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Abstract

Universities are regarded as critical institutions that shape society, which on the one hand have a great influence on (successful) social processes, but on the other, are traditionally very privileged and exclusive places of education. Despite various demands to open up to plural perspectives, they are still strongly characterized by powerful, meritocratic, and discriminatory structures, cultures, and orders. (Social) inclusion efforts are always linked to the need to analyze processes of exclusion. This article therefore examines the question: Which ableist practices and culture of silence are revealed in the context of higher education and how can these be linked to the findings of postcolonial studies on the topic of silence? On the one hand, established perspectives (lecturers and students), but above all the perspectives of marginalized and unheard (groups of) people (lecturers with (learning) disabilities) are involved. The results from two group discussions ($N = 9$) with perspectives from these three different positions are presented to work out implicit and explicit processes of silence. The (power) theoretical reference is the concept of ableism, which is linked with (postcolonial) perspectives on the ideas of "silence" according to Brunner (2017a). This article emphasizes that, in addition to formal access restrictions to university education, there are also implicit barriers oriented towards non-transparent ableist expectations of ability, which in turn (re-)produce processes of silence. The case study concerns one German university and shows that formal access to higher education is only one aspect of reducing ableism; above all, it is the creation of transparent structures with regard to set ability expectations, critical-reflective spaces, and a culture of "unlearning" biographically characterized ableist notions of normality. This article therefore focuses on the connection between ableist experiences and the findings of postcolonial discourses of silencing.

Keywords

academic ableism; exclusion; inclusive university development; silencing

1. Introduction

Concerning the "recommendations of supranational bodies (European Commission, United Nations, UNESCO, OECD, World Bank), all higher education institutions are committed to a policy of diversity as well as a policy of inclusion" (Allemann-Ghionda, 2021, p. 474, author's translation). Ensuring this requires an analysis of who is in which form allowed to participate in higher education processes and knowledge formation, and who is not. To enable a truly critical analysis of practices and the epistemically violent structures and cultures that go along with it, a look towards the unsaid or the invisible is needed (epistemic violence is here understood in the sense of postcolonial theory, as a transdisciplinary concept or as a process/relationship in the context of knowledge and knowledge production; Brunner, 2020). This article therefore focuses less on the statistics of who is "present" at the university or has access to it, and with what attributions. Rather, the focus will be on the question:

> Which ableist practices and culture of silence are revealed in the context of higher education and how can these be linked to the findings of postcolonial studies on the topic of silence?

Critical analyses of higher education from a postcolonial perspective are increasingly widespread (e.g., Dankwa et al., 2021), while critical analyses of ableism in the context of higher education (e.g., Brown & Leigh, 2020; Dolmage, 2017) are only gradually developing. This article aims to link the two discourses more closely together by first surveying and visualizing experiences of ableism and linking these findings with postcolonial ideas focusing on processes of silence. The framework will be formed by the four elements of silence according to Brunner (2017a). The descriptions do not claim to be universally valid but rather represent a case study at one German university.

The article is based on a differentiated and human rights-based understanding of inclusion as overcoming discrimination and marginalization, while at the same time recognizing plural perspectives. The article focuses primarily on the category of "disability," which in disability studies is understood "as a social, political, historical and cultural phenomenon" that is "linked to marginalization and exclusion" (Waldschmidt, 2020, pp. 22–23, author's translation).

In the first step, the tension between inclusion and exclusion at universities (Section 2) is considered as the starting point of the analysis. Afterwards, ableism as "counterparts of inclusion" (Buchner, 2022a, p. 66, author's translation) or as a (power) theoretical approach (Section 3) and postcolonial perspectives on speech and silence (Section 4) will be discussed, to enrich the analysis. The methodological design (Section 5) of the empirical study and the ableism-specific results (Section 6) are then presented. This is followed by a post-colonial critique (Section 7) regarding theoretical perspectives on silence, as well as a concluding outlook (Section 8).

2. Higher Education in the Realm of Tension Between Exclusion and Inclusion

On the one hand, universities are traditionally closely associated with an exclusive Aura (Alheit, 2014), currently strongly linked to the terms "elite" and "excellence," which is also reflected in the significance of corresponding international rankings (Helsper, 2009). On the other hand, they should act "socially responsible" as organizations and open themselves up to a broad and diverse public in an inclusive way (e.g., the

internationally significant university social responsibility approach; Goldbach et al., 2022). This broad area of tension, between inclusive aspirations and exclusive processes, is not insignificantly rooted in the close connection between higher education and society. Universities are essential organizations for the transmission and production of knowledge and thus very influential on social processes (Goldbach & Leonhardt, 2023). This can be linked to views of neo-institutional organization theory, which emphasizes that organizations must always be considered "in relation to their environment" and "must generate legitimacy in relation to it in order to obtain the resources necessary for their maintenance" (Buchner, 2022b, p. 440, author's translation, referencing Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Inclusive developments can therefore not be considered independently of exclusive processes as inseparably within social life and also higher education (Lanwer, 2015). Both inclusion and exclusion are not immutable states but "highly different and mutable" (Hauser et al., 2022, author's translation). This elaboration necessitates an analysis of normatively set orders of difference and power that continue in the higher education context. Ahmed (2013, p. 9), for example, shows that the "institutional will" for more diversity is not essentially reflected in structural changes and that structures tend to remain in privileged hands. Rather, it is about integrating into "a common organizational culture," but enabling higher education institutions "to celebrate diversity" (Ahmed, 2013, p. 13). Such an understanding of "diversity management" has been criticized for some time for neglecting structural adjustments and perpetuating rather neoliberal tendencies (Wagner, 2021). Further work in the academic discourse also shows a continuation of meritocratic ideas that are linked to supposedly inclusive policies (e.g., Przytulla, 2021). This leads to various orders that reinforce difference and produce powerful processes of othering and exclusion, as various current academic debates suggest (e.g., Ahmed, 2013; Brown & Leigh, 2020). Higher education thus remains a site of privileged knowledge production that continues to be inaccessible to many.

