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Perpetrators need healthy boundaries. Can we as a society set limits from a place of understanding?

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Speaker

Elien van Oostendorp

GZ Psychologist, DDP & EFT Therapist,
Couple & Family Trainer & Supervisor



European
Peace
Conference



What if we would help the aggressors as well?

Elien van Oostendorp on understanding destructive family patterns

We are excited to introduce Elien van Oostendorp as a speaker on understanding destructive family patterns at the European Peace Conference on Perpetrator-Victim Dynamics in Amsterdam, 2025.

Elien van Oostendorp

Elien van Oostendorp specialises in Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy (DDP) and Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT). She is supervisor for the Dutch Society of Couple and Family Therapy (NVRG). Oscar, the founder of the Peace Conference, got to know Elien through his trainings in Attachment-Based Family Therapy (ABFT). Elien and Oscar share a passion for making the systemic theory relatable, experiential, and applicable.

What perpetrator and victim patterns do you see in your practice?

“Let me start by saying that I prefer to speak of dysfunctional patterns, instead of using the term perpetrator. Why would we define someone by the sequence of their behaviours? Generally speaking, I see dysfunctional patterns at three levels. At the first level, intergenerationally, as parents or caregivers, we have unresolved issues and can thus act harmfully toward our children. For example, a father abuses his child, while the mother senses something, yet dares not investigate her hunch. Or children may resort to violence toward their caregivers when they experience few boundaries and empathy from them. They feel no sense of belonging. Events outside the family realm, like being bullied, obviously aggravate matters. I have seen families where one of the young children decides on day to day activities who is allowed to sit with them at the dinner table, or children who use force to get their parents to call them in sick from school multiple times per week. Second, destructive patterns can emerge between loved ones in the same generation, for example in the case of partner violence. It can be said that partners then typically fight for connection. Some partners can resort to physical or emotional abuse. And on the third level, there are the rhetorics in politics. In my view, right wing parties – mistakenly – call for ever higher judicial sentences.”

Why are higher judicial sentences for perpetrators not a good idea?

“People who act aggressively are not deterred from using violence because of heavier judicial sentences. In fact, violence is often elicited by a lot of factors and is not intentional. It is rather situational and emotional. That is how street fights and domestic violence starts. Those involved have no alternative than to yell, gaslight, batter, or use other forms of violence to act out their emotions. The more they feel abandoned and misunderstood, the more they may seek refuge in groups of like-minded others or in extreme social media outlets. Online, they meet others whom they feel akin with, which generates the experience of belonging and appraisal we all seek in social contact. Violence may become their way of living, their identity. Add to that the impact of politicians and institutions who frame people who act violently as ‘bad’ or ‘sick people’. Politicians and institutions push those who already feel excluded and unwanted even further away. Instead of helping people who have used aggression to belong to a community, our society abandons them. We leave them out in the cold and I understand their distrust toward institutions and authorities.” In fact here we see one of the dysfunctional patterns on a societal scale: two groups who discard each other, mistrust each other, which leads to even further escalation.”

What do you mean with ‘aggressors are more than their violence’?

“Framing people as either perpetrators or victims, I do not think that’s helpful. On the contrary, it boxes and fixes people into specific roles. They are more than that. For example, they are also a loving spouse, in denial of their traumas, and were not taught to speak about their emotions or deal with the pain in their lives. Then it is impossible to tell their spouse about their pain or tell them they are getting very agitated and could she/he please stop the bickering. Gabor Maté’s documentary “[The wisdom of trauma](#)” illustrates this. It shows how all prisoners had more than three ACE’s (Adverse Childhood Experiences).”



When people have unresolved pain and losses, they bring these into their relationships. Can we help both the perpetrator and the victim understand what happened when it escalated between them?

Why do you say that we should take more care of aggressors in families?



“In my supervision, social workers tell me how they go to families when violence is reported. Our society and the Council for Child Protection expect them to protect the children and their mother, in most cases, without attention or emphasis on also building an alliance with the father. Of course the children and harmed adults need safety and help to recover. However, what about the parent who inflicted the harm? Or the child who used violence? In order to heal the relations, family members need to be helped to reconnect and also take responsibility for their actions. We need to help them understand what happened and to help them deal with their emotions. We should replace the one-sided and oversimplified story about how bad the father is. I’d therefore say: How can we help parents and couples reconnect and understand why and how the interaction escalated? What is their pattern and how did it escalate? In case of violence between partners, in 80% of the cases it happened when emotions got out of hand; often after a long time of trying to suppress them. We call it a *dysfunctional* way to fight for connection, situational in the sense that it is not intentional. Did you know that people who harm their spouse, often suffer from their own behaviour as well? They typically say, ‘now that you point out that help is possible, I am willing to work on it’. Though it is not easy, it can be done. Violence alone is not who somebody is.”

When people have unresolved pain and losses, they bring these into their relationships. Can we help both the perpetrator and the victim understand what happened when it escalated between them?

