

# The Bystander Dilemma and Child Abuse: Extending the Latané and Darley Model to Domestic Violence<sup>1</sup>

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In this paper, the theoretical framework of the bystander paradigm, as originally developed by Latané and Darley (1968, 1970), is extended to include an example of domestic violence on the basis of empirical research. The purpose of this study is to examine which personal and situational characteristics are associated with noticing and interpretation of child abuse. Records of telephone calls ( $n = 696$ ) from nonprofessional bystanders who alleged child abuse were analyzed. Results show that these bystanders of child abuse are a diverse group, and include a considerable number of children (peers). Bystanders' characteristics, such as gender and age group, and bystanders' visual and auditory perceptions, affect their interpretation of the abusive situation, i.e., their level of certainty of the abuse. These and other findings are discussed, and implications for future research and the definition of bystanders are formulated.

Violence and abuse in the family are subjects of major societal importance. In the Netherlands, one in nine married women is now being battered by her husband (Römkens, 1992). Furthermore, it is estimated that even in this small country, at least 50,000 children are maltreated by their parents each year, either physically, emotionally, or sexually (Hoefnagels, 1994). Every day approximately 20 reports are made to reporting agencies, and most of them appear to be justified. Yet, the number of unreported cases (the "dark number") exceeds the number of reported cases, increasing the likelihood that the abuse of these children will continue. In the United States in 1994, more than 1 million children were determined to have been victims of abuse and neglect—almost 2,800 each day (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1996).

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In order to improve our ability to deal with violence and abuse, these subjects need to be better understood. Theory and empirical research can help us in our efforts to understand. One theoretical and empirical contribution to this subject is the bystander paradigm, which attempts to identify the mechanisms that may influence bystander behavior in an emergency. However, the theoretical knowledge of bystander behavior in cases of violence is generally limited to outdoor violence, and the empirical knowledge of general public perceptions and actions in cases of child abuse (as an example of "indoor" violence) is hampered by theoretical shortcomings. This paper seeks to bridge this gap.

### Theoretical Background and Research Question

Important theoretical knowledge of bystander behavior in emergencies has been provided by Latané and Darley (1970). Their model of the intervention process describes bystanders' intervention in emergencies as the result of a series of decisions. At each of the five steps described by the model, the bystander makes a choice. Whether this person will eventually intervene or not depends on the combination of choices made in this sequence.

First, someone in the vicinity of an emergency must notice that something is happening. This requires a shift of attention to an unusual event. Second, the bystander must interpret this event as an emergency. The interpretation of what is often an ambiguous situation depends on a number of personal and social factors; for example, the person's willingness to believe that an emergency is actually happening, and the reactions of other bystanders by which the individual is influenced. Third, after the interpretation of an event as an emergency, the person must decide that it is his or her personal responsibility to intervene. Several variables determine whether the bystander will feel this responsibility. These include bystander characteristics (age, gender, social role), victim characteristics (age, gender, helplessness), situational factors (number of other bystanders present), and characteristics of the relationship between the bystander and the victim. Fourth, when the bystander has decided to help, the form of intervention must be chosen. The most important choice to be made at this point is whether the intervention will be direct (e.g., jumping into the fire oneself) or indirect (e.g., mobilizing professionals to help). Finally, the planned intervention must be implemented, which involves making practical choices. At this point, the bystander may overtly begin to act. The required actions are generally not too difficult to perform. However, the stress generated by the situation may make even an easy task hard to do.

Latané and Darley (1970) developed their model to predict bystander behavior in emergencies in general. In several experiments in which emergencies of different kinds took place, they and other scientists manipulated the variables that they hypothesized to influence the decisions that bystanders make. These include

the effects of social influence on the interpretation of the situation as an emergency (Bickman, 1972; Harrison & Wells, 1991; Latané & Darley, 1968; Latané & Rodin, 1969; Solomon, Solomon, & Stone, 1978), the way in which the interpretation of the situation is influenced by bystanders' willingness to perceive an emergency (Latané & Darley, 1970), the effect of the number of other bystanders on feelings of responsibility (Bickman, 1971; Darley & Latané, 1968; Harari, Harari, & White, 1985), and the effects of personality characteristics on helping behavior (Latané & Darley, 1970; Schreiber, 1979).

