct from the grassroots charity groups led by disabled people in terms of ideology and leadership. Many of the traditional voluntary organisations tend to be run by able-bodied people and operated by salaried professional able-bodied staff members and a board dominated by able-bodied directors (Oliver, 1990). According to Drake (1994), these voluntary groups often exclude disabled people from employment within the organisation, particularly from positions of power and influence. The operation of conferred dominance is maintained through the recruitment and retention of able-bodied people and the subordination and exclusion of disabled people (Oliver, 1990). Opportunities for participation and employment within the group appear to be more open to able-bodied people than disabled people. This results in an over-representation of able-bodied staff members and a statistical under-representation of disabled people (Drake, 1994). Thus, as Drake notes, able-bodied people have a pathway to power and power to maintain dominance by granting opportunities exclusively to individuals sharing the same ability characteristics as their own.

## **5. Problematizing Hearing Privilege in Employment Contexts**

When employment inequalities are acknowledged in Deaf Studies research, they tend to be discussed more in terms of deaf people's disadvantage rather than the resulting advantages granted to hearing people (O'Connell, 2022). Researchers

studying deaf people's experience of employment discrimination often do not theorise hearing privilege in contrast to deaf people's disadvantage. One exception is Gournaris and Aubrecht (2013), who have drawn attention to "hearing privilege" in contrast to deaf people's disadvantage by showing how hearing people have an unfair advantage attached to their hearing status. To illustrate, the authors discuss a case whereby a hearing professional working in a healthcare setting was able to exert control over a project initially developed by a deaf professional by enlisting a hearing colleague to work on a team in place of the deaf person. The (now entirely hearing) research team then took credit for the completed work and the financial rewards that went with it. Gournaris and Aubrecht argue that this case has the hallmarks of hearing privilege – the unearned advantages given to hearing people (in this case the hearing colleague) who prosper as a result of the disadvantage (exclusion) of deaf people. The deaf person was denied the opportunity to develop his project while the hearing colleague benefited from his exclusion. This happened mainly because hearing people generally see their advantage as entitlement unrelated to actual performance, qualification, and work experience.

Robinson and Henner (2018) noted how hearing people have been successful in obtaining jobs as sign language teachers in higher education institutions as a result of an ableist culture. The authors maintain that hearing people can apply for an American Sign Language (ASL) teacher position in university with confidence due to their higher social position compared to deaf people. As members of the privileged group, they can easily ignore or not see how deaf people are denied the same opportunity to work in a higher education institution. Hearing privilege is manifest in the failure of hearing academics to address the underrepresentation of deaf academics in higher education institutions. Ferndale (2018), for example, noted the poor participation rates of deaf academics in higher education employment, which is compounded by a lack of job security and tenured positions as many of them are employed on a temporary or part-time basis. Kusters et al. (2017) argue that hearing people are more likely to be seen as the preferred candidate over deaf academics to work in sign language-related projects even if they are non-specialist and from outside the field. Researchers such as Baker-Shenk and Kyle (1990) and Ferndale (2018) argue that hearing researchers have been successful in securing research funding to work on deaf community projects, but are more inclined to recruit hearing researchers as research assistants or research associates. By neglecting to include deaf people as co-researchers or co-authors, hearing academics are complicit in maintaining their dominance in the field of Deaf Studies (O'Brien and Emery 2014; Gulliver 2015). Such biases are rooted in ableism, which has the effect of leaving deaf people with responsibility to deal with the problem of privilege and hearing people with an unfair advantage (Campbell, 2009).

Although ableism is often the determining factor in limiting deaf people's career progression, it is also an aspect of privilege in enabling hearing people to advance their careers without having to deal with the obstacles and disadvantages that deaf people often encounter. Advantages associated with hearing privilege

can be “cashed-in” on a daily basis: from choosing jobs, obtaining better work conditions, having access to promotion or research funding opportunities, and being free to act with confidence knowing that you are likely to meet employers who share similar identities and attributes as your own (Ferndale, 2018). Other advantages associated with hearing privilege include not having to disclose their deafness in a job application or asking a hiring manager to provide a sign language interpreter (Woodcock, Rohan, and Campbell, 2007). Hearing people do not have to contend with employers being overly concerned about the cost associated with hiring an interpreter, and experience anxiety about interpreter quality and competency (Robinson and Henner, 2018). Hearing people can feel confident knowing that employers will not focus on their hearing status or dis/ability. They can be reasonably certain that members of the interview panel will be from the same social identity group (O’Connell, 2022). Furthermore, they do not have to worry about whether or not employers will treat them as a health and safety concern in the workplace. Nor do they have to worry about having their hearing dis/ability put under the spotlight. Hearing people can be sure that managers will grant them promotion on the basis of work performance rather than the disability question. Such advantages are “invisible knapsacks of special provisions” (McIntosh, 1989) that hearing people can count on when competing with deaf people for the same job.

