

Long Live Superficial Contacts!
Interview with Femmianne Bredewold
By
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Editorial Introduction: In life in general, we tend to ignore each other even as we rub shoulders. Femmianne Bredewold conducted research in the relationships between vulnerable and independent “normal” citizens in two suburbs of Zwolle, a city in The Netherlands. The majority of these relationships tend to be superficial contacts—and those are the best, for not much can become dysfunctional, they are symmetric and they give everyone the feeling of belonging. The only thing is, even superficial contacts are few and far between. Two thirds of “normal” independent citizens don’t have any contact with their more vulnerable neighbours.

Femmianne Bredewold, researcher at the *Centrum voor Samenlevingsvraagstukken*² in Zwolle, received her doctorate in January, 2014, on basis of her dissertation *Lof der oppervlakkigheid*.³ Her conclusion: Superficiality is essential for living together in a neighbourhood. It often makes for a balance between giving and receiving. When there is more intensive contact between independent and vulnerable citizens, there is often a problem of exploitation. Some people only take or receive, which creates a negative relationship. Or of charity, with people who only give, something that is also not only positive. Symmetrical relationships hardly ever result. This assessment has made Bredewold very somber with respect to the coming decentralization in social work in The Netherlands. According to her, this cannot end well.

¹Trans. Jan H. Boer *Sophie*, 2/20 pp. 18-21. Original title: “*Leve de oppervlakkige contacten!*”

²Translation: “Centre for Social Issues/problems/questions.”

³Translation: *In Praise of Superficiality*.

E&D—You live in Zwolle and did your sociological research in two suburbs there. Nice and close. How close are you to those vulnerable people who are the subject of your research?

I studied Social Work and then worked in psychiatry in order to pay for my second study, Development Studies, at the Radboud University. I worked at the *Regionale Instelling voor Beschermd Wonen* (RIBW)⁴ in Wolfheze. I worked swing shifts without heavy responsibilities. I was treated like a student. I was not the one who had to discuss managerial plans. It was light, something the clients also appreciated.

E&D—You already sang the praise of superficiality in your early years.

Yes, now that you put it this way, I have never realize that.

E&D—“Wofheze” means “pavilions in the forest behind a fence.” Was that a good time for you?

Inside the Institute I worked with a population of “heavy cases.” I often stood there in total surprise and sometimes thought, “Wow! It’s a good thing you don’t live in an ordinary open neighbourhood. The place is organized like a village, with its own little store, a club, etc. They, of course, offered a great degree of safety. In that respect, it was indeed a good time for me. On the other hand, as resident you would be able to leave the place only with great difficulty. You were a lifer. You needed nothing. No prodding to take initiatives or to take personal responsibility.

E&D—Brandon, the boy who became famous because he had been chained in another institution, now creates commotion in his present neighbourhood, because the neighbourhood feels insecure. What will it take for him to be successfully re-socialized?

For example, I noticed in my research in Zwolle that if young people with a criminal background move into the neighbourhood, at first a lot of fear and *angst* would arise and the residents would immediately withdraw into a “we vs them” kind of pattern. It is very difficult to bridge the wide gap that was immediately created. The feeling of insecurity remains, while, if you get to know them, you can often break this kind of pattern.

⁴ Translation: “Regional Institute for Protected Living.” See Wikipedia and other websites.

E&D—In your dissertation, you tend to intermingle the terms “contact” and “relationship.” Within relationships, you make a distinction between warm and cold relationships. What was actually your precise focal point?

I have researched the question what level of contact exists between people with and without restrictions. If there is contact, what does it look like? I consider contact as a loose kind of relationship, while relationship includes an emotional component. Contact is cold; a relationship is warm. I have discovered that a third of the “normal” population appears to have contact with the vulnerable, especially in moments like shopping or walking their dogs, and that within those contacts only a small group have some sort of a relationship. If it is a positive relationship, then it is nearly always by people who have such a restricted person in their own family or who are driven by religious motives.

E&D—What led you to this particular research issue?

I had a lot of contact with the RIBW in Zwolle. At the RIBW it was well known that clients with a psychic disturbance have few contacts. They have a limited network that, in addition, often has worn thin; relationships with family are distorted. The question for an organization like RIBW is how we can organize networks for such clients once the support they still receive from professionals is withdrawn in the context of the **Wmo**. What will still be available once the support is withdrawn? Thus my issue of research into the current situation and what you can expect arises from the practice of psychiatry.

