

Surdophobia!

FEAR OF DEAF PROFESSIONALS

WOORD & GEBAAR (1997) Vol. 17 (9). (First printed in Dutch)

"When a surdophobe must collaborate with deaf people on an equal footing, a fear mechanism is activated. Maybe it is the fear of having to render account to those whom you consider to be inferior." Thus states Gardy van Gils. Her presentation about surdophobia - fear of the deaf - had quite an impact recently at a conference on Mental Health and Deafness in Manchester UK. Below follows an integral version of her presentation.

GARDY VAN GILS

I am thirty-one years old and I am deaf. I was raised bilingually by deaf parents and attended a school for the hard-of-hearing, which offered oral education. The last six years I have been working as a social worker specialised in support services for the deaf at GOUDT in Ede.

Last year I developed a training course for the staff of our institute, that provides support services for the deaf. The aim of that course was to closely examine collaboration between deaf and hearing people, in order to improve its quality. Experience had taught us that the collaboration within this organisation was not working well.

The discussions were fierce and many irritations were voiced like "When I am having a break, I don't want to sign for my deaf colleagues". At one point a woman at the end of the room stood up and said (in a tone of voice which implied - what are we talking about) "But the deaf are inferior to the hearing!"

A deadly silence followed. The hearing were all looking out of the windows, with a few exceptions, and the deaf participants, who were sitting up front, looked at me, stupefied, indignant.

I was completely taken aback. Such a remark in the nineties.... It could not be true. I thought it to be a very rude remark, and decided to ignore it.

However, her remark stayed with me. I thought that I had misjudged her statement, and should not have ignored it. She had the guts to say out loud what many hearing think but dare not say, although they do act like it.

While most hearing were thus staring out of the window, the woman looked me straight in the face and said, that she did not think much of me and my deaf colleagues, thus showing me the core of most hearing people's attitude: the deaf are inferior.

Similar scenes were flashing before my eyes. Fearful whites who were trying to exclude black students from an American university, even the army had to interfere. Whites who no longer dared go to the beach, because now it was open for black people.

Closer to home: men who for a long time denied women the right to vote, out of fear that those housewives would gain a voice in their important political affairs. Or women who were banned from authority in typically male professions, again out of fear that men would lose their power and status.

And even closer to home: the psychiatric aid to the deaf. You can spot it in the Netherlands and abroad in organisations where deaf people are minimally represented in the staff, and only work in functions that require little or no education. And that in organisations that provide services to deaf children, deaf adults and deaf elderly people!

Whenever I ask the management why there are so few professional deaf people, they give me these plausible arguments. Usually it is mentioned in the official policy plan, that the organisation considers it of importance that there are deaf people employed. However, in practice that policy is not implemented. It is considered, but not executed.

There is more than meets the eye. This has to do with fear. You can smell their fear when you ask the managers why they don't adhere to their policy plans as formulated. This fear I call *surdophobia* - which means fear of the deaf.

As long as surdophobes come into contact with deaf people as clients, patients or pupils there is nothing to worry about. S/he can do her or his job, and exert his professional power. Just like the whites could tolerate

the blacks as workers on their cotton plantations or as domestics – but they could not join them on the beach.

The moment a surdophobe must collaborate with deaf people on an equal footing, a fear mechanism is activated. Maybe it is the fear of having to render account to those whom you consider to be inferior.

I can see you thinking: Surdophobia – where does Van Gils get it? Well, maybe this is her answer to the diagnosis of surdophrenia of a couple of years back, which was coined to describe the supposedly aberrant personality structure of deaf people, which is so popular in mental health circles.

Are you still with me?

Let us consider the criteria for Surdophobia that I successfully submitted to the American Psychiatric Association. They have decided to integrate my classification in the next D5M edition. For those unfamiliar with this term: D5M-IV is a psychiatric classification system, used by professionals in mental health to support the research into psychopathological and psychiatric disorders.

Surdophobia belongs to the so-called Anxiety Disorders. The diagnosis can be given when four of the following criteria are met:

A. The person suffers from a clear and lasting fear of situations in which s/he must function on an equal level with deaf people, or must act in the company of the deaf or be judged by deaf people.

B. The person has a discriminating, incorrigible bias toward the deaf: they are inferior people.

C. The person has no insight into his own fear of the deaf.

D. The person will try his utmost to avoid the abovementioned confrontation. This avoidance behaviour is manifested by rationalisation and denial.

E. The person tried to infest his environment with his own fear that the deaf may become a danger if treated as equals. The invention of a psychiatric disease like ‘surdophrenia’ is clear proof of this.

F. The person has a bloated sense of self-esteem when confronted with a deaf person in need of help.

G. The person shows this behaviour minimally for six months and is incorrigible even when confronted with information about deafness or with deaf people who do not need help.

I think I am getting even closer to home now. I think I am almost inside, even almost on your lap. For those of you who are getting all warm and sweaty and who cannot bear my tale: please do not give in to evasive behaviour, do not run away – there is more to come.

There is hope for surdophobes!

I will be realistic. For those chronic surdophobes among us – and I mean those of you who have had this disorder for five years or longer – you have a long way to go, but a cure is not impossible.

The first step to health is *awareness*. That is the first, biggest and most difficult step. This step must be taken with a hearing therapist. The therapist should help the client to become aware of his disorder surdophobia. Contact with a deaf professional would seriously lessen the chance of success, since the fears of the surdophobe would increase and the patient would probably stop the treatment prematurely.

Once the client is aware of his surdophobia, he should work on how to handle his fears for the deaf according to the rules of behavioural therapy.

A behavioural therapist can tell you more about this than I can, but naturally a confrontation with a deaf person in an equal setting will be part of the treatment.

For instance, locking the client in an elevator with a deaf co-professional and subsequently shut it off for a couple of hours. The client must think of a plan, together with the deaf person, how to escape from this nasty situation. Of course there are other therapeutic treatments possible.

To be perfectly clear: everything you have just learned about surdophobia is completely fictitious – I made it all up. But – and I want to emphasize

this – that does not mean that the phenomenon that I just described does not exist. The woman I quoted at the beginning of this article, articulated a bias of society as a whole. She said: “In the end the deaf are inferior to the hearing”. People think it and act upon it, but don’t say it. That, I think is the core of the problem. That is why there are so few deaf professionals active in mental health settings for the deaf.

With this presentation I hope to raise your awareness. Surdophobia is a sick mentality with a century old tradition, a psychiatric disorder that nowadays needs to be recognized and treated. In the meantime, I trust that in the near future more deaf people will be working within your organisations.