People from the privileged group enter into the labour market knowing what the established order is and act in ways to keep it in place (Johnson, 2018). This aspect of privilege is what McIntosh (2014) refers to as “conferred dominance”, which is manifest in the cultural assumption that one group is entitled to control or have power over another group. McIntosh maintains that the cultural assumptions held by people who control social institutions are often imposed on those who rely on these institutions to access social and economic resources and opportunities. Johnson (2018) refers to social institutions as the established order in which social systems, social practices, roles, and relationships are organised within a particular culture (e.g. employment, education, religion, family, school, university). In this study, social institutions are established systems governed by hearing people who create ideologies, policies, laws, practices, and social norms. Komerassoff’s (2013) study of deaf education in Australia indicates that the education system allows hearing people to act as “gatekeepers” to labour market openings and their unwillingness to open the gates to educational leadership and management opportunities for deaf people represents a key aspect of privilege. To demonstrate this point, Komerassoff identified the under-representation of deaf teachers working in schools for deaf children as evidence of hearing dominance. The author estimates that 98% of the total are hearing teachers, but this disparity is even more marked at school leadership and management levels. Researchers such as O’Brien and Emery (2014), Sutton-Spence and West (2011), and Kusters et al. (2017) report that while hearing dominance extends to the field of Deaf Studies, no attempt has been made to address this imbalance at higher education institutions. Thus, conferred dominance

is apparent in the numerical underrepresentation of deaf people and the vertical and horizontal segregation of deaf and hearing people.

## **6. Troubled by Ableism: Hearing Fragility**

Due to their dominant status, hearing people may be insulated from the discrimination experienced by deaf people. There have been suggestions that hearing people are protected from seeing ableism and the effects that ableist discrimination has on deaf people's life chances, to the point that they experience a range of negative emotions when called upon to talk about discrimination (Robinson and Henner, 2018). Hearing people may experience a form of stress similar to "white fragility" (DiAngelo 2018), which refers to emotional reactions ("racial stress") and defensive moves that white people go through when their ideas about racism are challenged. DiAngelo (2018) argues that white people react by going through a process of denial, defensiveness, argumentation, silence, or withdrawal from discussion. These emotional responses are often triggered by fear, anger, or guilt. DiAngelo (2018) maintains that such behaviour prevents real dialogue about racism from taking place. For example, white people can easily avoid or ignore uncomfortable situations that might be triggered by racial talk, something that people of colour cannot easily do themselves. The ease with which white people are able to avoid such uncomfortable conversations allows them to reproduce their power and privilege in organisations.

Robinson and Henner (2018) similarly explore the way hearing people react and cope with perceived employment discrimination and ableism at work in higher education institutions in the US. Specifically, Robinson and Henner examine the white fragility hypothesis in the context of hearing people's insecurities around perceived discrimination against deaf people. The authors observed how hearing ASL teachers felt compelled to seek assurance from deaf faculty members that they were not doing something wrong by teaching the language at university. As Robinson and Henner note, the teachers were prioritising the emotional impact that such a position has on them rather than focusing on the impact on deaf faculty members. While struggling with an identity that marks them out as oppressor, they became more concerned about being accused of taking up "space" that should belong to deaf teachers. These sentiments were observed by Sutton-Spence and West (2011) who, as hearing academics working in a Deaf Studies department, find themselves "burying, ignoring, and suppressing our feelings of discomfort, confusion, and stuck-ness [sic]" (429) while teaching about the history of deaf people's oppression. Gulliver (2015) and O'Brien and Emery (2014) suggest that Sutton-Spence and West are attempting to position themselves as the "good" hearing allies of deaf people. The authors argue that this distinction allows hearing people to distance themselves from the problem of ableism. In doing so, they avoid dealing with uncomfortable and troublesome topics. Although they explore "hearingness" as a concept by drawing parallels with the Whiteness concept, Sutton-Spence and West fall short of offering an in-depth analysis of the term. Their reluctance is perhaps rooted in hearing fragility; their response to the tension between presenting an image of themselves as allies with good intentions and talking about benefiting from an ableist academy.