Is there a difference in responsibility between partners and children?



“In families with dysfunctional patterns and violence (physical and/or verbal), my opinion is that a child has no responsibility for their position in the pattern. Children act in reaction to patterns that stem from their parents or caregivers and their ancestors. Children cannot be held accountable because we as parents offer the possibilities and situations, build the patterns in which they can act and react.”

What core dynamics do you see with partners in a relationship?

“When people have unresolved emotional issues, they will bring this into their relationship. We all do. Typically, I see three dynamics. The first dynamic plays when there is a more accommodating partner and a more externalising partner. The one partner, scared of confrontation, adjusts to the other, who in some cases can use aggression and will be called a ‘perpetrator’ by society. This often starts before they grow into their relationship. People learn their way of communicating in their family of origin. Accommodating partners typically deny or trivialise the violence, as if it is their own wrongdoing or maybe refer to their past as they have experienced worse previously. The second dynamic plays when couples stop talking out of fear of confrontations, resulting in fights in silence. Both partners turn their attention elsewhere. This can be towards TV, friends, or an addiction. The third dynamic plays when one tries to reach his/her spouse who fears confrontation. We try to get their attention. This can start with verbal complaints like ‘Why are you home late?’ or ‘Why did you not bring flowers for Valentine’s day?’ This gets more intense until the other can no longer handle the complaints. They may lose their self-control and yell or hit their partner out of this sense of powerlessness. Anything to make it stop. So both partners use a form of violence, but one is more verbal and the other more physical (also the complaining partner may get physical first). Whenever we have unprocessed emotions, especially from our family of origin, we get more easily triggered into the patterns that we seek to avoid.”

Aggression on the street and in families is situational in 80% of the cases. Thus, as much as we want to believe in politics, higher judicial sentences will not make aggressors less violent.

What is the consequence of not empathising with both perpetrators and victims?

“You can only be a bully if you do not allow your vulnerable feelings to be felt. Only then one is capable to cross other people’s boundaries without a sense of guilt. It is said that Zelensky, before it escalated in the White House in their first meeting, that he showed Trump a video about the war zone. Trump apparently looked at the suffering of the Ukrainian soldiers without any visible emotion. Denial makes it easier to ignore those in need. Similarly, in Europe, we look away from the fate of refugees. Populist politicians frame them as ‘a group of parasites’ living off us ‘benefactors’. It is the ‘good’ versus the ‘bad’. It is easier to look this way at immigrants if you do not allow yourself to get to know a person. You can then dehumanise others. Let me give another example. Let’s say you grew up in a poor neighbourhood. The police is considered your enemy because of bad experiences of your parents with them. You are offered to earn some money by drug dealing. As your parents are busy trying to make a living, and the kid does not want a life like that of their parents, can you blame the kid for becoming involved in criminal acts? Societal victims become perpetrators. They think that the distorted way that they learned to live is ‘love’ because now they belong. Yet, is it? In addition, often, bystanders do also not set boundaries in a respectful way.”

Destructive behaviours often spring from low self-esteem and feeling unwanted or even excluded.

How can bystanders set boundaries for those that are not aware of them?

“In families, we help parents do sit-ins. As a parent, you ask a neighbour or a family member like an aunt or a grandparent, to help set limits with the child that crosses boundaries. After an escalation happened, as a parent, you sit for fixed time in your child’s room, asking them for a solution. You do not get angry. You do not misuse your position by making reproaches. You say: ‘We sit here because you beat up your mother. We stay until you have come up with a solution.’ Similarly, I think we should activate the silent majority in society to say ‘no’ and say ‘stop’ against letting our leaders get away with their bullying. Non-violent resistance (developed by Chaim Omer) we can train to be fluent in. Demonstrators use our right to demonstrate that way; the more peaceful they act, the clearer they can convey their message. Maybe this is a way to break with patriarchal bulwarks that cover up their underlying low self-esteem? Children feel more secure when they experience clear boundaries. Can we –as a society– develop this third way? And learn that we do not need to hide our feelings or excessively act them out? I believe that we could move toward a more humane view of ‘others’ in society, if we would prioritise emotion and connection in communication from an early onset on.”

As a society, we should help perpetrators by setting respectful boundaries and help them experience a sense of belonging.

Want to learn more? Join us in person or online.

European Peace Conference on Perpetrator-Victim Dynamics

"We are not at war, but not at peace either," said the new NATO Chief, Mark Rutte. "If you want peace, prepare for war." Is Europe at a crossroad towards more polarisation, identity politics, and war? Reflections on our human nature may help us find a sensible way forward.

At this year's peace conference, the first of its kind, an international group of scholars, experts and practitioners, will seek ways to explore how perpetrator-victim dynamics run through our lives, families, business and politics.

With guest lectures, workshops, personal and group reflections, we seek to embody the latest expertise from the research on war and peace.

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