In the context of disability, there are also various efforts to create accessibility in order to enable more diversity (e.g., O'Brien et al., 2019). However, this often reveals an individualization of disability experiences. One example in the German-speaking world in this regard is the so-called disadvantage compensation, which is intended to reduce barriers at the individual level but requires disclosure of individual attributions and at the same time does not encourage structural change/adaptation (McGowan & Bichsel, 2021).

Inferring from these descriptions, it is necessary not to reduce inclusion-oriented higher education development to a one-dimensional issue. Rather, it needs a processual view that is directed in particular at powerful orders and at the same time enables diversification at higher education institutions.

3. Analyzing Perspectives Through the Lens of Ableism as a Theoretical Framework

For (power-)critical reflection and the development of an inclusion-sensitive practice, ableism is becoming increasingly significant as a concept, and in the process is also showing up more frequently in media and public discussion:

> Ableism stands for the critique of a mode of production of social inequality, through which individuals and groups are de/privileged and specific practices of inclusion and exclusion are legitimized via the recognition and denial of abilities. (Buchner, 2022c, p. 203, author's translation)

The construction of "able subjects" is central and closely linked to individual and, above all, socially shaped notions of capability, structures, and practices. Which abilities are considered self-evident and which should be

acquired in order to be considered an able subject? These ideas and expectations of so-called essential abilities serve to maintain ableist and thus hierarchical orders. These orders are also characterized by a very powerful demarcation between "able" and "not able," which Campbell (2003) calls the "great divide" in her work.

"Ableism is an ideological discourse that fundamentally assumes and demands non-disabled normality, autonomy and usefulness, and is deeply embedded in social structures and in the subjectivity of all" (Maskos, 2023, author's translation). Even if ableism analysis should not be limited to disability (Wolbring, 2008), this category or order of difference is a very central one. On the one hand, disability represents a deficit and, at the same time, constructs an external perception of a supposedly capable subject (Buchner, 2022a, referencing Campbell, 2009). It "has also long been used to justify hierarchies of rights and discrimination between other social groups, and to exclude people not classified as 'disabled people'" (Wolbring, 2008, p. 253).

In comparison to other "isms," ableism has various special features, which is why it will be the focus of this article. Wolbring (2008) describes ableism as a kind of "umbrella ism for other isms" (p. 253) and as "one of the most socially entrenched and accepted isms and one of the biggest enablers for other isms" (p. 255). Not least because the ability-based orders and ideas are found in many other isms in an intersectional sense. The binaries established in ableist orders between a desirable "top" (non-disabled/able) and a "bottom" (disabled/non-able) to be avoided, are particularly characterized by fluidity. "Re-localization to the lower spheres can threaten at any time, for example due to an accident or a psychological crisis" and at the same time there is the "potential for mobility towards the higher spheres" (Buchner, 2022a, p. 67, author's translation). This fragility is accompanied by a high emotionality of this order of difference, as it is always connected with the pressure not to lose one's own positioning or to "improve" it.

A critical perspective of ableism serves to make discriminatory phenomena visible with regard to the production of normality and exclusion. In the context of inclusion-sensitive higher education development, ableism can serve as a perspective for analysis to reveal discriminatory power structures and to reflect on them in connection with processes of change.

4. Speaking and Silence From a Postcolonial Perspective

As the previous remarks have shown, the analysis of power relations and exclusion processes plays a central role in the further development of inclusive (higher education) spaces. Following Butler (2006), it can be seen that the maintenance and reproduction of power relations are ensured, among other things, by the fact that people who are repeatedly marked as "others" consequently also perceive themselves as different. As illustrated by Spivak, it can be added that the "voices" of the marginalized are often not heard or being actively silenced, and they accordingly have little opportunity to draw attention to their situation nor to change it. Spivak (2008) describes this as the power-specific phenomenon of subalternity. She refers primarily to subjective perspectives from the Global South, which she describes as subalterns (see also Nguyễn, 2022). Language is, in this context, theorized as an instrument of power in terms of various facets. Universities also "contribute institutionally to reproducing hegemonies of knowledge" and "practices of silencing build on these structures of dominance" that marginalized people "feel differently" (Nguyễn, 2022, pp. 46–47, author's translation). To dissolve this "silence of the subalterns as a result of epistemic violence," it is not enough to "call on them to speak" (Nguyễn, 2022, p. 65, author's translation). Rather, it is relevant to

analyze who is allowed to speak and who remains silent or is silenced. For such an analysis, however, a clear and differentiated understanding of speaking and silence is needed. Furthermore, it has to be taken into account that for marginalized people speaking is "not only about the wording, the thought, but always also about the question of belonging" (Gümüşay, 2020, p. 35, author's translation).