## 7. A Call to Action

Bauman's (2004: 240) statement that "we must gain a deeper understanding of the dynamics of audism" represents a call to action requiring effective strategies for dismantling power and privilege in the pursuit of social justice. Hearing privilege underlies many of the challenges preventing deaf people from accessing the same employment opportunities as hearing people (O'Connell, 2021a). In this study, I argue that social justice educators need to engage with hearing people (as employers and co-workers of deaf people) in conversations about power and privilege. According to Wolsey et al. (2017), hearing people need to be self-reflectively aware of their social position in relation to the disadvantages suffered by deaf people. From that perspective, privilege workshops and training programs are useful for providing privileged groups with an awareness of privilege and their complicity in the disadvantage and oppression of others (Pease, 2016).

### 7.1 Transformative Education

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire (1972) developed a critical pedagogy that refers to a set of educational practices that seek to empower students to think critically about the oppressive reality of their situation. Freire believed students lacked what he called *conscientização* or "conscientisation" – a concept that refers to a process of becoming aware of the social and cultural context in which they are embedded and questioning the assumptions that maintain the oppressive social arrangement (Freire, 1972). While Freire's critical pedagogy is focused on empowering the disadvantaged, there is a growing trend towards educating the privileged or those who benefit from the oppression of the marginalised. This new critical pedagogy is one that is reserved for the privileged and is designed under various titles such as "pedagogy of the oppressor" (Pease, 2014), "education of the privileged" (Goodman, 2001), and "anti-oppressive pedagogy" (Beckett, 2015). Scholars argue that this new critical pedagogy is important for privileged students because they may one day hold positions of power. Goodman (2001) and DiAngelo (2018), for example, advocate for educating white people about their white privilege and racism in the workplace. Goodman (2001) suggests that employers fund privilege workshops as part of employees' continuing professional training to enhance effective teamwork skills among staff members. DiAngelo (2018) advocates for social justice educators to design and implement privilege training courses for organisations interested in issues such as diversity, inclusion, and equality.

To address male privilege, Pease (2016: 52) facilitates anti-sexism workshops for men "as part of gender awareness and gender equality training within workplaces". The aim is to increase awareness among male staff members about the problem of patriarchy and its impact on the lives of women and children. Using presentations, small group discussions, and simulation exercises, Pease (2016) encourages men to talk openly about patriarchy and male privilege to help them become aware of their own complicity in the oppression of women. Pease discovers that talking about male privilege triggers a range of emotional responses from men. Men experience

emotional discomfort as a result of talking about male privilege. However, as Pease maintains, emotions can be a catalyst for breaking down men's defensiveness and avoidance behaviour. Pease argues that male privilege training can be beneficial in enabling men to become aware of sexism in the workplace and other forms of discrimination against women.

In this study, I argue that deaf service provider organisations can benefit from a similar type of training. Unfortunately, research on this phenomenon is scarce. However, the literature on transformative education offers some useful guidance on developing hearing privilege workshops. Goodman (2001), for example, advocates for an intersectional approach to engaging with workshop participants in a discussion about different social identities based on race, gender, sexuality, and disability. Goodman suggests that educators begin by asking workshop participants to talk about the link between their social identity and the associated disadvantage they experience as a result of sexism, racism, or ableism. This approach helps participants understand that oppression exists and is not a thing of the past, as most privileged learners are inclined to argue. According to Curry-Stevens (2007), learners should be actively encouraged to share personal experiences of disadvantage so that the participants can build empathy towards one another. The participants then engage in a process of "critical reflection", which is a key component of transformative learning (Freire, 1972). They begin to think critically by questioning systems and challenging dominant cultural beliefs and assumptions about privilege and oppression (Goodman, 2001; Pease, 2016). This sets the stage for a discussion of their social identity as privileged individuals. Learners are encouraged to familiarise themselves with McIntosh's (1989) "invisible knapsack" of privileges. They will construct a list of unearned advantages conferred to them as a result of the disadvantages of others. Doing so allows learners to see that "privilege exists, that they are privileged [and] culpable in domination because of what they do or fail to do or, perhaps, because of the very nature of their identity" (Curry-Stevens, 2007: 49).