E&D—If people truly are sociable beings, they look after each other. Can you assume that as a community? Or do you need to organize it?

I think you need to organize. There are many people who no longer are part of any community; they are not religious and they are not active in the life of the community. Thus you need to organize something. You must also remember what kind of people we are talking about. It is often about people who are not adept at social contacts, who constantly ignore boundaries and whom you would prefer to avoid in your daily life. I think, for example, of a man I interviewed and who, when I met him again later, accused me of not

having had a coffee with him, for I had allegedly promised him. I could not remember that situation, but I did not feel at ease in his presence, so that I would always have checked whether this would be approved. Because I have worked in psychiatry, I have an idea of what you can expect, but I can easily understand that people in the neighbourhood would experience a deep *angst*, not understand the situation and therefore keep at a distance.

E&D—You say, you must organize, but at the same time you say it won't work, for "normal" citizens remain fearful of the more vulnerable.

For certain groups it will indeed not work to withdraw them from care. I believe that for a certain form of support you can involve neighbours, but you will always continue to need professionals. Just looking after each other cannot replace professional care. Perhaps you can give professionals another role by having them give guidance to social networks, for it is not realistic to expect that a neighbourhood will take that over. Think, e.g., about people who live independently but under guidance of the *Stichting Philadelphia*.⁵ Who will take over the work of the counselor who comes by twice a week? Who will protect the finances of such clients? For the RIBW, in the context of her psychiatric clients, the same uncertainties pertain.

E&D—The RIBW was one of your clients. What do they think about your conclusions?

The RIBW is in a quandary. Financially, they are dependent on the community. Thus, they are not free to act against the local authorities; They have to participate in the policies of WMO.

E&D—In other words, the parties involved do not protest. But if RIBW does not give the signal, who will?

Indeed, there is little resistance. We do see the need for knowledge of hard facts. We are now busy, e.g., to organize research together with the RIBW into the role of social neighbourhood teams. How do they handle the problematics in a neighbourhood? We are going to follow that for four years.

⁵Translation: "Philadelphia Foundation."

E&D—In order to conclude after four years that, indeed, it does not work.

I suspect that indeed, the number of people with a negative contact, e.g. exploitation, may well increase dramatically.

Is it a surprise that exploitative relations surface so frequently? You describe criminal exploitative practices such as registering a car in the name of a handicapped or taking out loans on another person's name.

No, from the perspective of the literature this is no surprise. Nor is it from the perspective of care-giving practice. Professionals are familiar with it. For me it *was* a surprise, because I had never experienced it while I worked in psychiatry, but that was still in the old setting. As soon as people with physical handicaps live independently, they run enormous risks of exploitation. That shocked me deeply. How often do you see this kind of thing in the media? Young people short on emotional and social skills easily allow themselves to be sucked into criminal practices. One neighbourhood social worker admitted to me it was more than a day's work for him. *The whole idea that persons with such restrictions can cope and maintain themselves on their own in society without (public) assistance is simply wrong.*⁶ That is contrary to all sociological research. When someone's social-emotional development is disturbed as the result of a sickness, he will also hardly be teachable. Such a person will remain dependent on support throughout his life.

E&D—What if you approach the problem from another side, that is, not from the perspective of social welfare but of being offered support. Are we willing to help each other? Are we willing to help our handicapped neighbor with his finances?

Naturally, we are all willing. We will be happy to take the dog out for a walk, to feed the cat, bring the garbage can outside—but not every day! Not even in an organized way.

E&D--But is the superficial chat with the fish vendor a solution to the problem? That suggestion crops up between the lines in your dissertation.

⁶Emphasis by translator.

No, that is not the solution, but it *is* the beginning of a solution. When I presented the results in the neighbourhoods where I did the research, many made such observations. So, let us again just greet each other on the street. That would be a way by which we could give each other a feeling of security again. In a positive sphere you can again invite restricted people to come along. But that's it! Official support, aid, public assistance—that's a totally different kettle of fish. That is for the Mother Theresas of this world. They are happy everywhere and in every neighbourhood, but you cannot base a policy on that.

E&D—Two thirds of "normal" people have no contact with the vulnerable. That means there is still a world to conquer. What can you do about it as local authority?

Much of it depends on communication and image building. Many people indicate they want information about the handicapped in their neighbourhood. They don't know who they are or how you should deal with specific difficulties. However, with the correct information about their fellow residents they are quite prepared to give a helping hand.