From a postcolonial perspective, speaking and silence are not/can't be seen as a delimitable/opposed binary. "Silence is neither nothing nor another language, but it is at the same time its presence and absence, just as the element of silence is always inherent in speaking itself" (Brunner, 2017a, p. 36, author's translation). This contradicts the liberal understanding of silence as the pure opposite of speaking and the "self-inflicted weakness" of, for example, "those for whom it seems better anyway if others make decisions for them and also speak" (Brunner, 2017a, p. 34, author's translation). As of late, since the "linguistic discursive and colonial turns," it has become clear that "language and speech are entangled in relations of violence" (Brunner, 2017a, p. 35, author's translation).

For a differentiated consideration, Brunner (2017a) refers to Spivak and other postcolonial thinkers and develops four different elements of silence, which will serve as a basis for the following analysis.

4.1. Privileged Silence and Silencing as a Technique of Power

In this form, silence occurs from a privileged position where "speech can be suspended at any [and self-chosen] point" (Brunner, 2017a, p. 43, author's translation). Silence and concealment can be understood as privilege, also to maintain one's own position/normality, because the assertion of power and knowledge is "necessarily accompanied by the delegitimization, sanctioning and suppression of alternative possibilities of cognition and knowledge" (Brunner, 2017a, p. 45, author's translation). Such dominant "discourses are what not only produce silence but also promote violent indifference to the voice of the other or otherness" (Brunner, 2017a, p. 47, author's translation, referencing Dhawan, 2007).

4.2. Marginalized Silence as a Double Silencing

At this level, the perspective is directed towards those who are to be "controlled and dominated by epistemic violence." Here Brunner distinguishes two forms of oppression according to Dotson (2011):

1. Testimonial quieting: the failure to hear, understand, or acknowledge as a knowing subject the other based on stereotypes and not for lack of knowledge or not wanting to know.

2. Testimonial smothering: experience-based "presupposition that the (non-)hearing counterpart has no adequate understanding of one's own statement or response anyway" (Brunner, 2017a, p. 49, author's translation).

4.3. Rejecting the Silence of Marginalized People as a Starting Point for Change

This element is about rejecting the (existing) status quo without the subject knowing where this leads. This makes it highly risky for the marginalized subject. Brunner again describes two phases: the rejecting, provoking, blocking silence and a developing productive silence. It can be activating and subversive and

bring movement into the power structure or contribute to the "interruption of normality" (Brunner, 2017a, p. 52, author's translation); but only if it is heard/understood by the counterpart, which also requires "forced" (institutionalized) listening on the part of the privileged.

4.4. Silence of the Privileged as a Practice of Solidarity

This form of silence can also be described as "attentive listening" and can be seen as an "essential precondition for being heard as appropriately as possible" (Brunner, 2017a, p. 57, author's translation). This involves more than a guilty or benevolent failure to speak. "This engaged listening necessarily presupposes suspending one's own speaking and truth-telling" (Brunner, 2017a, p. 59, author's translation), which requires hegemonic self-critical reflection.

In the following, the methodological approach and results are presented and described and then linked to the previous theoretical thoughts on silence from a critical perspective of ableism.

5. Methodological Approach

The following question arises from the theoretical descriptions:

> Which ableist practices and cultures of silence are revealed in the context of higher education and how can these be linked to the findings of postcolonial studies on the topic of silence?

This question is to be answered within the framework of a case study and is qualitatively limited to exemplary perspectives of university members and therefore does not promise general transferability. Furthermore, the question is answered in the article in two main steps:

> 1. Presentation of perspectives on ableism from diverse positions (Section 6)

> 2. Interpretation of these perspectives regarding postcolonial perspectives on silence as a secondary analysis (Section 7)

The methodological framework used for this is described below and is also summarized in Figure 1.

5.1. Participants and Context of the Survey

The data collection took place with members of the Faculty of Education at Leipzig University. In two group discussions, first four and then five participants were interviewed. In order to answer the question as differentiated as possible, three different perspectives were included: those of lecturers/professors ($n = 2$), students ($n = 2$), and lecturers with experience of disability/so-called subject matter experts on inclusion and education (SMEIE; $n = 5$).

