Understanding & Dismantling Privilege

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Easier Said Than Done: Undoing Hearing Privilege in Deaf Studies

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Abstract

Although Deaf Studies has made a significant contribution to research on oppression, there has been little attempt at sensitizing hearing students to issues of power and privilege within the field. A major reason for this lapse is the manifestation and maintenance of hearing privilege within Deaf Studies. Most Deaf Studies courses tend to discuss oppression as problems affecting deaf people, thereby neglecting to explore the advantages of hearing-abled people due to that oppression. The workings of hearing privilege are rarely problematized in Deaf Studies teaching and research because it is invisible, normalized, and structurally embedded. In this study, the author argues for the importance of incorporating the concepts of both oppression and hearing privilege into Deaf Studies programs. If there is an expectation to study oppression, then hearing students and academics of Deaf Studies need to be prepared to explore the concept of hearing privilege. The author discusses and reflects upon his experiences of delivering social justice workshops to hearing people within the field of Deaf Studies. He contends that bringing hearing privilege into debate within Deaf Studies can enable hearing people to become aware of their privilege and take responsibility for challenging inequality.

Keywords: hearing privilege, Deaf studies, deaf people, hearing people, hearingness, audism

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A workshop series inspired this essay that I designed, implemented, and facilitated in Ireland and the United Kingdom (UK) during a ten-year period between 2009 and 2019. The workshop sessions were conducted as part of my social justice research project on deaf people and the intersections of oppression. The primary motivations were to engage the hearing students, graduates, and academics of Deaf Studies in discussions about audism and oppression within the field of Deaf Studies.[i] Readers might question my decision to focus almost exclusively on those who can hear, or *hearing people*, as the workshop series participants. As scholars have noted, Deaf Studies is dominated and controlled by hearing academics who appear to exhibit an unwillingness to acknowledge the benefits, advantages, and rewards they gain as a result of their status as hearing people and the disadvantages faced by deaf people (Kusters, De Meulder, & O'Brien, 2017). From that perspective, I adopted a critical approach that opened a line of questioning power dynamics at structural and interpersonal levels. Participants were encouraged to engage in self-reflection, delve deeply into their social identities and negotiate their privileges, successes, insecurities, and challenges within the field of Deaf Studies. My intention was to enable participants to identify systems of oppression—audism and oralism—that lead to the marginalization of deaf people. *Audism* refers to a set of assumptions and practices that promote the unequal treatment of deaf people on the basis of hearing (dis)ability (Bauman, 2004).

In my effort to infuse critical discussion to the workshop sessions, I came across Peggy McIntosh's (1989) seminal article on *White privilege*, a term she conceptualized to describe "an invisible package of unearned assets that [she] can count on cashing in each day, but about which [she is] meant to remain oblivious" (p. 291). In her paper, McIntosh presents a personal account of her experience as a White woman, in which she observes that "[W]hites are carefully taught not to recognize [W]hite privilege, as males are taught not to recognize male privilege" (p. 1). She provides a list of advantages and benefits that are handed to her because of her skin color. For example, she can be confident in finding a publisher for a piece on White privilege, or she can speak in public to a powerful male group without her race being called into question. *Privilege* refers to a condition that "confers dominance, gives permission to control, because of one's race or sex" (McIntosh, 2014, p. 36).

Many scholars have extended McIntosh's theories to a study of *male privilege* (Noble & Pease, 2011) in relation to sexism and *heterosexual privilege* (Case & Stewart, 2010) in the context of homophobia. Furthermore, ability privilege has gained traction in Disability Studies research (Shea, 2014; Wolbring, 2014; Bialka & Morro, 2017). Disability Studies scholars conceptualize *ability privilege* as conditions that confer advantages to people who exhibit certain abilities (Wolbring, 2014). Yet, such work has rarely considered the advantages hearing people enjoy because of systems of inequality that disadvantage deaf people. There is, therefore, a need for a new vocabulary to discuss ability privilege relevant to audiological identities.

I submit that examining hearing privilege offers a more useful way of problematizing hearing dominance (Bauman, 2004). Rather than seeing hearing dominance in terms of deaf people's disadvantage and powerlessness, Deaf Studies need to shine a spotlight on hearing people's advantage and powerfulness as

contributing factors in the oppression of deaf people. In this essay, I define *hearing privilege* as the unearned advantages, benefits, and entitlements reserved for hearing people that are not based on talent or effort but rather on (hearing) ability status and their membership to the "normal" social group. My aim in writing this essay is to focus attention on Deaf Studies as a central site of hearing privilege and oppression. In line with McIntosh's *Invisible Knapsack of Privilege* exercises, I intend to construct a list of advantages that hearing people enjoy based on their relevance to what has been described in the literature and workshop discussions (see Appendix). The discussion is not meant to point a finger of blame or instill feelings of guilt or shame in hearing people but rather to raise awareness about hearing privilege and provide them with a deeper understanding of the oppression system that affects deaf people. I hope the discussion will generate new theories in Deaf Studies and new insights into finding ways to promote social justice.

This essay also demonstrates the value of teaching and learning about hearing privilege in Deaf Studies. In doing so, I develop my argument in four stages. First, I briefly describe the history and development of Deaf Studies as an academic discipline and discuss its evolution, conceptual frameworks, Deaf scholarship, and the role of hearing academics in the field (Kusters et al., 2017). Second, I discuss the disadvantages faced by deaf people. Third, I explore the hidden processes of hearing privilege via an examination of hearingness (Krentz, 2008) and hearing hegemony (Kusters et al., 2017; Ladd, 2003)—both concepts help explain the complex dynamics of oppression and privilege. Finally, I offer insight into my experience delivering the workshop sessions and discuss the participants' thoughts and views about hearing privilege. From these deliberations, I present a list of advantages and benefits granted to hearing people.