So, it does after all turn out to be a question of a stranger not being loved.⁷ Thus, possibilities for further integration in the neighbourhood of the handicapped are not excluded. Actually, we are now talking about the problem of getting something started. After a phase of getting acquainted, something beautiful could possibly come to bloom.

Well, that's another side of the picture. People constantly emphasize the negative aspect of my dissertation—the risk of exploitation--; the press always avoids the positive: It's about being recognized, being seen. That's what makes people flourish. When you know you belong, you are part of it, then you can take it again. And that is precisely what happens in every case in superficial relationships. That's why I think that we can benefit much from those superficial contacts.

E&D--Can you give us an example?

Think of Project Mate, linking of a vulnerable person to a volunteer who regularly comes for a visit or who undertakes certain activities with the

⁷I do not know of a fitting equivalent for the popular Dutch expression "Onbekend maakt onbemind."

other. If the expectations are not realistic, something that can happen from either party, you will often see frustration develop. But if from the onset such a relationship receives effective coaching; if it is made clear that it is about togetherness but with a restricted contact, such a linking of mates can be very successful. That is the type of relationship that I have called "adapted reciprocity" in my research.

E&D--In your dissertation that, however, means that the "normal" citizen is satisfied with a more restricted contribution to the arrangement. With the priest Henri Nouwen, the relationship with Adam, a multiple-handicapped person, worked the opposite way. Nouwen realized how little he could give and how difficult it was for him to receive.⁸

That book gets on my nerves. Throughout my reading it I thought that Nouwen projected everything on that Adam, because he, Adam, had nothing to give.

E&D—Is it not the burden of "normal" people that they owe their strength to their success and their achievements? And is it not precisely that which falls away in the contact with restricted persons? Your own strength is after all only a phantom strength. We live, receiving too little, too little out of grace. Was that not the reason for Nouwen's disorder?

Yes, I can follow him, but then why write such a pathetic book about it?

E&D—You say you understand him, but secretly you simply don't believe him. You call it "projecting."

Well, true, I indeed do not believe him. Nouwen wants to bring the theme to the table in a clear manner, but then I think: You also simply need that Adam.

E&D—In the context of your research, would you describe the relationship between Adam and Nouwen one of mutuality?

No, that is not a mutual relationship. But that does not matter at all. Why should such a relationship be mutual? Besides, I am annoyed at expressing

⁸For the story of Nouwen, google his name for a highly edifying history that made him famous.

myself so definitely about a book that I have read years ago. I would not mind engrossing myself once again in his book and then continue our discussion next week.

E&D—Okay, let's talk again next week, for this is an important point.

(They are now continuing the discussion the following week.)

What do you think about Nouwen's description of his relationship with Adam?

I have to adjust my judgment and am less disturbed by the book now than at my first reading. Nouwen's point is: If the relationship is the central focus, it is no longer about giving and receiving. I acknowledge that and agree with it. Jet Isarin wrote the same in her dissertation, *De eigen ander*. She approaches the relationship with her handicapped daughter with the help of, among others, the philosophy of Levinas. There is a permanent lack of symmetry between mother and her handicapped daughter. As mother, this keeps you angry and sad permanently. This issue is not, according to Isarin, creating a balance, but how you allow the other to enter, give a place to, appropriate.

Nouwen turns Adam into a sort of Jesus, a saint. This makes it unbelievable for me. Philosopher Isarin and priest Nouwen describe, I think, the same phenomenon, but Isarin strikes me as more realistic. She leaves a place for frustration, for anger, for conceit, that is also caused by the other. It is not only all nice and good. Nouwen and Isarin have in common their placing the relationship at the forefront, but Nouwen makes it all too beautiful. He creates the illusion of symmetry.

E&D--Perhaps unmasking is a form of symmetry: It is something the other gives you or does with you. Do you have any other positive word about Nouwen to restore the balance?

He describes very well the process whereby he learns to know Adam and to interpret the sounds. How he becomes unsure and then learns gradually to focus more on the other and less on himself.

E&D—Back to your research. The way you now describe Nouwen and Isarin does not sound superficial but deepening. If you were to

transform the above lines into a recommendation, you would not end up with "Long live superficiality!" You would rather have something like: You can be open to the vulnerable on basis of an inner conviction.

That I don't know. It's all about society, about what we share with each other in public. If there is no contact there, it will go from bad to worse. That's why we must first establish contact and we'll take it from there. Just see the other stand there and greet him. It is both so simple and so meaningful!