



*The direct relationship
between victims and
perpetrators should be
primarily based on facts
—and not on perceptions.*

Speaker

**Hilbrand
Westra**

Trauma Release Expert



European
Peace
Conference

The existential perpetrator-victim polarity



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Hilbrand Westra on taking responsibility within systems of denial

*We are excited to announce **Hilbrand Westra** as a speaker on the political framing of adoption at the European Peace Conference on Perpetrator-Victim Dynamics in Amsterdam, 2025.*

Hilbrand Westra

Hilbrand Westra is a trauma release expert specialised in existential systemic work. He is the founder of SSB (School voor Systemisch Bewustzijn) and different workshop concepts. Since he has a Korean background, adopted by Dutch-Frisian adopters in the Netherlands, Hilbrand has been involved in the Dutch and international adoption debates. Oscar, the founder of the Peace Conference knows Hilbrand from having been at the yearly two-day event War and Peace, a gathering that brings together both citizens and military through work formats like systemic constellations in groups guided by Hilbrand and his team from Military Civil Domain of his school.

What do you mean with the ‘perpetrator-victim polarity’?

“From an existential perspective, the perpetrator and the victim have factually become related, as if a line can be drawn between the two poles. On the one hand, there is the perpetrator: the one who acts, the actor, who does something. On the other hand, there is the victim: the one who receives one or more physical, emotional, social-psychological, or financial consequence of the actions undertaken. It is not so much about the legal or moral side of the actions, but about the fact that both parties got connected through the happening itself. In short, two or more elements, individuals, or groups meet each other, at a specific time and place. The perpetrator-victim polarity emerges out of ‘the givens’. The ‘facts’ speak for themselves. Mind you: I am not talking about our subjective experiences, whether we perceive someone or something else or ourselves as a perpetrator or victim. Such judgements, especially without evidence, can often only cloud our understanding of the perpetrator-victim polarity. It is about ‘what happened’ and about ‘what cannot be denied’. It is like Boszormenyi-Nagy argues for in his contextual therapy: before all, you need to get clear on the facts – and only afterwards you can explore the psychological, relational and ethical side of matters. Similarly, as Eugene Gendlin, an American philosopher argues, the things we try to understand are incomplete. That is, the relationship between perpetrators and victims may not be so clear either. So we need to start with the basics, the facts, before we bring in any obfuscating perceptions.”



What typically obfuscates our perception on perpetrator-victim dynamics?

“One thing that obfuscates the clarity on the perpetrator and victim polarity line is when elements stand in between the perpetrator and the victim. The less direct the action is, the easier it becomes to look at it as a mere technical execution. Take for example the nuclear bombs dropped on Japan. The pilots involved did drop the bombs because they were told to do so. It’s their job, right? With the legal system in between, they can step away from their professional responsibility towards the victims, which is also easier as they did not know the victims. With this, they avoid seeing and taking responsibility for their terrible deed (even though it might have been the most strategic choice that could have been made, when we consider the stage that the war found itself in at the time). If they would let the deaths sink in, however, it is devastating, horrible and gruesome. From this point, I think we can ask ourselves: Were our ancestors, as part of an allied alliance, implicated subjects? Should they have actually stopped the bombing?”

“Another factor that obfuscates clarity on the perpetrator-victim polarity is that of time and distance. Even when we did not *do* the act itself, thus do not need to *feel personal guilty* (even though we may feel guilty by identifying with the human consequences nonetheless), we can still profit from the consequences of acts from others. Think of crimes committed by Dutch ancestors with their history of slavery or their collaboration with the Nazi regime. Or take political leaders who send poorly armed military to the battlefield. Does it make those who give the orders are less guilty as compared to those who do the killing? I don’t think so. What does it make those who do not fight –and let others do it? In the Korean culture, we rather be dead than let ourselves be enslaved. In contrast, the Netherlands has a very feminine culture with regards to war. It’s a bit controversial to say, but I think that ‘women are the first to push men to go to war’. Why? They have less of an idea about what it takes for men to fight. Letting others endure your pain is an act of false femininity. Today, the Dutch in general rather negotiate than fight. They rather wallow in their collective –I would say– *feigned* sense of victimhood. This way they are hiding their perpetrator side, just like many women nowadays do that. Let me give a short example. We find it perfectly normal that women do not escape their early youth sexual abuse. In fact, in constellations, women, including mothers and sisters, even turn away from the female client who seeks to move on. It is as if stepping out of the victim position is not allowed by a system of perpetrator denial.”

The perpetrator-victim polarity emerges out of the fact that the victim suffers or benefits from the consequences of the perpetrator’s actions – it is a direct relationship that can never be denied without becoming a perpetrator.

Should we take responsibility for intergenerational acts of violence?

“No. Even though we can feel guilty out of compassion, juridically speaking we are never guilty. People sometimes try to hold me –originally Korean, adopted and growing up in the Netherlands– accountable for what the Dutch did in for example the Second World War or Golden Age. How can they? Sorry, there is no direct relationship between me and the Dutch ancestors. I am Korean! Discussions about decolonisation with justice activists often get out of hand when they try to make me personally responsible as well, while only at most an indirect and implicit connection can be found. As an activist, at most you can request my empathy, share how intergenerational acts do pain you, but you should not pressure another to *be* or *feel* responsible. In fact, you are then forcing something onto another person, thus become a perpetrator yourself. As soon as I say this, activists get livid, as if the bad is not in them and only in others and our ancestors? As Carl Jung would say: We are all good and bad. The black and the white flow into each other. People who can no longer discern this are entangled in their primary emotional reaction. They are no longer reasonable. Everything is dismissed as ‘irrelevant’ or ‘invalid’.”

The Dutch have a feminine culture, one of negotiation and feigned victimhood. They need to man up, take their position in the battle field – and no longer be the falling short daughter under the wings of the United States.

So, how can Europeans better take responsibility – and thus stand their ground?

“Until on the battle field itself, you will never know what you will do. In my career, I have seen people in reorganisations pull the strangest acts, for example when their income or social status was on the line. Unless people have identified with the trauma parts from their family, it is normal to have the will to live and survive. In the battle field, I found out that I know now that I am able to be the first to shoot. It is an archaic force within me. We simply cannot avoid our responsibility. Let me give an illustrative example. When a father says ‘rape my daughter as long as you do not hurt me,’ the daughter can, after this has happened, no longer see her father in the eyes. The father lost his rightful position in the house. Similarly, Europe now needs to face its perpetrator side –and not longer lean onto the Americans saving them. Metaphorically speaking, we should no longer behave as the victimised daughter that always fell short. Instead, Europe is now forced to –finally– *man up*.”

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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