In these studies, several emergencies were simulated to test hypotheses about variables, such as the onset of a fire (Latané & Darley, 1968), theft in a store (Latané & Darley, 1969), and the sound of a bookcase falling on a confederate (Bickman, 1972). In only a few studies, however, did the emergency consist of an act of violence. Schreiber (1979) conducted an experiment in which an intruder shot a (confederate) college student in the classroom. Harari et al. (1985) simulated a rape in a realistic natural setting (a parking lot that had been the scene of previous rape assaults). These experimental studies focused on cases of outdoor violence.

Christy and Voigt (1994) were the first to extend bystander research to the field of child abuse. Having self-reported witnesses of child abuse complete a questionnaire concerning their experiences, they identified 40 variables as being related to intervention. However, since they are based on public episodes of child abuse, their results also help us to understand only the reactions and actions of bystanders of outdoor violence. However, most child abuse, relatively independent of its nature, appears to take place inside the home (Gilbert, 1997; Risin & Koss, 1987). Although child sexual abuse may be perpetrated by people outside the immediate family and even by people who may not be relatives (Langeland & Van der Vlugt, 1990; Russell, 1983), its secretive nature means that it takes place "behind closed doors" (Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1980). All other kinds of abuse, including neglect, are generally the privilege of parents or parenting figures (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1996). Does slamming the front door shut necessarily mean that domestic violence need become—and remain—unnoticed? Apparently not.

In recent years, two studies of bystander behavior in cases of child abuse have been carried out in The Netherlands, using representative samples of nonprofessional adults (Hoefnagels, 1995; Van Burik & Geldorp, 1997). With some methodological restrictions (variations in the definitions of abuse and time periods measured) the combined outcome was that, on average, one out of five adults reported that they had noticed children who were alleged of being abused or neglected in some way (the exact figures in these studies were 17.4% and 23.0%, respectively). Even if these adults noticed some of the same children, these figures bring the bystander problem into sharp relief, because in The Netherlands less than 0.1% of adults report an allegation of child abuse or neglect to an

official reporting agency in any year. How may this gap between observation and action be interpreted?

The aforementioned studies of bystander behavior in cases of outdoor violence were grounded in theoretical knowledge. We assume that this theory can also be useful in the study of behavior of bystanders of child abuse, as a case of domestic violence. Apart from the later publication of Paquin and Ford (1996), we are in agreement with the findings of Christy and Voigt (1994) that no studies of witnesses of child abuse as bystanders of violence have yet appeared in the literature. More fundamentally, most research on the processes leading to a report of child abuse lacks theoretical foundation. In the present study, the Latané and Darley (1970) model therefore serves as a guideline by which to analyze and interpret the data. Because of the nature of these data, we had to restrict our research to the first two steps of the model, asking ourselves the following question: Which personal and situational characteristics are associated with noticing and interpreting a case of child abuse?

## Method

### *Database and Definitions*

To find an answer to this question, we took advantage of a special opportunity to use data derived from a naturalistic setting. These were recorded telephone calls from bystanders of child abuse with professional social workers and psychologists. The initial database consisted of 4,117 recorded telephone calls. Demographic (age, gender, and region) data and some additional data had been registered on forms. Examples of these latter data are a characterization of the kind of call (e.g., counseling, informative) and the way in which the social worker had answered the question (e.g., helped immediately, referred to an agency). These data provided only a limited insight into the problem at hand. Of these forms, however, 30% did contain supplementary information; that is, the content of the telephone call as written down by the counselor. Those registration forms containing this supplementary information about a call with a bystander were selected. This resulted in 696 forms to be analyzed.

