

Preface

It is not a coincidence that I wrote a dissertation on violence. As a child, together with my family, I regularly watched the gruesome murders in (mostly British) detective series. However, most of the time, the actual acts of inflicting harm were cinematic snap-shots, leaving much to my imagination. Later on, I got to know the doings of harm up close in my days as a social worker. Whilst working in homeless shelters in the Red Light District of Amsterdam, and a domestic violence shelter in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, U.S.A., I was frequently a witness of angriness, heated altercations, psychotic episodes, fist-fights, threats, the use of weaponry and horrific suicide attempts. More crucially, I was put on the spot in sorting such situations out. Thus, I have had my fair share of pulling people apart, restraining individuals, infinite attempts to calm enraged people down, helping victims—men, women and children—with their noticeable injuries of abuse and attacks, being assaulted myself and managing (personal) emotions. There is no doubt that these experiences have left its mark on me.

I became intrigued by the subtleties of violence. I did not just want to understand the impact on myself and my colleagues, but also the intricate dynamics of antagonistic interactions itself. How are we to understand them and how was I, and are others, supposed to deal with them? In the summer of 2016 my passion for understanding violence was strengthened when I was seriously threatened and intimidated by a client. These experiences had, in a short period of time, amounted to terrifying nightmares. I experienced a total lack of support from my direct team leader, higher-level management and organization. After their unimpressed, heartless and rather callous response, I vowed to never accept any intention to make me feel small or ashamed again. To this day I aim to support those who are called ‘not suited’ for their job, ridiculed, considered weak or crazy whilst having to work in the face of violence. I also seek to understand how we can make sure that those with exceptional powers proportionally use them. Finally, the violent murder of my, then 26-year-old, uncle Jochem Keesman in 1984 on the beach front of Egmond aan Zee continues to drive me to understand the interactional dynamics of violence. Kicked and punched to death by a group of young men, his murder would arguably be called an act of ‘senseless violence’ in Dutch media.¹ This prohibits understanding why and how such violence occurs. With my social work degree and years of work experience I thus made my way to University. There, I was lucky enough to meet my supervisor Don who worked on violence matters and encouraged me to do research.

While this preface consists only of anecdotal evidence, these encounters, personal experiences and thoughts did motivate me to dig deeper into the mechanisms that underlie violence. One way of doing so was researching and writing this dissertation. Although it does by no means provide a full or final answer to the question of how

1 In Dutch ‘Zinloos geweld’

violence (de)escalates or how it is experienced, I do hope that it contributes to some pieces of the puzzle. In conclusion, this endeavour coming to an end is somewhat of a personal triumph. Like many early-career scholars and as a first-generation academic, I too often felt insecure prompting me to work hard. To quote my former general practitioner who (mis)diagnosed me as a 3-year old as someone who had ‘a failure to thrive,’ I’m pretty sure that, having written this book, I am thriving.