

A wider, deeper look at domestic violence

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PIONEER

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Domestic violence takes many forms and often involves complex (multi)problems. That is why professionals do not only have to follow procedures, but also have to cooperate and look beyond the frontiers of their own disciplines. "That is a significant issue to work on," thinks Sietske Dijkstra, who was until recently lector in domestic violence and interagency cooperation at Avans Unmiversity of Applied Sciences, and who in 1998 established the Dijkstra Agency.

Dr. Dijkstra prefers the term *intimate violence* "because 'domestic' makes it sound gentler than it is. Domestic violence can be child abuse and partner violence, including child-parent abuse and elder abuse. Think of grandchildren who "borrow" Grannie's debit card or pressures Grandpa into creating activities things to entertain them. And intimate violence covers both physical abuse, such as beating or sexual assault, and also psychological violence such as verbal abuse, humiliation, and intimidation. Intimate violence also includes the physical or emotional neglect of children or elders".

Little changed

Dr. Dijkstra is believes that progress is being made in understanding and handling domestic violence. The Netherlands center for social development, **MOVISIE**, conducts effective interventions to respond to domestic violence (www.effectieveinterventies.nl). Yet there is too little lasting change. In April 2002 a government policy document called "Private Violence, Public Good" described a joint approach to domestic violence involving multiple social agencies. The Cabinet recognized domestic violence as European society's greatest source of violence, and called for increased public awareness and a more focused approach. Since then, the topic has definitely been prominent on the national agenda, acknowledges Dijkstra.

"Today we see more effective policies, collaboration, and detection," she says. "When I received my doctorate in 2000, we didn't have anywhere near the insight into the topic as we have now. The research is continually improving and increasing amounts of useful data are being brought together. We are really seeing more awareness and understanding. Yet despite that progress, not much has really changed in society's approach to domestic violence. I think that is mainly because of the attitudes of blame and shame that still prevails."

Evidence-based

The website www.effectieveinterventies.nl developed as part of the project, describing methods used by professionals to reduce aggression and violence. But merely describing methods does not produce the desired result, explains Sietske Dijkstra. "Research is still required to measure the impact

and effectiveness of many of those methods, which can be a long and costly road. Interventions should meet definite criteria that explicitly specify their purpose, approach, development, and experience required."

Dijkstra herself led a multi-year project until last July in which a consortium investigated the RJ Flags System, a methodology to detect sexual behavior in children and adolescents and to respond constructively. "Here too, the method is promising," says Dijkstra, "but its effectiveness has yet to be validated by research."

Beyond stereotypes

It is not known exactly how many instances of each kind of domestic violence occur each year in the Netherlands. Only a few studies were published in 2011, based on research performed by (among others) the Intomart research group and Tilburg University, commissioned by the Dutch Ministry of Justice. Those studies estimate that there were at least 200 thousand victims of domestic violence in the Netherlands in that year alone. About half of the respondents claimed to have been faced with at least one occurrence at home during that year.

Dealing effectively with domestic violence is complicated by the fact that it usually is not an isolated phenomenon. Instead it is often related to behavioral problems, relationship issues, addiction, unemployment, and even crime. Further, the short-term and long-term impact of violence directed at children in families often is huge, as convincingly indicated by a longitudinal study conducted by American researcher Vincent J. Felitti, MD on the effects of negative experiences during childhood. (Adverse Childhood Experiences [ACE] Study, 2012), which concluded that traumatic events can have a cumulative effect in later life, such as greater tendencies toward addiction, depression, mental disorder, weight problems, heart disease, and other health issues.

Investing

Research into domestic violence is often conducted via surveys or interviews with stakeholders and professionals, following family histories, or evaluating events and methods. Last June the Verwey Jonker Institute, with whom Dijkstra frequently cooperates, published a major study of partner violence in the four largest cities in the Netherlands: Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Utrecht, and The Hague. ('Breaking patterns of violence requires specialized assistance', commissioned by those cities). Researchers extended that study by following from 2009 through 2012 more than two hundred families with children, tracking three measurements extensively. Mothers from a quarter of the households were interviewed to gain greater insight into their experience as victims. The researchers concluded that severe aggression against partner victims can only be treated effectively by providing specialized help.

But often the provision of those services fails, Dr. Dijkstra notes. "In a third of the situations the women do not feel sufficiently helped, and the violence against them does not stop. The struggle continues, often as a conflict over the custody of the children. More than half of the children do not get the help they need. On the positive side, government policies have improved and the detection of violence by professionals happens much earlier, but we must not settle for that. Those improved tools bring an ethical obligation to do even better at providing good work. That awareness really needs to become stronger. For example, when I participated in the massive study to follow research

evaluating a decade's development of domestic violence policies, it became clear that that we had invested in significantly in infrastructure and detection, but enough in developing effective interventions.”

No contact

For Dr. Dijkstra, that poses the question: what is skilful professional performance? And how can professionals better cooperate in reaching that goal together? Sometimes families have been monitored by social work professionals, for example office consultations concerning the well-being of young children. There it becomes clear that parents are the guardians of their children's mental health care. The problem is that the various professionals assigned to intervene often have no contact with one another. “Too many professionals still view situations only on the basis of their own core activities,” says Dijkstra. “But that doesn't work if you're seeking a comprehensive approach because families usually have comprehensive needs. You must apply your own skill set, but you also need connect with what the other professionals on the case are viewing and doing. Professionals may participate in multidisciplinary discussions of a case, but what is needed is an interdisciplinary discussion that crosses over the barriers between fields. That is a huge issue we must continually work on.”