The entire process and in particular the use of the collected data was made transparent to the participants and the voluntariness of participation was emphasized several times during the process. All participants were associated with the university teaching and transfer project Qualification for Subject Matter Expert on
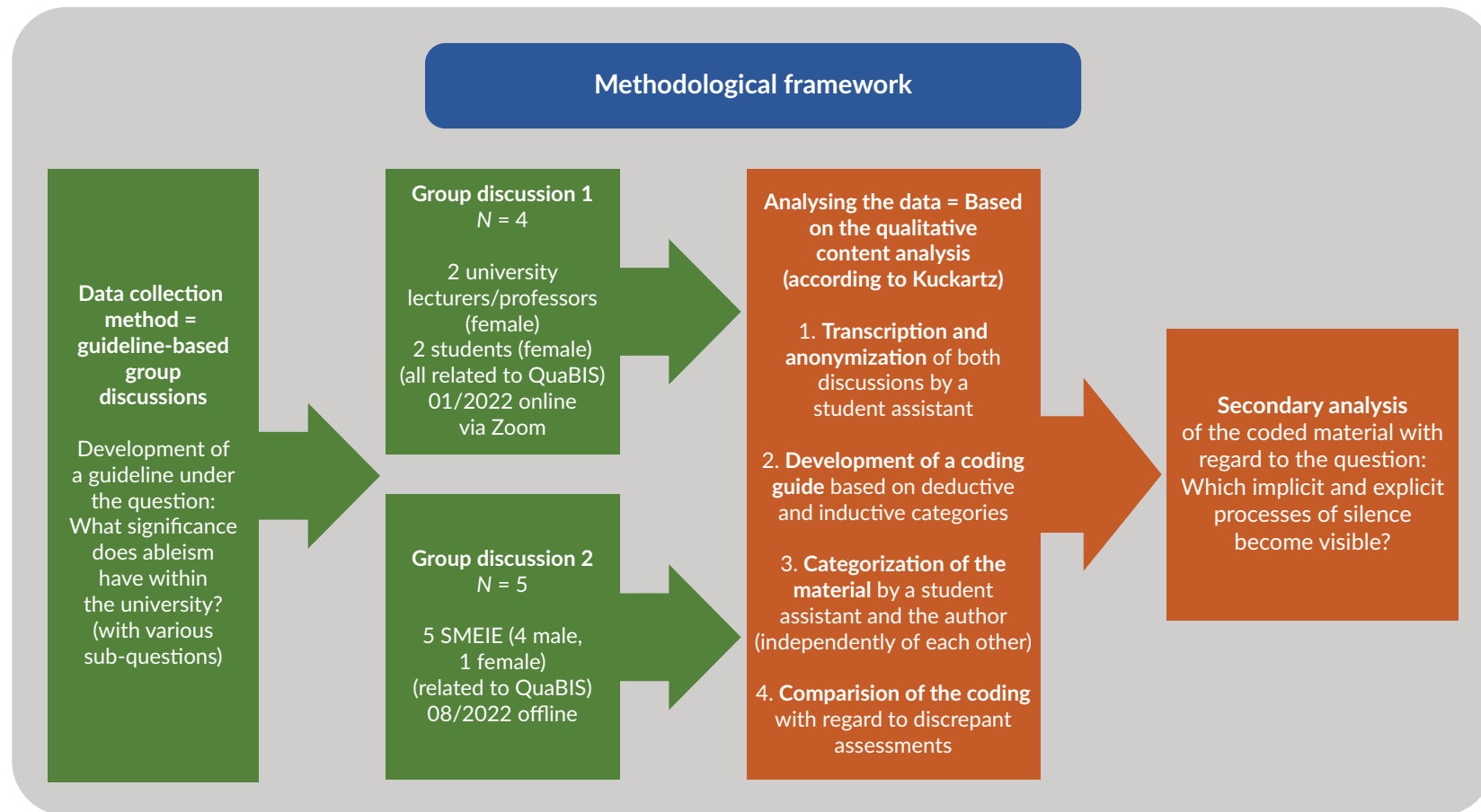
Methodological framework

Data collection method = guideline-based group discussions

Development of a guideline under the question: What significance does ableism have within the university? (with various sub-questions)

Group discussion 1
N = 4

2 university lecturers/professors (female)
2 students (female)
(all related to QuaBIS)
01/2022 online
via Zoom

Group discussion 2
N = 5

5 SMEIE (4 male, 1 female)
(related to QuaBIS)
08/2022 offline

Analysing the data = Based on the qualitative content analysis (according to Kuckartz)

1. **Transcription and anonymization** of both discussions by a student assistant

2. **Development of a coding guide** based on deductive and inductive categories

3. **Categorization of the material** by a student assistant and the author (independently of each other)

4. **Comparision of the coding** with regard to discrepant assessments

Secondary analysis of the coded material with regard to the question: Which implicit and explicit processes of silence become visible?

Figure 1. Methodological framework.

Inclusion And Education in Saxony (QuaBIS). As talking about experiences of discrimination requires, among other things, safe and trustworthy spaces, the discussions with the participants with disabilities were held separately from the participants without disabilities. This resulted in the distribution provided in Table 1.

As the QuaBIS project represents an important link for all participants, it is important to briefly categorize it. The aim of the project is to empower people with experience of (learning) disability for various university processes in order to initiate inclusion-oriented developments. Thus, in the period from May 2019 to December 2022, five people were qualified in the areas of teaching, research, and transfer at Leipzig University who had previously learned, worked, and/or lived in various separative institutions of the so-called disability support system. Since January 2023, they have been working as SMEIE at the university, primarily in the context of critical-reflective knowledge transfer in teaching and professionalization, as well as in participatory research and transfer activities. In German-speaking countries, these types of projects (with conceptually very different orientations) have developed under the name of "participatory teaching" in the last 10 years (a critical reflection can be found in Goldbach & Leonhardt, 2023). A more detailed description of the project goals and contents can be found in Leonhardt and Goldbach (2022).