The telephone line had been developed as a service for adults with questions about child abuse. Both the establishment of this line and the latent need for advice had received an extra impetus, since a national awareness campaign on child abuse was prepared and implemented simultaneously. While the campaign was directed at all kinds of child abuse, the emphasis was on physical child abuse (Hoefnagels & Baartman, 1997), and this might be reflected in the results. The line was connected to the country's best-known adult Telephone Service (*Korrelatie*), which gave us permission to use their anonymous registration forms for research purposes 5 years after the closing of the line. As a result of the fact

that the telephone calls concerned the needs of the callers, their content varied. These differences were reflected in a considerable variation of the written text in the forms' supplementary information. These circumstances urge us to emphasize the explorative nature of the study.

A *bystander* was defined as any person who phoned the specific telephone line from a nonprofessional perspective and who was concerned with an allegation of child abuse in his or her vicinity. *Child abuse* is defined as "any threatening or violent interaction of a physical, sexual, or emotional nature, which is inflicted on a child in a dependency relationship, actively or passively, resulting in severe harm in the child of physical nature and/or mental disorders" (Dutch Ministries of Welfare, Health, and Cultural Affairs and of Justice, 1990; *Werkgroep Meldpunt Kindermishandeling*, 1997, p. 15).

In the present study, we focus on the initial steps of possible intervention in child abuse. This means that the allegations of abuse are of primary interest. These allegations function as the prerequisites of later steps to be made, including assessing the nature and extent of abuse (substantiation or falsification). As a consequence, the issue of whether or not the alleged child abuse actually occurred is irrelevant to the present study.

### *Procedure*

Two criteria were used in order to quantify the diverse rough material. First, the information had to fit elements in the theoretical model: the theoretical criterion. Second, a minimal number of valid scores had to be met for a variable to be included in the variables list: the empirical criterion. By taking a subsample of 100 forms from the 696 forms, these numbers of each potential variable were given. Variables with a low number of valid scores that were of moderate and low theoretical relevance were excluded from the list. If valid scores of variables were seldom available in the forms, but their relevance was considered high, these variables were included (e.g., if the caller had discussed the allegation of abuse with other bystanders). In this way, all potential variables in the initial codebook were balanced for theoretical relevance and empirical presence, which resulted in 67 variables structuring the database.

The forms were coded by a psychologist and six trained graduate students. For all students, a sample of 10 forms was first coded independently by the psychologist and a trained student. The forms were then re-examined together, and in some instances the codebook was refined. Finally, the data were coded and entered in a datafile.

Because of the nature of the data in this naturalistic research, it was inevitable that several variables had missing values. These missing values can have different meanings (e.g., irrelevant with respect to the situation at hand, not reported by the bystander, not recorded by the counselor). Therefore, we present

Table 1

*Number, Gender, and Age of Children and Number and Gender of Perpetrators*

|                 | Number mentioned (%)      |      | Gender (%) |                           |                 | Age (%)   |                           |
|-----------------|---------------------------|------|------------|---------------------------|-----------------|-----------|---------------------------|
|                 | 1                         | >1   | Male       | Female                    | Male and female | < 8 years | ≤12 years                 |
|                 |                           |      |            |                           |                 |           |                           |
| Abused children | 74.9<br>( <i>n</i> = 614) | 25.1 | 62.3       | 31.0<br>( <i>n</i> = 509) | 6.7             | 51.4      | 77.2<br>( <i>n</i> = 478) |
| Perpetrators    | 78.7<br>( <i>n</i> = 484) | 21.2 | 37.8       | 62.2<br>( <i>n</i> = 490) |                 |           |                           |

most results in terms of the valid cases, and reanalyze some data under varying assumptions.

To assess interrater reliability, another subsample of 99 forms was coded twice, and Cohen's (1960) kappas were computed. The average kappa value of the variables used in this paper, excluding the four fewest coded variables (all rarely mentioned signals) was .76, reflecting excellent agreement beyond chance (Fleiss, 1981). The interrater agreement, as measured by the diagonal percentage in these latter four signals, was 93.6% (but the kappa value decreases sharply with rare scores). Because of the number in a series of univariate analyses, the level of significance was set at a probability (*p*) value of .005.