Deaf Studies: An Emerged Field

Deaf Studies stand as an established academic field encompassing a wide range of higher education courses, modules, and programs on sign language, sign language interpreting, sign language teaching, Deaf culture, Deaf education, Deaf history, Deaf art, and Deaf literature (Kusters et al., 2017). Such programs have been developed in many countries, including the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, Germany, Ireland, New Zealand, and South Africa (Murray, 2017). Although Deaf Studies scholarship has grown exponentially over the last 30 years, little has been attempted to describe Deaf Studies with a formal definition. There appears to be some ambiguity around what precisely Deaf Studies means as a concept. The term is often used to characterize sign language studies, interpreting, and teaching. The diverse range of courses makes it difficult for scholars to come up with a more coherent definition. One hypothesis offered to explain this difficulty is that researchers may be reluctant to restrict it to a single academic category (O'Brien, 2017). Some scholars define *Deaf Studies* as denoting a study of the language, culture, and community of deaf people (Sutton-Spence & West, 2011; Cooper et al., 2012). Others such as O'Brien (2017) see Deaf Studies as being concerned with "all research performed on or with signing (visual or tactile) [D]eaf communities and individuals who identify with those communities" (p. 57). For Kusters et al. (2017), Deaf Studies entail "the study of anything linked to deaf people, including research in neuropsychology, theoretical sign linguistics, [D]eaf education, language

acquisition, and sign language interpretation" (p. 3).

The varied definitions of Deaf Studies seem to be reflective of the different intellectual strands in the field. Indeed, Deaf Studies may be many things to many people, but the common denominator is deaf people. Just as Black Studies focuses on Black people and the Black experience (Karenga, 2009), one might justifiably argue that Deaf Studies is predominantly concerned with deaf people and the Deaf experience. Several researchers have supported this perspective. Ladd (2003), for example, maintains that Deaf Studies should be about teaching and learning about the human condition. In other words, the Deaf experience must be central to all inquiry from which to study human experience. From that perspective, the mission of Deaf Studies is to teach and learn about deaf people's contribution to society and humanity, previously denied in the history textbooks. Deaf people's history has been invisible in the history books and the history of all histories, be they mainstream or fringe history. The writing of history is often an unconscious decision in which the history of deaf persons is not featured in mainstream history books. Writers who can hear favor the stories of hearing-abled people. Deaf people do not fit into the idea of what is history. The purpose of Deaf Studies is to fill this gap by telling the story of deaf people and all that they have done, endured, and encountered in social, cultural, educational, and political life.

Perhaps more significant than the focus of Deaf Studies is what scholars feel is the reason for it. Kusters et al. (2017) argue that we need Deaf Studies to increase awareness of the history of identity politics rooted in the Deaf experience. Woodward (1972) capitalized the term *Deaf* to denote a positive cultural, American Sign Language identity when the dominant medical view of deaf people sought to understand them in terms of perceived deficiencies, dysfunctions, problems, needs, and limitations. Hearing professionals who hold a pathological view of deaf people tend to use the lowercase *deaf*, which describes an audiological condition of hearing loss. Woodward (1972) shifted the focus from dominant audiological labels to a frame of reference in which Deaf culture is considered valid and formed the basis for teaching and learning about deaf people. Deaf with the capital letter "D" was conceptualized as a political identifier similar to Black with the capital letter "B" referring to the collective identity of Black people (Karenga, 1988).

Ladd (2003) argues that Deaf Studies was not established to promote academic careers but to generate new knowledge and ways to theorize about deaf people, their language, culture, and communities. This stands in stark contrast to studies in Deaf education dominated by the medical model of disability, which upholds the values and behaviors of hearing people as standard and focuses on how deaf people deviate from that norm (O'Connell, 2017). Ladd maintains that Deaf Studies scholarship must contribute towards the liberation of deaf people. There needs to be data that uncovers significant patterns of oppression which affect deaf people's position in society. There needs to be information that reveals the extent to which deaf people have endured and continue to endure oppression from hearing people. Deaf Studies need to produce content that demands an understanding of power relations and structural and systematic oppression. Perhaps more importantly, research and material should unpack the invisible knapsack (McIntosh, 1989) of privilege that

contributes to the disadvantage of deaf people.

It is important to note that my argument is not meant to be a definitive concept of Deaf Studies. I merely provide a set of ideas about the field to generate debate about what it should be about. This debate should be a prerequisite to setting goals and targets for developing teaching and research programs. On that basis, it is useful to provide a backdrop of the origin and development of Deaf Studies as an academic field. However, a detailed and comprehensive rendering of its history worldwide is beyond the scope of this research. It has already been chartered by Murray (2017), Kusters et al. (2017), and O'Brien (2017). It is worth consulting the work of these authors to gain an insight into the field's foundation and paradigm. In this paper, I will instead present a historical overview to provide the basis for understanding how Deaf Studies gained impetus from Deaf activism to form an academic subject and establish itself as an academic area in its own right. The context of the discussion will focus on the United States, where the idea of Deaf Studies originated, and the United Kingdom (UK), where the first Deaf Studies center was established in Europe.