High Conflict Divorce

Dijkstra says professionals must strive for a much wider and deeper view of domestic abuse. A fight between partners is usually not the straightforward conflict it may appear to be at first.

In May 2014 Dijkstra participated in the www.uitdehoudgreep.nl conference ("escaping the headlock") on high-conflict divorce convened by the task force on child abuse and sexual abuse. There it was agreed that greater cooperation among the agencies involved, along with better alignment of aid, is needed, but that cooperation is often difficult because of interagency competition that keeps them from sharing knowledge, for example in judicial proceedings. “Agencies invest a lot in what they offer, but they may learn more by sharing their expertise with others,” according to Dr. Dijkstra.

Also, too little is known about complex divorce. At the conference she lectured on the multiple dimensions of high-conflict divorce. “Often we have a simplistic and stereotypical picture: two parents in conflict fighting over the heads of their children. Sometimes that's accurate, but there could be many other factors involved, such as past violence, a psychiatric issue, a legal conflict, or substance addiction. Also, one parent can "enlist" one or more children to form a bullying alliance against the other parent. And the dysfunctional communication between the parents can be repeated in a parallel process by the professionals involved, ruling out a clear idea about the proper approach. In that situation, the professionals can actually cause a conflict to escalate even further—a serious ethical breach.

Important lessons

Dijkstra and her fellow researcher Wil Verhoeven analyzed a governmental report issued in September 2014 that evaluated the tragic case of Ruben, age seven, and Julian, age nine. In May of that year the boys were murdered by their father, who then killed himself. Their analysis called "Separate worlds and strained relationships" was published in the February 2014 issue of the journal

Maatwerk. The government's report established that the professionals involved in the case were proficient, but "although all the proper procedures were followed, nonetheless the result was that three people are dead." Dr. Dijkstra adds, "I believe we need to look much more deeply into what really took place there. For example, think of the emotions: anger, fear, feelings of being excluded and not heard. Those are underlying factors we too easily overlook. Both parents were highly educated and so were assumed to be reasonable people. That turns out to be not necessarily so." Dr. Dijkstra calls for much more research in the coming years focused on such underlying factors. She has developed a proposal to fund research into the risk factors for conflict escalation and how professionals can learn to reverse it. The research would evaluate the files at youth care agencies having to do with complaints that were settled, supplemented by interviews of both stakeholders and the professionals involved. "I strive for a language that could be common to professionals of every field involved in this work," says Dijkstra, "bringing together both social and legal vocabularies that would enable professionals to work together in cases of complex divorce, rather than separated on their own little islands."

Hidden knowledge

Sietske Dijkstra also calls for a greater awareness among professionals of the 'hidden' or tacit knowledge that can be crucial to understanding domestic violence and family relationships, such as in shelters, youth care institutions, police involvement, and supervised visitation. Many professionals have through their years of practical experience developed a 'gut feeling' about how to approach a given situation. Dr. Dijkstra has traveled several times to academic conferences and has undertaken work visits in the United States and Canada to delve into what is often called 'tacit knowing'. How is that sophisticated knowledge developed, applied, and passed on to others? To answer such questions, in 2011 she published with co-researcher Nicole van Dartel the book *Hidden Treasures*. "You can experience knowledge in more complex divorce situations, for example through group discussions that make it useful to others. Tacit knowing can be gained through student internships. Much of my work as a lecturer in recent years has focused on strengthening explicit knowledge related to practice. A focus on tacit knowing can help in coming years to provide a better approach to this crucial work."

Pride

Dr. Dijkstra has been studying domestic violence for over thirty years. She finds it a lively and penetrating subject, with a wonderful side-benefit: "Sometimes you can really help people. And there's so much that can be a very moving emotional insight. Unfortunately, these days we're seeing a growing risk of relapse and an increase in violence, particularly related to the economic crisis and the transition of care to municipalities.

That may mean we can expect to experience many more domestic calamities, she says. "Yet at the same time I and other professionals see students growing tremendously in their profession. That I am hugely proud of. My focus includes field work, including working visits, and in that work I learn again and again the value of our practice. I find that very beautiful. That's the happy part of my work, and it more than outweighs the doom and gloom."

Sietske Dijkstra

Sietske Dijkstra (born 1960) taught two days a week at Avans University from 2007 to November 2014 as a 'lector' in domestic violence and interagency cooperation. Since November 2010 her research group, Bureau Dijkstra, has joined with five other research groups to form the Center for Expertise in Safety.

From August 2010 until December 2012 Dijkstra was part of the Samson Commission to investigate child sexual abuse in residential care and foster care from 1945 to the present. Dijkstra graduated from the University of Utrecht and received her PhD from there in 2000. Her expertise focuses on applied, practice based research and providing training and consultation to a wide range of professionals, students, and teachers in training for various vocations. www.sietske-dijkstra.com