## **7.2 Privilege Ally Action**

According to Kendall (2013), individuals who use their privilege to actively prevent discrimination from taking place can play an important and active role in transforming the workplace culture to become more inclusive, equitable, and diverse. Privilege allies are defined as members of the dominant social groups working to end the system of oppression that gives them greater privilege and power based on their social group membership (Kraemer, 2007). Kendall (2013) highlights the need for privileged groups to undertake training that clarifies conceptualisations of privilege so that they can translate their understanding of privilege into ally action at institutional and individual levels. They need to understand what privilege is and acknowledge how their own privilege operates from their social locations (Kraemer 2007). However, awareness of these issues and knowledge about allyship are not enough. Allies must take action and use their privilege to challenge oppression. Such actions may involve going against the people who share their privilege and

speaking out about discrimination to those in power (Kendall, 2013). Ally work involves transforming systems of inequality and dominance to be equitable and just. Johnson (2018: 112) shows how ally action can be enacted in the workplace:

*When a committee is making hiring decisions and an applicant comes up for discussion and someone says “not a good fit” and everyone is silent or murmurs assent. And there is a critical moment when someone in the room [...] cannot shake the feeling that something is wrong, that “not a good fit” is code for not-male, not-white, not-heterosexual, not-nondisabled – it being perfectly clear that the applicant is qualified. Do they say something or not?*

Johnson argues that, by staying silent, one becomes part of the problem. Silence affirms the normalcy of the response. Alternatively, allies can become part of the solution by speaking up with a question: “In what specific way is this not a good fit?” By questioning a statement, they draw attention to the problem. Johnson suggests that this approach can make people feel uncomfortable. People may end up trying to deal with their discomfort by dismissing, excluding, or even attacking the speaker. Allies may fear the cost they experience as a result of these confrontations, such as being viewed as troublemakers. However, Drury and Kaiser (2014) found that this is not necessarily the case: for example, men who confront sexism against women experience smaller costs of confrontation than do women. The authors suggest that male allies may “be perceived as acting more legitimately or appropriately when they confront sexism compared to women who engage in the same action” (2014: 642). Men may be seen as more credible than women and be taken more seriously. Men’s action in confronting sexism against women may be viewed as not directly benefiting themselves, compared to women, who are perceived as trying to benefit their gender group (Drury and Kaiser, 2014).

Johnson (2018) suggests that allies could take minor risks by paying attention to subtle forms of prejudice, oppression, and discrimination, speaking out against discriminatory acts, participating in social movements, joining an organisation, writing letters to politicians and newspapers, and breaking silences on social injustice matters. His recommendation is that if it’s considered too risky to do so, individuals should take a moment to practice self-reflection and understand that silence (as in doing nothing) makes one complicit in maintaining systems of inequality. Johnson urges privileged allies to accept that making people feel uncomfortable is par for the course and part of the solution. By opposing the devaluing of disadvantaged group members in the workplace, questioning executive decision-making, and speaking out in support of equal pay and promotion for everyone, allies disrupt the flow of business-as-usual. By problematising the problem, allies can contribute to changing attitudes and cultures.

## 8. Conclusion

This article set out to analyse and interrogate hearing privilege in employment contexts by synthesising and integrating an intersectionality of concepts, categories, and issues on privilege, identity, and employment from a range of Disability Studies, Deaf Studies,

and Privilege Studies literature. This goal was accomplished by considering some interesting aspects of privilege and examining how hearing privilege and hearing identity contribute to deaf people's employment disadvantage. The article highlighted intersectionality as an important conceptual framework for illuminating an understanding of how experiences of privilege and oppression are often shaped by different social identities that simultaneously intersect with one another (Collins, 2000). However, it was important to highlight central hearing identity as a significant identity marker, and a social construct which serves to confer automatic unearned advantages to hearing people. Johnson (2018: 69) reminds us that privileged individuals need to be aware "that the trouble around privilege is their trouble as much as anyone else's". By the same token, hearing people must be conscious that the problem of hearing privilege is their trouble as much as it is deaf people's. Trouble involves hearing people taking the action in opposing ableism and publicly renouncing the unearned benefit they derive from deaf people's disadvantage. Trouble also comes from learning about hearing privilege through transformative education training. Finding ways to make a real difference involves more than simply including deaf people in decision-making powers. Hearing people can use their privilege to speak up and question decisions that affect deaf people in negative ways. By challenging everyday ableism in the workplace, they engage in the practice of allyship and become part of the change.

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