Deaf Studies: Historical Context

It is probably difficult to identify the exact date for the beginning of Deaf Studies as an academic discipline, but Murray (2017) brings its evolution in the United States into sharp focus. From his account, we can discern that Deaf Studies emerged from often difficult and frustrating journeys. We can see that deaf people have struggled to bring their knowledge and experience of Deaf culture and American Sign Language (ASL) to the academic community. They have struggled in the face of the dominance and power of hearing academics and professionals who formulate negative and oftentimes inaccurate explanations about them as a social group (Lane, 1992, 2008). It has been argued that the dominative processes of oralism are at the crux of the disadvantages experienced by deaf people. *Oralism* which means "of the mouth," denotes an educational ideology asserting the belief that spoken language is superior to sign language (O'Connell & Deegan, 2014). Oralism involved training deaf children to acquire spoken language by developing skills in speech, lipreading, and residual hearing (O'Connell, 2015). In oralism, two principle themes stand out – one is the prohibition of sign language in the classroom, often enforced by the teacher through the physical punishment of deaf children, and the other is the removal of deaf teachers from teaching deaf children (Anglin-Jaffe, 2020). The threatened existential status of sign language in deaf education provided the impetus for academic activists to preserve ASL through linguistic research and the establishment of Deaf Studies.

Deaf Studies in the United States

The term *Deaf Studies* first entered public discourse in 1971 when the deaf executive director of the National Association of the Deaf (NAD), Frederick C. Schreiber, called for the establishment of a new program of Deaf Studies (Bauman, 2008). Schreiber justified his argument with an analogy to Black Studies and Jewish Studies:

> If deaf people are to get ahead in our time, they must have a better image of themselves and their capabilities. They need concrete examples of what deaf people have already done so they can

> project for themselves a brighter future. If we can have Black studies, Jewish studies, why not Deaf [S]tudies? (Bauman, 2008, p. 7)

However, even before that date, there were isolated examples of linguistic research projects which laid the groundwork for Deaf Studies in the United States. As early as the 1960s, William Stokoe (hearing) and his team of deaf researchers Dorothy Casterline and Carl Cronenberg published their linguistic research findings, which confirmed the status of ASL as a bona fide language containing all the linguistic markers necessary for human languages to function (Stokoe et al., 1965). This landmark study provided the necessary stream for the setting up of the Linguistic Research Laboratory (LRL) at Gallaudet University in 1971 and the *Sign Language Studies* journal a year later. Gallaudet University is currently the only fully established "deaf university" globally, where most courses are provided through ASL. Although a number of Deaf Studies courses were provided at Gallaudet during the 1970s and 1980s, they were developed more as subject areas and modules than complete degree programs (Bauman, 2008).

In 1981, Boston University became the first higher education institution in the United States to establish a Deaf Studies department. A similar department was founded at California State University, Northridge, two years later. In 1985, Bristol Community College in Massachusetts began providing Deaf Studies diploma courses before expanding to undergraduate and postgraduate degree programs in the late 1990s. The delay with setting up a Deaf Studies unit at Gallaudet University resulted from a prolonged struggle with the university system, which, according to Murray (2017), attempted to undermine the development of ASL research, including the LRL unit. The dominance of the pathological view of deaf people had such a powerful influence that many attempts to set up a Deaf Studies program were thwarted. The background to this struggle needs to be understood in the context of the university's history—an example of how hearing privilege is played out.

Gallaudet University

From its foundation in 1864 to the late 1980s, hearing people have assumed presidents, vice-presidents, deans, and other top administrative positions at Gallaudet University (Christiansen & Barnartt, 1995). As a result, deaf faculty and academics were forced to work in a paradoxical situation in which they were subordinate to hearing academics occupying the central administrative positions in a hearing-controlled deaf-focused university environment. This form of hearing hegemony (Ladd, 2003) guaranteed the dominant position of hearing faculty members and the subordination of deaf academics (Kusters et al., 2017). The privileges enjoyed by faculty members were emphasized by the continuing exclusion of deaf people from the top administrative positions in the university (Murray, 2017). Until the late 1980s, no deaf person had ever been appointed university president, and many deaf faculty members have struggled to find their place in the only higher education where courses are delivered through the medium of ASL (Sacks, 1990).

The closure of the ASL linguistic lab at Gallaudet during the mid-1980s coincided with the growing rumblings of discontent emerging through a new generation of deaf students calling for a deaf president. Not for the first time, students encountered

resistance from the university's top echelons, especially from administrators who thought that only hearing people should occupy the top university positions (Sacks, 1990). This level of paternalism was never more emphasized when the ongoing hearing president resigned in 1987 and was replaced by a hearing candidate the following spring. It happened even though the other two qualified candidates were deaf. The Board of Trustees had followed a long line of choosing hearing candidates and a group of Deaf activists reacted by barricading the university campus. All the entry points into the university were shut until the board accepted their demand for the resignation of the new president and the election of a deaf candidate (Sacks, 1990). The *Deaf President Now!* (DPN) movement spurred a wave of negative publicity for the university and a growing fear that deaf people really meant business (Christiansen & Barnartt, 1995). The Board of Trustees and administrators eventually acquiesced to the demands, and within 24 hrs, a deaf candidate was elected to replace the hearing candidate to become Gallaudet's first deaf president. A Deaf Studies department was established within six years, and a graduate program of Deaf Studies and ASL was rolled out eight years later (Murray, 2017). The political root of *Deaf President Now!* inspired by the mission of Deaf Studies, and a deaf academic was hired as head of the department (Bauman, 2008).

Deaf Studies in the United Kingdom

Kusters et al. (2017) trace the history of Deaf Studies in the United Kingdom (UK) back to 1986 when the Centre for Deaf Studies (CDS) was established at the University of Bristol. Before that date, researchers had been conducting British Sign Language (BSL) research at the university. The BSL research unit was nestled in the university's social science department. The researchers were awarded funding to develop a BSL research project (Brennan & Colville, 1979). This led to the establishment of the Deaf Studies Trust in 1984 and the founding of CDS two years later. The founding members of CDS included deaf and hearing academics and teachers, some of whom had no connection with the British Deaf community. Over the years, the balance in the membership shifted to include a higher proportion of hearing individuals due to the increase in the number of hearing students.