The professors and students interviewed are also closely associated with the project described through collaboration or close (teaching) cooperation. All participants are familiar with the topic of ableism through the project or their own expertise.

5.2. Data Collection

Within the above-mentioned project, two group discussions were conducted to identify and analyze discriminatory barriers and experiences in higher education. The group discussions were conducted by the author, who already has experience in conducting interviews and group discussions with people with and without disabilities in various projects. The focus was on the topic of ableism in higher education. In a first digitally conducted group discussion, two professors and two students participated in the discussion. A second group discussion with the five SMEIE took place later, offline. For the second discussion, the questions of the interview were translated into simple language for better understanding, while the content remained the same.

Table 1. Overview of roles/anonymization.

Group discussion	Role of the person	Anonymized codename in the article
Group discussion 1	Lecturer/professor 1 (female)	Julia
	Lecturer/professor 2 (female)	Sabine
	Student 1 (female)	Sophie
	Student 2 (female)	Mia
Group discussion 2	SMEIE 1 (male)	Adrian
	SMEIE 2 (female)	Laura
	SMEIE 3 (male)	Malik
	SMEIE 4 (male)	Jonas
	SMEIE 5 (male)	Paul

The interview guideline with nine questions was based on a total of three key aspects: (a) basic understanding of ableism, (b) performance-related expectations/experiences at higher education institutions, and (c) opportunities to reflect on discrimination within the higher education system. The questions were not directly related to the topic of silence/processes of silence. The collected data was linked to these theoretical ideas in a secondary analysis for this article.

5.3. Analysis of the Data

The audio material of the two discussions was transcribed by a student assistant. The qualitative material was evaluated using qualitative content analysis based on the content structuring content analysis according to Kuckartz (2014). For this purpose, inductive categories were created in addition to the deductive categories of the interview guide, thus creating a differentiated category system with coding guidelines. The material was coded using this coding guide by the author and again independently by a student assistant. Any inconsistencies were discussed afterward. This resulted in eight categories with a total of 15 sub-categories (see Supplementary File). The data/categories in the topic area of *ableism at the university* are subjected to a secondary analysis in this article regarding the topic of *speaking and silence*. The discussions took place in German; for legibility, all the following questions from the interviews have been translated into English by the author.

5.4. Methodological Limitations and Self-Reflexive Methodological Critique

Since, as described, this is a case study at a single university with reference to only three different roles, the findings generated can only be transferred to a limited extent. The following descriptions therefore do not claim to produce universally valid (or internationally) applicable findings. This would require at least a larger sample, preferably at different universities, which also covers other positions within the system. Rather, the aim is to visualize exemplary findings that are intended to highlight the processes of silence at a university. The fact that the author, who himself works as a research assistant in the QuaBIS project, is involved in the survey ensures a familiar environment within the group discussions. On the other hand, this existing relationship can also lead to limitations or the silencing of statements or social acceptability due to different (power) positions. Also because this article is dedicated to making marginalized voices visible, it is important to emphasize that the author collected and analyzed the data from a strongly privileged position (white, male, with no experiences of disability), and also from within the university system as a research assistant. In this respect, such a non-participatory evaluation of experiential data leaves limits to the possibilities of interpretation. Due to these limitations and the situated entanglement of the author's knowledge, the interpretation must be read in consideration of its limitations and, if necessary, relation/connection to (existing) structures of power/imbalances of power.

6. Results

Four categories emerged from the data material that are relevant to the research question of this article. These are first described and will then be interpreted in the following chapter with regard to the topic of silencing.

6.1. Ableist Cultures and Structures at the University

In the participants' statements, there is a strong overall reference to the interconnectedness of higher education and performance expectations and the associated exclusion of certain people.

These links become clear at different levels in the group discussions. For example, clearly restrictive admission limits to higher education institutions were highlighted, which were already linked to performance requirements before entering higher education. For example, Adrian (192) said: "If you don't have specific degree and achievements…you are denied this path, this privilege to work at the university." In both discussions, it was emphasized that this possibility of access was already inherent to the previous educational path. Sophie (61–63) pointed out, for example, that "it starts in the education system beforehand, which access children and teenagers have to which school, or what resources their parents have." Laura (314) in the second group discussion saw it similarly and emphasized that "it's also up to the teacher, they make such a distinction in school as to who is rich and who is poor. That is such a difference. Or if you have a disability. Do I support them or not?" Overall, high pressure to perform was associated with higher education when it was described as a very "competitive" business (Sabine, 165), which is "very, very demanding" (Julia, 264). Malik (221) emphasized, in this regard, that it is "very rare for people with disabilities to go this path because the pressure from society to perform is not possible for many disabilities to sustain the pressure and performance over time." The high expectations to perform were a very central reason for exclusion for many of the discussion participants. For example, working at a university requires very different abilities, such as "retentiveness, attentiveness, reflectiveness" (Julia, 78), as well as self-active understanding and familiarizing oneself with new systems, high physical functioning, and organizational talent. For Adrian (160), it was primarily "mental abilities" that were required. At the same time, other abilities can lead to exclusion, such as "insecurity" or, as Julia (146) said, "not fulfilling a certain academic language or a certain theoretical knowledge, which is immediately associated with devaluation." With these seemingly clear ability expectations, however, it was also emphasized that these remain completely non-transparent in the context of higher education, which means that they cannot be negotiated by the actors. Julia (83–89) spoke of a "diffuseness that is connected with the fact…that it is often not quite clearly formulated what ability expectations one actually has of me at university" and she described it as "not thematizing, or perhaps even tabooing ability expectations."

