Cochlear implants (CIs) are considered to be one of the first true bionic devices and are described as able to repair a “sensory deficit” by (re)creating hearing. Over the past two decades, CIs have become increasingly commonly used, with the result that many deaf people now hear. However, hearing with CIs is described in scientific literature as “impoverished” or “degraded.” This research has documented how CI users hear and process sound differently than typical (or, “normal”) hearers. For example, in the context of background noise or multiple speakers, they often rely on visual input such as lip reading to understand speech. Despite these known differences, therapeutic interventions nonetheless train people to mimic typical hearing behaviours, for example, by avoiding visual input as much as possible. When differences remain between people’s hearing with CIs and typical hearing, discrepancies are framed in terms of what ‘lacks’ in the sensory experiences of CI users.

In contrast to existing research, these differences will be our starting point to study experiences with CIs in their own right, rather than as an experience that can only be understood by what it lacks. We aim to gain insights into the specificity of hearing with CIs to (1) clarify what is currently unknown or unmeasured in CI research as it relates to the specific sensory experiences associated with the devices and (2) consider how experiences with CIs could be understood and possibly reshaped if the reproduction of typical hearing was not the primary, or sole, goal of interventions.

Overall, deaf people’s experiences will be central to this study and many of the lead researchers of this project are deaf, some of whom have CIs. The outcome of the project will be findings that go beyond conventional research on CIs to produce new understandings of the experience of living with CIs that will allow people to live better with the devices.