Furthermore, the university appointed a hearing professor as CDS director to mobilize the program. The appointment of a hearing academic as a leader might appear inconsequential, but it forms a pattern of hearing domination in Deaf Studies (Kusters et al., 2017). The original hearing lecturers at CDS held PhD degrees in academic disciplines and specialized areas of knowledge outside of Deaf Studies. By contrast, deaf lecturers of Deaf Studies did not have PhD degrees but had specialized knowledge of BSL and Deaf culture.

The earlier research ideas of the BSL research team influenced the development of diploma courses in BSL interpreting and BSL teaching. The diploma courses flourished in the 1980s and, by the 1990s, undergraduate programs were introduced. This made it possible for students to study for complete degrees in Deaf Studies. In the same year, *Deaf Worlds: International Journal of Deaf Studies* was established to provide a platform for debate on social, cultural, historical, political, linguistic, anthropological, and psychological issues in the field of Deaf Studies. Hearing scholars as established academics in the field made up the majority of the journal's editors. Unfortunately, the articles were never

digitized, which means that online access to published work is unavailable. *Deaf Worlds* stayed active for several years until 2008, when the editorial team disbanded apparently with no explanation for its closure.

In the late 1990s, several postgraduate courses in Deaf Studies became available at CDS, including a doctoral research program. By the turn of the 21st century, a major milestone was reached when a deaf student was awarded a PhD in Deaf Studies. The appointment of a deaf academic to the position of director of CDS was another significant achievement. The CDS operated as the flagship of international Deaf Studies research, producing new knowledge and theories that have stood the test of time. Amongst the most valuable theoretical work to emerge was Ladd's (2003) thesis on Deafhood. Ladd coined the term *Deafhood* to describe the ontological experience of being deaf in the social world. In line with Woodward (1972), the capitalized word denotes a political identity with the suffix –*hood* added to capture the essence of the Deaf experience. The Deafhood concept continues to be widely debated in international research. Indeed, it has had such a remarkable influence on the field of Deaf Studies that many scholars have drawn inspiration from Ladd's work.

The expansion of CDS can be seen in the wide range of modules offered on BSL teaching, sociolinguistics of BSL, BSL interpreting, Deaf education, sign bilingualism, Deafhood, Deaf history, and Deaf community and society (O'Brien & Emery, 2014). Such courses were established despite underfunding, opposition and prejudice, and intense and prolonged struggles with the system. CDS faced many obstacles towards its development and expansion. In many cases, this involved a struggle for power and autonomy, sometimes having to justify their position within the academy or fight for survival. CDS survived for as long as possible until 2013, when funding cuts forced its closure.

Hearing Hegemony in Deaf Studies

Implicit in Deaf Studies research is the notion of the institution as predominantly hearing (Gulliver, 2015). To understand how hearing dominance manifests itself in the field of Deaf Studies, scholars have used Gramsci's concept of hegemony (O'Brien & Emery, 2014; Gulliver, 2015; Kusters et al., 2017). The word *hegemony* describes the way dominance is manifest through consensus built within an institutional system that rewards the interests, intentions, and efforts of dominant members of the social class (Gramsci, 1971). For examples of hearing hegemony, Kusters et al. (2017) suggest we look at how official gatekeepers of academic journals and publications work to limit the academic contributions of deaf scholars. For example, O'Brien and Emery (2014) note a stark under-representation of deaf academics in Deaf Studies, particularly in the area of research and publishing. Hearing hegemony manifests through dominance in research and publications. To a large extent, research in Deaf Studies has been closely tied to academic journals that publish work in the field of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education, Sign Language Studies, and Sign Language Interpreting Studies. Academic journals play a crucial role in creating knowledge within the field of Deaf Studies and the career advancement of deaf and hearing researchers. Journal editors and editorial boards play important roles as gatekeepers of knowledge within the field, setting research priorities and making decisions that advance scholars into roles as reviewers and editors.

According to Kusters et al. (2017), hearing academics dominate the editorial boards and editorial leadership teams in academic journals that publish papers on Deaf-related issues. The authors note the underrepresentation of deaf people in the editorial boards of leading Deaf education journals. Deaf academics comprise approximately 2% of editorial team members, and this imbalance in editorial roles has implications for Deaf Studies (Bauman, 2008). For instance, evidence suggests that a lack of equality can create bias in the review process (Konrad, 2008). It may also indicate to deaf researchers that their work will not be published or that their submissions are not welcome. Deaf scholars who submit their manuscripts to such journals are more likely to have their work screened by hearing reviewers and hearing editors who make specific decisions on what will be published. They may face difficulties since their approach to research problems is often presented from the Deaf perspective. As a result, deaf scholars may find their work rejected because it does not conform to the conventional way of thinking.

O'Brien and Emery (2014) argue that hearing academics have been more successful than deaf scholars in navigating their way up the academic career ladder into higher and more prestigious jobs due to their work in Deaf Studies. As discussed elsewhere, the appointment of a hearing academic to the position of director lends itself to a contradiction. This paradox extends to how Deaf Studies is "largely populated, organized, researched, and taught by hearing scholars" (Sutton-Spence & West, 2011, p. 244). Just as it seems odd for a Women's Studies center to be directed by male faculty, it is equally strange for hearing academics to direct Deaf Studies. Yet, deaf faculty members work under the direction of hearing academics, knowing that they earn their living from an oppressive hearing institution (Ladd, 2003).