For some participants, the structures do provide opportunities for (partial) access, but these are also always linked to making "otherness" visible. Thus, Julia (26) also described that "the constructions, such as compensation for disadvantages…actually presuppose or include these ableist structures." Adrian (490–492) also emphasized that, for them, being at the university is connected with being marked as disabled when he said: "So I would call that exotic and to some extent the main reason for our impairment."

6.2. Experiencing Ableism (SMEIE) and Perceiving One's Own Ableist Actions (Lecturers and Students)

Particularly in the discussion with the SMEIE, their own experiences with ableism at the university were comprehensively addressed. Adrian (346) stated that his experiences of ableism are usually "not conscious, [but] rather unconscious." Direct hostility or open discrimination was not mentioned (Laura, 343). Rather, experiences that relate to one's own insecurities were mentioned, such as the experience of Laura (369): "It was like that with me, I doubted myself because I don't know the technical language." There were also

descriptions of examples that referred to the time before getting into work contexts outside of higher education. For example, Laura (423) said: "The sheltered workshops, they also told me…'why are you doing this project?' They tried to talk me out of it." Adrian (403–404) then connected this to earlier experiences: "They said 'you can't do that because of your disability'…and at some point, you internalize that so much that you say, 'oh, I can't do that.'"

In the university environment, the SMEIE did describe positive experiences that marked moments of recognition, as illustrated by the statement of Jonas (327–328):

> I go to eat in the dining hall.…I see countless people there and…as a person with an intellectual impairment…I still see people,…they don't see me as disabled at all. They perceive me as I am. And that makes me proud.

Nevertheless, Adrian (477) saw the danger "that we [as teachers] are only shown as a demonstration effect" and that it becomes something "exotic" (474).

In the discussion with the lecturers and students on the other hand, their own ableist actions were also described, which arises, among other things, from the challenge of teaching or acting in an exclusive/ableist system. This was exemplified by the fact that ableist behavior was made the topic of discussion in events that are not themselves inclusively structured and accessible (Julia, 367). It was further emphasized that one is not free oneself, as Mia (127–128) described: "[There are] certain social ideas in my head…that were taught to me from the outside or that I got from others." Julia said: "I think we are all infested with ableist ideas, that is also unavoidable [because] my own expectations develop along the lines of the expectations that are directed at me" (134–136).

6.3. Lack of Awareness

Key evidence for ableist structures, cultures, and practices was seen in the lack of awareness of the actors in the higher education system. On the one hand, it was described as a "taboo subject" (Laura, 568) or as an "unpleasant subject [for] people who are themselves very privileged at the university…and have not yet had to make use of so much support in their lives" (Julia, 202). Furthermore, it was reported that it is avoided because it asks "unpleasant questions" (Julia, 205), "that many people also feel attacked" (Mia, 230), or that one is "not really confronted with the term in everyday life" (Mia, 30). Adrian (498–499) explained that one also "forgets…to reflect critically" and that university is "a very big structure" in which the subject can get lost (Adrian, 552). At the same time, Laura (577) emphasized that the term itself has not yet arrived in the everyday life of many. Julia (144–145) also pointed out that it is "a great challenge" to "create a culture that somehow carries an ableist consciousness…in other words, to deal with such a non-error culture, which I think we feel is quite a burden here at the university."

6.4. Possibilities for Dealing With Ableism

In both group discussions, possibilities for counteracting ableism at the university were discussed. The results highlighted, for example, how important it is "that it takes place in teaching at all" (Sabine, 161), but that there is also a need for spaces to discuss the topic in order to "think of possible ways out" (Julia, 376). For such

ways out, Julia described it as central to arrive at "new images of ability" (377) and to deconstruct "concepts of ability" (381). This also required a look at one's own "biography…i.e., with what kind of ability expectations have I actually been raised?" (Julia, 134–135). Malik (589) emphasized that it is not enough "if individuals…try to do that." Mia (216) stated that attention must be drawn to such "structures, and they must also be encouraged to reflect." Some of the SMEIE pointed out that more accessibility (for disabled people) must also be created (Laura, 133; Adrian, 596). This would then result in a stronger recognition and confidence of the previously excluded people (Laura, 617–618).

