



Problematizing the Problem: Exploring How Hearing Privilege Fosters Employment Inequality for Deaf People.

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Plain English Summary

1. Introduction

The article highlights three main points of view: first, hearing privilege is the unearned advantages given to people on the basis of their ability to hear (and speak). Second, hearing privilege exist because of ableism, the belief that people with ability to hear and speak are superior to those without such abilities. Employers who hold such beliefs will likely make decisions that favour hearing people over deaf people. Third, hearing privilege is an invisible force that hearing people need to recognize in order to take responsibility for challenging their unearned advantage and promoting social justice for deaf people in the labour market.

2. Theoretical Approach

The article examines the literature from Disability Studies, Deaf Studies and Privilege Studies. The aim was to use intersectionality theory to identify, explore and analyse the evidence that show how privilege and ableism effect deaf and hearing people in different ways. Intersectionality is the concept that says people might experience oppression in one context and privilege in another context depending on the social position in which they find themselves in. The intersectional approach helps expose the hidden features of oppression that are difficult for hearing people to notice and the advantages that result from it in employment contexts.

3. Summary of Main Findings

The main argument is that hearing people (employers, co-workers etc) need to engage in conversations about power and privilege. In order for them to do this, they need to participate in social justice education workshops in which they are encouraged to examine their hearing privilege, understand how they are complicit in the oppression of deaf people and learn how to challenge their unearned advantage in order to create a socially just society. The paper makes the case for a new critical pedagogy similar to the one espoused in Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1972). The focus should be on educating the privileged rather than the oppressed. The workshop is aimed at encouraging hearing people to think critically about the reality of their situation as members of the privileged group. Privilege studies scholar argue that employers could fund these workshops to enhance workplace relationships and improve team-working skills among staff members. Others suggest that social justice educators design and implement privilege training courses for organizations interested in issues such as diversity, inclusion, and equality. This may take the form of presentations, small group discussions, and simulation exercises for staff members.

Social justice educators often say that talking about privilege can trigger defensive reactions from members of the privilege groups. However, such emotions may be a catalyst for learning and becoming more self-aware and passionate about social justice matters. Social justice



scholars offer some useful guidance on developing privilege workshops using the intersectionality framework: first, participants should be encouraged to discuss the way oppression is shaped by different social identities based on race, gender, sexuality, and disability. Second, participants should be encouraged to identify themselves as member of an oppressed group (e.g. based on gender) and share some personal experiences of disadvantage (e.g. sexism/patriarchy). Third, participants need to be encouraged to identify themselves as member of a privileged group (e.g. based on race) and talk about privilege (e.g. white privilege) associated with their identity (e.g. white identity). Fourth, participants are then asked to talk about themselves as hearing people and the benefits they derive from having a hearing identity. Throughout the discussion on the intersections of privilege/oppression and their associated social identities, participants engage in a process of what Freire calls “critical reflection,” which is a key component of transformative learning.

4. Main Implications

The article shows how hearing people can become more effective allies of deaf people in the struggle for social justice. The research illustrates how their privilege can be used to challenge systems of inequality: for example, hearing people may be in a privileged position to speak out against the discrimination, exclusion and ableism that deaf people face as job seekers or employees. Hearing allies need to engage in action by going against the grain of popular opinion and questioning the opinions of those in power. The article urges hearing allies to accept that making other people feel uncomfortable is part of the solution. By opposing the devaluing of deaf people in the workplace, and by questioning ableist decision-making, they can end discrimination against deaf people. Thus, by problematizing the problem, hearing people can contribute to changing attitudes and cultures and help promote social justice for deaf people.

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Dr Noel O'Connell is a deaf postdoctoral research fellow at the Institute of Social Sciences in the 21st Century (ISS21) working on the SFI-IRC Pathway funded CODA project, which explores how hearing children of deaf adults (Codalas) experience the courtesy stigma (or stigma-by-association) of their parents and the cultural resources they use to become agents of their own resilience and empowerment. Dr O'Connell is a recipient of the DOROTHY COFUND Marie Skłodowska-Curie award from the Irish Research Council for a project focusing on deaf people's experience of the COVID-19 pandemic in Ireland and the UK (2023). He was awarded the GOI Irish Research Council Postdoctoral Fellowship (2015) to publish doctoral research findings and a grant from the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (2022) in conjunction with Irish Deaf Society to conduct research on deaf people's experience of ableism and employment discrimination. His main research interests include social justice, deaf studies, identity politics, disability issues, human rights, sociology, deaf life stories, children and childhood studies, gender studies, education, and privilege studies.

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