The underrepresentation of deaf scholars noted by Kusters et al. (2017) can be attributed to systems of inequality that allow hearing people to gain advantages in their academic careers—hearing people begin their academic career from the point of being undergraduate students of Sign Language, Deaf Education, and Sign Language Interpreting. They then progress towards a postgraduate degree, including a PhD. After one or two postdoc appointments, they are hired as lecturers or professors. Baker-Shenk and Kyle (1990) note that hearing researchers have successfully secured research funding to work on Deaf community projects in which they work as lead investigators. Sometimes they hire deaf people as research assistants who undertake the bulk of the research labor (O'Brien, 2020).

In some cases, hearing researchers are hired to assist the lead researchers as part of an all-hearing research team (e.g., Leeson & Venturi, 2017). The rewards are then granted to the lead investigator who publishes the findings in peer-reviewed academic journals. In their position as lead academics, they have the means to travel and present papers at high-profile conferences and return home with enhanced reputations in the field of Deaf Studies.

Kusters et al. (2017) noted the consistent exclusion of deaf scholars from research and publication opportunities. They found that hearing scholars of Deaf Studies were more inclined to recruit in the research hearing academics in the field or non-specialist hearing academics from outside the discipline (Gulliver, 2015). For instance, Young and Temple's (2014) work on Deaf Studies research brings together a hearing

Deaf Studies faculty member (Young) with another hearing faculty member (Temple) who is skilled in research methods but not in Deaf Studies. Similarly, Leeson and Saaed (2012) are co-authors, one of which is a Deaf Studies academic who can hear (Leeson) and the other, who can also hear (Saaed), is skilled in linguistics but not in Deaf Studies. The choice of authors appears to privilege a second author skilled in hearing-world academic knowledge rather than one skilled in Deaf-world knowledge. This potentially also tells a story about the envisaged audience for the books they publish and about hearing academics' privilege in shaping their work for unmarked consumption rather than challenging by example. This kind of hearing-as-normal positioning has been defined by Bauman (2004) as audism. The decision to recruit an all-hearing research team may be determined by a desire to associate only with those most likely to have considerable influence in enhancing their academic reputation. The net effect is that deaf people are denied opportunities to become part of the academic network that produces and monitors knowledge in Deaf Studies. The result is a ceiling on their academic achievement tied not to their talent or capabilities but to the privileges granted to hearing academics both within and outside Deaf Studies.

Hearingness as a Social Institution: Deaf People's Disadvantage

Audism

Bauman (2004) uses the term *audism* as an explanatory framework for explaining how and why deaf people experience disadvantages in everyday life. While most scholars see audism as a problem affecting deaf people's disadvantage, few have interrogated the processes by which this is done and the advantages that hearing people gain (Bauman, 2008). Audism is embedded within social institutions (e.g., family, school, employment, higher education) and cultural norms of society; many of these practices are habituated and unconscious (Eckert & Rowley, 2013). Many of the injustices that deaf people experience result from audism and the attitudes and practices of people going about their daily lives unaware of how their assumptions of superiority impact their lives (Lane, 1992). Deaf people's disadvantage also stems from the fact that they live as a minority group within a majority hearing population where they are likely to be judged, stereotyped, and labeled by others (Bauman, 2004). Bauman estimates that hearing people represent 99% of the world's population, with deaf people making up a minuscule of the total number. As such, hearing people dominate the social institutions in which they set forth ideologies that provide the foundation of culture (Krentz, 2008). Their dominance is mirrored in all the major institutions in the world where decisions are made, laws created, legislation enacted, policies implemented, and labels assigned. For example, in higher education institutions, hearing people develop the criteria for defining success, reward system, the distribution of resources, and institutional goals (Kusters et al., 2017). They control the colleges and universities worldwide and act as gatekeepers to a wide range of job opportunities, resources, and funding.

Hearingness

In recent times, the topic of *hearingness* has emerged as a new conceptual framework in Deaf Studies scholarship to describe a set of normative values, beliefs, attitudes that uphold hearing ability as the standard of acceptability against which others are judged, contrasted, or evaluated (Kentz,

2008, p. 66; Sutton-Spence & West, 2011). Hearingness is embedded in social institutions comprising an invisible belief system of ideologies, attitudes, and actions of audism. It is directly connected to institutionalized power and privileges that benefit those who can hear and speak. Kendall (2013, p. 108) offers a covert example of this concept, who observes how university environments are built for hearing people without a thought given to the cultural needs of deaf people—such as, audio public announcement systems are assembled in ways that benefit hearing people. Kendall identifies several advantages granted to her as a hearing person: She can communicate with all those who are hearing, talk around those who are deaf by speaking to other hearing people and the interpreters for the deaf; she can publish papers in the English language, which is the second language of deaf people, an issue that she does not have to deal with herself.

The concept of hearingness provides a valuable lens to understand better its function in the oppression of deaf people (Sutton-Spence & West, 2011). Some examples of hearingness in practice can be gleaned from Deaf Studies literature. One example is school programs that operate a policy of oralism in which harmful practices were inflicted upon deaf children (Anglin-Jaffe, 2020). Such programs are determined, in large part, through structures that privilege hearing norms (e.g., speaking, listening, hearing, and talking). Deaf children were subjected to various forms of physical punishment for using sign language (McDonnell & Saunders, 1993). This practice was carried out to ensure deaf children conformed to hearing norms. Some students were beaten, mocked, and fined money, while others were suspended from class. Some of the more extreme forms of punishment and control include the practice of tying the children's hands behind their backs or forcing them to sit on their hands (McDonnell & Saunders, 1993; Ladd, 2003). Such powerful forms of domination were designed to prevent signing but had much broader implications for education and future careers.