7. Interpretation: Silence as a Result of Ableist Attributions of Ability by Higher Education Institutions

The ableist experiences in the university space described so far are now interpreted in a second step, focusing on the topic of silence and processes of silence. The results show that higher education in its structures and culture is deeply influenced by notions of ability and norms, which in turn have an effect on subjects inside and outside this space. The simultaneous striving to meet "positive" ability norms and avoidance of "negative" ability orders is clearly found in the statements of lecturers and students as well as in those of the SMEIE. In particular, (certain) cognitive and linguistic abilities are considered desirable. Failure to comply with these ability norms is associated with exclusion in higher education. In view of the participants' statements, this exclusion or ableism is already influenced by various (ability-related) aspects well before entering higher education. This happens on the one hand, by a separative and meritocratic school and education system and, on the other hand, by the resulting structural admission regulations. Those who do not pass this ableist educational pathway due to the set ability regulations are denied access to higher education. This process characterized by ableism can certainly be described as a form of silencing since the exclusion is simultaneously connected with not being allowed to speak in the context of central social knowledge production. Following Buchner (2023, author's translation), ableism (in this case the form of silencing) can also be seen as "disempowerment as a double-sided process" of marginalized persons. Subjects are positioned as incapable and, at the same time, hindered in the development of abilities.

Going back to Brunner's (2017a) elements, aspects of "privileged silence and silencing as a technique of power" (element 1) become visible in the results (see Figure 2). Forms of silence are produced and maintained through the delegitimization or denial of skills and knowledge. At the same time, it becomes clear that the intransparency of ability expectations can be seen as a technique of silence that serves to maintain the status quo. Accordingly, on the level of "marginalized silence as double silencing" (element 2), this can lead to the phenomena of "testimonial quieting" and "testimonial smothering" potentially reinforcing each other. This is somewhat reflected in the statements of the SMEIE, which make it clear that the existing and ableist skill requirements can lead to internalized insecurity or "not trusting oneself." This internalized ableism (which, according to the SMEIE statements, also has clear non-university references) potentially leads to a silencing of the persons concerned. At the same time, testimonial squealing is further promoted by a (privileged) lack of institutional and personal awareness within the university of these ableist attributions and orders.

Regarding the aspect of "refusing silence of the marginalized as a starting point for change" (element 3), no direct statements can be found. However, it can be emphasized at this point that access to and existing in higher education for marginalized people is always linked to practices of "othering," since disclosure of difference
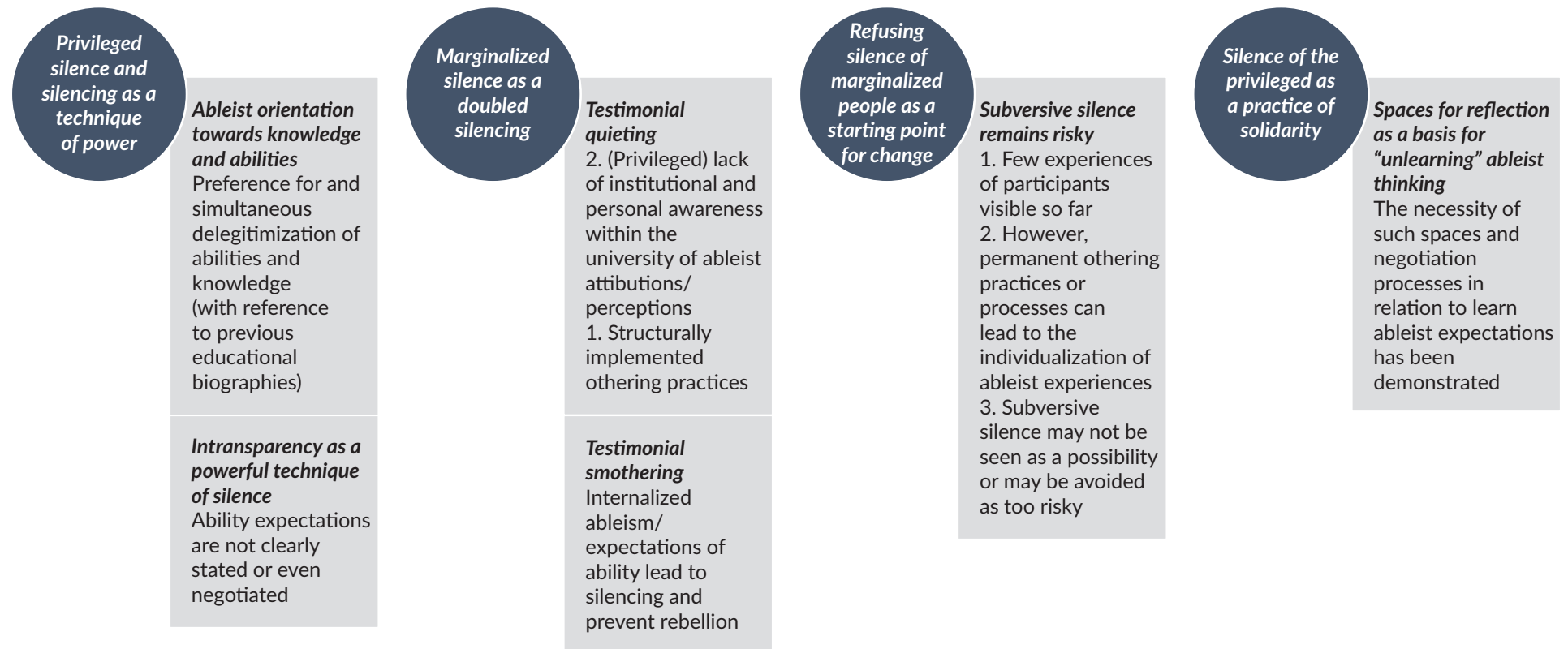
Figure 2. Experiences of ableism in the context of silence processes: The four elements according to Brunner (central results).

