

SOFIE DE VEIRMAN

## **Breaking the silence. The experiences of deaf people in East Flanders, 1750-1950. A life course approach**

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Although historical disability research has accelerated rapidly in the last decades, the main focus has been on the history of institutional, educational and medical practices and the question as to how disabled individuals experienced living with an impairment became increasingly pertinent. My research has taken up this challenge with an empirical research into the lives of prelingual deaf people, living in the province of East Flanders between 1750 and 1950. From early on in history, deaf people have been the focus of intensive academic, educational, and medical attention and debate. This makes them an interesting research group. Moreover, the early distinction of prelingual deafness ('deaf-mutism') in historical sources enables one to identify deaf people through time.

Disability historians often turn to institutional source materials. As a result, disabled persons appear as objects of medical surveillance, as recipients of charity, or as subjects of state disciplinary action. I, on the other hand, managed to identify deaf men and women in a varied set of (also non-institutional) historical sources. These sources provided me with a sample of 284 deaf persons born in different generations and regions, from all socio-economic groups and both genders. The life courses of these 284 deaf men and women were subsequently reconstructed from birth until death through linkage with historical demographic sources as parish and civil registers and population registers. The life course data was also expanded by other

sources written from both a quantitative and a qualitative perspective, such as census data and newspapers. By using event history analysis, the statistical analysis on which most life course analyses are based, I could determine the extent to which a life course was determined by the presence of a hearing impairment, or by (a combination of) other life characteristics, such as gender, social class and living environment.

My objective to uncover the experiences of deaf people, was operationalized in terms of two research questions. First, to what extent did the lives of the deaf differ from the hearing population? I chose the deaf persons' siblings as a control group as they shared the same early life characteristics that potentially influenced future life trajectories. And second, in what way were their life courses negatively influenced by nineteenth-century developments? The latter question starts from the widespread assumption put forward by historical materialism (E.g. Finkelstein 1981, Oliver 1990) that the material and ideological changes that accompanied the emergence of an industrial capitalist society, coupled with the increased medical interpretation of disabilities, made people with disabilities increasingly vulnerable to segregation, stigmatization and institutionalization. In line with contemporary studies into integration, I have dealt with these two questions alongside five thematic chapters. Each of these chapters focused on a set of key events in a person's life course: 1) growing up, 2) making a career for oneself, 3) finding a partner in life, 4) developing a personal network of family and friends and migration, 5) growing old and dying. By focussing on this wide range of topics, my study links up with many avenues of historical inquiry such

as poverty, employment, industrialization, the importance of family systems, migration, aging and mortality.

My study shows that the chances for deaf men and women to live an 'ordinary' life were significantly monopolized by the direct and indirect consequences of their impairment. Most crucial in this regard were their difficulties on the labour and marriage market. Instead of setting up a new household and earning a living for one's family, most deaf people had to take up alternative survival strategies. Close relatives and institutions constituted the most important support systems for deaf singles. The generally higher number of unmarried, unemployed and institutionalized deaf individuals indicates that the restrictions an impairment imposed on a person's chances in life were not easily surpassed. However, I demonstrate that the life paths of deaf people were equally dependent on personal and environmental factors, such as a person's gender, living environment, family situation and socio-economic background. As such, I show that the relationship between being deaf and being vulnerable was not an inescapable one, but the product of specific environments. With regards to the second research question, I demonstrate that the hypothesis that the nineteenth century can be considered a *dark* century for the deaf, as opposed to a *golden* age in the eras before, needs revision. I show that the nineteenth-century decline in marriage rates and increase in unemployment and institutionalization was not unique for the deaf and not necessarily related to industrialization processes. Moreover, not all nineteenth-century developments were necessarily for the worse as the nineteenth-century increase in the number of deaf people employed in more highly skilled occupations

illustrates. The vocational training provided by the expanding nineteenth-century deaf education system proved to be the influential factor here.