Many deaf people experienced literacy problems in school, which, in turn, contributed to their disadvantage in the employment market, especially when competing with educated hearing people (Woodcock, Rohan, & Campbell, 2007). Since hearing ability is normalized in social institutions (e.g., employment) as standards against which others are judged, deaf people's disadvantage is further increased. A significant number are engaged in more labor-intensive work, less well paid, and less secure than hearing people (Woodcock et al., 2007). Ferndale (2018) argues that most deaf students struggle at the university level because courses often require a high level of English literacy. The attitudinal and environmental barriers exacerbate such problems that deaf people face in their daily lives. As Playforth (2004) observes, social institutions are constructed in ways that allow information to be communicated through auditory channels that require hearing ability. In such an environment, hearing people have the advantage in making choices and decisions about public services or participating in conversation, debate, or discussion, an advantage that is routinely denied deaf people.

Invisibility of Hearing Privilege

Hearing people have privilege because social institutions are organized to grant privileges based on audiological identity (Bauman, 2004; Tuccoli, 2008; Kendall, 2013). Johnson (2001) maintains that privilege is a feature of social systems or

social institutions rather than individuals. Whether or not people have privilege depends on the social institution with which they live and work and the social category they are associated with. When deaf and hearing people work in the same social institution operating an audist culture, hearing people stand to benefit from the structures and processes perpetuating inequality. Hearing people may not have asked for such privileges, but they receive them nonetheless. This happens because social institutions are constructed in ways that confer power to them. McIntosh (2014) names this advantage an *invisible knapsack of privilege*. Advantages associated with hearing privilege can be cashed in daily: from choosing academic jobs to applying for research funding, accessing research opportunities, attending international conference events, and publishing work (Napier & Leeson, 2015). By exercising their entitlements to such opportunities, hearing academics can easily ignore or choose not to see how deaf academics are denied the same opportunities. By partnering with other hearing researchers and authors, they help maintain the established order in social institutions.

In a study conducted at Gallaudet University, Tuccoli (2008) found that most hearing people seem unaware of their privileges and how their choices, decisions, and actions have effectively denied deaf people a range of academic opportunities. As McIntosh (1989) points out, privilege is invisible to those who have it. Privilege structures the social world in ways that allow its mechanism to remain invisible to those who benefit from them (Bailey, 1998). Members of the privileged social group have an *unmarked status* which refers to an invisible identity that is unnoticed by the privileged themselves (Rosenblum & Travis, 1996, p. 142; Flood & Pease, 2005; Johnson, 2001). By the same token, hearing people have an unmarked status because their identity remains invisible (Krentz, 2008). It rarely gets talked about as a significant social category. Hearing identity is unmarked, seen as the norm, a common-sense norm. Hearing people go through life unaware that they have a hearing identity until they encounter deaf people (Bauman, 2009).

The *invisibility* of hearingness means that hearing people rarely notice that they are culturally hearing. *Culturally hearing* in the sense that listening and speaking are normal ways of communicating with people. As Krentz (2008) points out, "hearingness" is not even a word—an unnamed social category. When there is no word for it, we cannot conceptualize or meditate on it. Nor can we question it. This invisibility makes it less likely for hearing people to be noticed. It is easier to maintain the myth that audism is a problem for deaf people and not hearing people. Being invisible makes hearing people powerful as a social group. It facilitates their smooth entry and mobility into positions of power. They can, for instance, apply for jobs without fear of being identified as different than the social and cultural hearing norms of the company or business. Johnson (2001) argues that invisibility can be reinforced through denial of the existence of privilege. When privilege is pointed out to them, members of the privileged group tend to react with anger or dismay. For Johnson, the privilege does not necessarily lead to positive outcomes in life or bring happiness, and fulfillment can often provoke denial or resistance. Some hearing people may be willing to acknowledge that deaf people are disadvantaged and discriminated against but may be less willing to recognize that they are advantaged or privileged because of it (Tuccoli, 2008; Mole, 2018). It may be easier for them to

recognize audism when someone is excluded because of their hearing (dis)ability, but it is much harder to acknowledge that they have advantages due to audism.

Privilege Awareness Workshops

To combat against audism and challenge hearing privilege in Deaf Studies, I found it necessary to develop and facilitate workshops about deaf people and the intersections of oppression. Between 2009 and 2019, I began with several short roundtable discussions on the topics before organizing two major workshop sessions. The workshops, which informed this essay, involved a maximum of 15 participants. Each session lasted for one day. The background of the participants was diverse on a number of dimensions. Participants in Workshop #1 were hearing sign language interpreters and Deaf service providers. In Workshop #2, participants include a mixture of hearing lecturers, researchers, sign language interpreters, and students of Deaf Studies. Hearing people were purposefully selected for the opportunity to learn about hearing privilege. A small number of deaf people participated in both workshops, and the gender demographic was 70% female and 30% male. The workshop discussions were conducted in BSL and Irish Sign Language (ISL). Seats were arranged in a semi-circular format so that participants could see each other signing. The questions I had uppermost in my mind were: *Are hearing participants consciously aware of their privileged position as hearing people? Are they willing to acknowledge that privilege?*

Session Structure

The workshop sessions began with a discussion that mapped out the different domains of social identities tied to group membership based on gender, race, sexuality, and ability. The aim was to encourage participants to reflect on how these domains intersect and position themselves in relation to dominant and subordinate social identity groups. I hoped to create an atmosphere in which participants willingly engaged in *critical dialogue* (Freire, 1970)—that is, reflection and action—on the different forms of oppression perpetuated by sexism, racism, homophobia, and audism (or ableism). One of the theoretical paradigms that informed this early part of the discussion drew upon Crenshaw's (1989) theory of intersectionality. Crenshaw used the metaphor of intersecting roads to describe how racial and gender discrimination interconnect with one another. The road metaphor was adopted to explain how a subordinate social group might navigate the main crossings where the sexism road crosses with the racism road and meet at the intersection. Crenshaw coined the term "intersectionality," which has been used ever since to explain this phenomenon.