(e.g., through disadvantage compensation) is structurally required. Linked to McGowan and Bichsel's (2021) thesis that this construction of disability takes place in the context of a powerful place-making, this could well be seen as an institutionally embedded technique of ableist power towards silence:

> The ambivalence felt by those affected by silencing is not reflected structurally, but rather attributed to the individual, so that the structural violence is not recognized as such. Silencing practices are thus legitimized and reproduce relations of dominance, which in turn can lead to structural exclusion. (Nguyễn, 2022, p. 57, author's translation)

Subversive silence or active (re)speaking against these ableist power structures is invariably highly risky for marginalized groups of people due to these forms of othering.

In the statements on possibilities to deal with ableism at the university, at least rudimentary connections to the fourth element, the "silence of the privileged as a practice of solidarity" (element 4) become clear. The necessity to create spaces for reflection, to question and deconstruct one's own ableist-characterized ability expectations/concepts is described. At the same time, raising awareness and diversification (through accessibility) of university staff are mentioned as important aspects. These approaches can certainly serve to enable solidarity silence or, in reference to Spivak (1996), to initiate "unlearning" as a never-ending process.

Spivak's unlearning means gaining knowledge that is denied by a privileged position and it also means meeting others seriously so that they are able to respond (Spivak, 1996). Buchner (2022c, p. 213, author's translation) also relates this to an ableism-critical perspective and describes unlearning as a "process of coming to terms with 'having become this way,'" which according to him also includes "incorporated ableist thought patterns and privileges." This includes "years of empathic listening and observation" (Castro Varela, 2021, p. 124, author's translation), i.e., a non-hierarchical solidaric silence (Brunner, 2017a). "This involves understanding the importance of knowledge declared unimportant without disregarding the importance of knowledge declared important" (Castro Varela, 2021, p. 116, author's translation).

The results indicate that this unlearning also takes place within exclusive structures and in the context of one's own biographical attachment to social ableist constructions of expectation. Spivak (1993) points to a necessary simultaneous inside and outside ("out-side in the teaching machine," as cited in Castro Varela, 2021, p. 114), since it is not possible to act completely outside the power structures, which makes reaction forms of "subject shaming," as Buchner (2022a, p. 72) describes for example for teachers, obsolete. Rather, in addition to changes in action, it is a matter of structurally and culturally necessary changes or institutionalized critique, as they can be reconciled with the concept of "sabotage" according to Spivak. This means "an [ongoing and never-ending] practice in which what is sabotaged is closely examined beforehand...subjected to in-depth critique...[and ultimately] revised and recalibrated" (Castro Varela, 2021, p. 111, author's translation). "It is not the exposure of error. It is constantly and persistently looking into how truths are produced" (Spivak, 1996, p. 27).

8. Conclusions

In the descriptions so far, an attempt has been made to uncover experiences in the context of ableism at the university and to link these with previous (postcolonial) reflections on processes of silence. In doing so, the

perspectives of professors/lecturers and students on the one hand and lecturers with (learning) disabilities on the other were used and analyzed as examples.

The discussion in this article shows that there can be a close connection between ableist-structured norms of ability and processes of silencing in higher education. Inclusive endeavors inevitably require analyzing these powerful structures and cultures in the context of epistemic violence. One way of dealing with and changing this is seen in Spivak's concept of unlearning. The creation and provision of (self-critical) spaces of reflection within the higher education system seem to be of great importance here. Beyond the explanations given so far, the concept of "critical diversity literacy" according to Steyn (2015) could offer a suitable orientation framework to analytically advance this unlearning and to enable actors in the higher education system "to 'read' prevailing social relations." Overall, it can, also be neither about a pure "diversity of people" (Wagner, 2021, p. 91) nor about a representation of some marginalized people (to speak for others; Nguyễn, 2022). Rather, what is needed are new forms of knowledge production and a "diversity of knowledge" (Wagner, 2021, p. 91) as well as an accompanying decolonized recognition of different forms of knowledge, as described by Mbembe (2016) with the term "pluriversity." This requires a self-critical consideration of inequalities, which can help to "possibly change unequal relations in a direction that is able to understand disadvantaged voices not only as background noise, but as political subjects" (Brunner, 2017b, p. 35, author's translation).

With the special access provided by the QuaBIS project, not only the views of established players such as professors and students could be made visible, but also the experiences of people who had previously been excluded from higher education as participants and lecturers. Even if it was possible to explicitly include the views of marginalized people, the findings only represent an exemplary excerpt. Building on the descriptions in this article, more comprehensive analyses are needed. For example, further university members could be interviewed about the aspects presented here. It would also make sense to follow up on this by visualizing intersectional entanglements in further empirical research in this regard. This article is therefore only an important element in analyzing ableist structures, cultures, and practices and considering them in the context of a differentiated understanding of silence.

Conflict of Interests
The author declares no conflict of interests.

Supplementary Material
Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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