I asked students to reflect upon their social identities and link them with the type of inequality or disadvantage associated with that particular social identity group. I wanted the participants to reflect on *positionality*, which refers to standpoints that shape how we make sense of the world (Flood & Pease, 2005). Positionality and the intersections of oppression formed the backdrop of the workshop. I asked participants to consider the binary terms of "deaf" and "hearing" and then asked them to think about the point at which they became "hearing" aware. Some of them said they were born hearing. I explained that Bauman (2004) had not realized he had a hearing identity until he met deaf people. I explained my position as a deaf teacher—my social

identity denotes me as a member of the subordinate social group relative to hearing people. I emphasized that my intention was not to point a finger of blame on hearing people but to raise awareness about the invisibility of hearing privilege and hearingness.

When I introduced the concept of hearingness (Sutton-Spence & West, 2011), I immediately sensed a change in the room's atmosphere. In both workshops, the reaction was the same. Some people expressed annoyance about the topic of hearing identity. I realized that this was an indication of resistance. Goodman (2015) defines *resistance* as the "inability or unwillingness to engage in critical self-reflection and to re-evaluate currently held views" (p. 63). Goodman argues that students become resistant when they feel threatened by uncomfortable topics that "can turn people's world upside down" (p. 63). I noticed that participants were unsettled by discussions on hearing identity and hearingness because such topics put the spotlight on hearing people. Other participants reacted by retreating into silence.

Writing about the challenges she faced as a Black teacher, Ladson-Billings (1996) noticed that White students engage in silence as a form of resistance when discussing racism. According to the author, some students use silence as "a weapon or way to defy the legitimacy of the teacher and/or knowledge" (p. 82). I noticed that some participants used silence to let me know they were unwilling to discuss hearingness and hearing identity. There may have been an element of fear about saying something offensive or being misunderstood by others in the room. For example, one participant caught up with me after the end of Workshop #2 and said, "Sorry, I didn't say much. I don't want my reputation damaged by something I said today. I work here, so I have to watch my back." Fear of being called an oppressor or going against the grain of established thinking can be an uncomfortable experience for hearing people (Sutton-Spence & West, 2011).

In order to encourage participants to look into how audism results in advantages for hearing people, I had to provide factual data and video clips of deaf people sharing stories. I explained the history of oppression of deaf people using quotes extracted from my research data (O'Connell & Deegan, 2014; O'Connell, 2017). I also provided examples of how deaf academics were consistently excluded from research and publication opportunities. I mentioned a recent protest meeting organized by a group of Deaf activists in response to allegations of employment discrimination against deaf people within the Deaf community domain. It was claimed that hearing employers in Deaf service organizations hired less qualified hearing candidates for jobs that deaf people were qualified to do. I asked them to work in pairs to talk about audism, using the case study as an example. When we mentioned a public demonstration being organized in protest against the exclusion of deaf people, I asked participants to consider the idea of participating in the event in a show of support. Most participants agreed in principle that a public demonstration should go ahead but would never take part in something controversial. They cited the potential impact this would have on their careers. I noticed their comments were cloaked in hearingness, a place of structural advantage from which they could distance themselves from deaf people's struggle against audism.

Some of the participants' comments featured an apology ("Sorry, I can't risk losing my job") and a couple of declarations

("I am neutral on this" and "I am not the type of person to discriminate against deaf people"). In the last two comments, I recognized the defensiveness in the participants, which resonates with Goodman's (2015) assertion that students from privileged groups tend to become defensive when discussing topics that disrupt their fundamental beliefs. It was the claim to neutrality that caught my attention. In making this declaration, the participant had positioned himself as an outsider in the Deaf discourse. Even though his job took him inside the Deaf community, he seemed impervious to do something about the injustice inflicted on deaf people. The desire to be neutral hindered any discussion around hearing privilege. I had to confront that denial was a common reaction of privileged group members such as White people and *cis*– men—both of whom I am associated with.

In order to more effectively engage in dialogue with participants and to make hearingness visible, I quoted South African civil rights activist, Desmond Tutu who stated: "[if] you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor" (McAfee Brown, 1984, p. 19). Some of the participants shifted uncomfortably in their seats. Their comments included: "I believe Tutu is saying that it's impossible to be neutral," "Does this mean we have to take sides?" "I'm not an oppressor," "Is staying silent also supporting the oppressor?" "Yes, we have to take the side of deaf people, not the other way," to which a fellow participant replied, "Yes, well, that's easier said than done."

In the next exercise, participants worked in pairs again to discuss the question: *Who do you think benefits from having no active involvement in social justice movements?* In the ensuing discussion, participants wondered why I was asking this question. One of them thought I was being biased against hearing people. I reiterated that my intention is to raise awareness of hearing privilege in the oppression of deaf people. It seemed to make little sense to the participants to talk about something so remote from their daily experience. If audism is something that deaf people experience, then audism is what deaf people are responsible for.

Following McIntosh (1989), I asked participants to write one or two hearing advantages on yellow sticker paper and put them on a sheet. It was done so that participants could respond truthfully without having to reveal themselves to others. I wrote the statements on the sheet so that participants could read them. The stickers were then disposed of in a waste bag to ensure anonymity. The statements were then compiled into a list (see Appendix). Despite their resistance and defensiveness, I believe the workshop served its purpose in raising awareness of audism. Even if participants had not acknowledged their privilege, uncomfortable conversations about audism seemed to have lessened their resistance and helped them see more clearly who they are and where they come from in relation to deaf people.

On Reflection

On reflection, my experience with teaching about hearing privilege created inner tensions and emotional struggles inside me and the workshop participants. I tried to create a safe space for discussing uncomfortable topics. Such conversations proved to be a challenge for me. It generated emotional responses, some uncomfortable and frustrating but ultimately necessary for learning. I tried to show respect and interest

in the participants' views and opinions. Teaching about hearing privilege allowed me to reflect on my role as a teacher. I was able to open a line of critical dialogue that was previously not possible in Deaf Studies. I believe the literature review and workshop sessions have been valuable in providing essential themes that shaped how I think about Deaf Studies. I also believe that the hearing privilege concept should be explored and taught in Deaf Studies courses. The concept offers a powerful tool to better understand the hidden mechanism of oppression and audism.

Understanding hearing privilege may encourage hearing people to promote equality and social justice rather than leaving all the hard work to deaf people. Pease (2016), for example, advocates for male privilege awareness workshops as a practice for educating men about male privilege and their complicity in women's oppression. Pease believes that workshops should encourage men to take responsibility for ending sexism and promoting gender equality. He suggests that men's emotional investments in privilege need to be disrupted momentarily to help them become more aware of male privilege. I believe this same notion can be applied to dismantling hearing privilege. We can use emotions as a catalyst in disrupting student defensiveness and resistance when presenting uncomfortable ideas. For hearing people to promote equality and social justice for deaf people, they need to recognize their collusion in the oppression of deaf people. And workshops such as mine can bring such awareness.

Conclusion

This essay brings up the necessary questions about the next step: *In what ways can I better engage with students in a discussion about hearing privilege?* Many authors have laid the foundation for discussing privilege that may help participants be less defensive and resistant to learning. Castania et al. (2017) suggest that teachers or facilitators begin by presenting personal stories based on experiences from those with dominant identities and excluded identities. Participants respond better when they can explore practices that exclude them from one or more social identities. Pease (2016) finds that personal narratives of oppression can help students engage in dialogue with others about their experiences. Personal stories increase students' awareness of how privilege and oppression intersect in their lives. By discussing personal stories, students will unlearn and question old assumptions and beliefs that they may have (Walls et al., 2010).

For Goodman (2015), attempts to reduce resistance can be more effective when teaching and learning are "built on a foundation of compassion, trust, and respect" (p. 72). Pease (2016) argues that teachers should reveal their different social identities and talk about their experience of exclusion because of prejudice and discrimination. He also encourages teachers to ask students to list privileges they may have due to their membership to the dominant social identity group. Understanding and engaging in critical reflection and action about hearing privilege is essential to addressing audism and inequality. There is a need for Deaf Studies academics and students to be honest about personal perspectives to become aware of their assumptions and biases that may contribute to the disadvantage of deaf people.

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[i] The term *Deaf Studies* is capitalized to refer to the study of deaf people as a community with a collective identity and particular history and culture.

Appendix
List of Hearing Advantages

In line with Peggy McIntosh's (1988) unpacking of an invisible knapsack of privileges socially granted to Whites and men, I have compiled a checklist of unearned advantages conferred to hearing people based on the workshop discussions and literature review. The list presented below is not complete by any means, but they are written with hearing people in mind. The goal is to raise awareness about certain advantages they have that they may never have thought about before.

- I can reasonably be certain of being included or participating in policy debates affecting deaf people. I do not have to fear being excluded because of my identity.
- I can be reasonably certain of being included in any workgroup to discuss deaf education.
- I can expect to be involved in sign language projects even without the necessary experience or fluency in sign language.
- I can expect to meet hearing people everywhere I go and communicate with them without needing to write notes or use an interpreter (Kendall, 2013, p. 108).
- I can publish books and articles without having to deal with the challenge of writing in the primary language, which is the second or third language for deaf people (Kendall, 2013, p. 108).
- When I go to an academic conference or public seminar meeting, I know that everything will be in place to fulfill my audiological needs. I will not have to worry about whether or not I need to ask for an interpreter or deal with the organizer's negative attitude.
- When I go to any public service office, I do not have to deal with patronizing comments from staff.
- When I start a new job, I can be reasonably sure that I will not be considered a health and safety concern because of a hearing loss.
- When I apply for jobs, I don't have to worry about whether the hiring manager will discriminate against me because of a disability.
- When I win an award, I don't have to worry about being patronized by people who consider me a hero and role model for deaf people.
- I can easily find public places (e.g., railway stations, hotels, shopping centers) that have no access barriers to public information.
- When I read newspapers, I can be reasonably certain of being accurately represented by journalists and not be portrayed in stereotypical terms (e.g., helpless, dependent).
- In my line of work (e.g., sign language interpreter), I can expect to be praised for learning sign language and helping deaf people.
- I can be reasonably confident employers will be impressed with me for learning sign language.

- I can do well in my job and not be called an inspiration to deaf people.
- I can be relatively assured that people will approach me, make eye contact, and not treat me like I am invisible,
- I do not have to deal with people being concerned about my ability to parent my children because of a disability.
- I will not have to deal with people being concerned about me crossing the road because of a disability.
- I can support my children in school without being blamed for their academic performance.