## Results

### *Bystanders*

Of the 696 bystanders in our sample, more than three quarters (76.7%, *n* = 696) were female, and only one quarter (23.1%) was male. About half of the bystanders (51.3%, *n* = 312) had not yet reached the age of 30 years, and almost three quarters (73.4%) were younger than 40 years. A large proportion (38.8%) was younger than 20 years old. One in seven callers was about the same age as the child being abused (*n* = 648).

### *Children and Perpetrators*

Table 1 shows the characteristics of the abused children and perpetrators as described by the bystanders.

Table 2

*Types of Abuse Mentioned*

| Type of abuse                            | Frequency | Percentage |
|--|-----------|------------|
| Physical                                 | 190       | 34.2       |
| Emotional                                | 84        | 15.1       |
| Neglect                                  | 50        | 9.0        |
| Sexual                                   | 80        | 14.4       |
| Combination (physical/emotional/neglect) | 118       | 21.2       |
| Other combinations                       | 34        | 6.1        |
| Total                                    | 556       | 100.0      |

Table 3

*Nature of Signals of Abuse Mentioned (All Cases)*

| Signal  | Times mentioned | Percentage of all signals mentioned |
|---|-----------------|-------------------------------------|
| Remarks of child  | 194             | 23.3                                |
| Worrisome behavior of perpetrator                         | 111             | 13.3                                |
| Worrisome behavior of child                               | 110             | 13.2                                |
| Physical characteristics of child                         | 107             | 12.9                                |
| Hearing sounds  | 87              | 10.5                                |
| Seeing abuse happen                                       | 78              | 9.4                                 |
| Remarks of others   | 51              | 6.1                                 |
| Remarks of perpetrator                                    | 38              | 4.6                                 |
| Developmental deterioration or learning problems of child | 28              | 3.4                                 |
| Child is afraid of parents or to go home                  | 28              | 3.4                                 |
| Total   | 832             | 100.0                               |

When the bystander mentioned more than one child being abused, these children were invariably siblings. The ages of the children varied from 0 to 25 years (the older ones were adults who were still in a dependency relationship with a parent or caregiver). When there were two (or even more) perpetrators, the data of the most abusive one were coded.

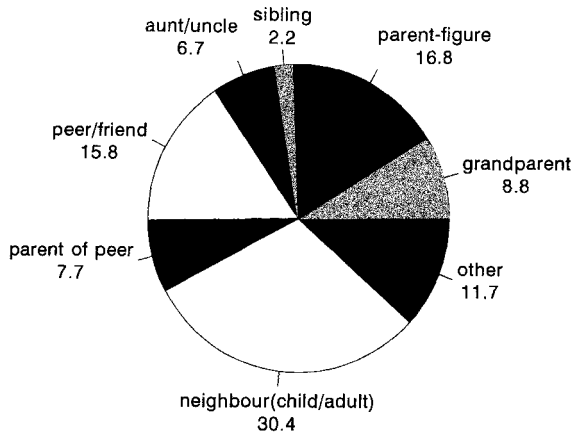


Figure 1. Positions of the bystanders toward the children.

### Abuse

In almost all (94.2%) of the cases ( $n = 553$ ), the abuse was still going on at the time of the call. The frequencies of the different kinds of abuse, irrespective of currency, are presented in Table 2. In instances where more than one kind of abuse was reported within one case, the combination of physical and emotional abuse and neglect was most frequently mentioned (21.2%).

### Relationships

In most (96.7%) instances ( $n = 602$ ), the bystander knew the child personally. Figure 1 describes the kinds of relationships between the bystanders and the children. A *neighbor* was a direct neighbor or someone living in the neighborhood. Parents who were bystanders (including stepparents and foster parents) were calling as nonabusive parents.

In most cases (94.7%,  $n = 360$ ), the bystander knew the perpetrator(s) personally. The average age of the nonadult bystanders was 13.7 years ( $SD = 2.67$ ), and the youngest bystander was 8 years old. In slightly more than one third of the cases (35.1%), the bystander was a perpetrator's neighbor or lived in the neighborhood. Approximately one in 10 (10.1%) bystanders had formerly been married to the perpetrator ( $n = 467$ ). In four out of five cases (82.1%,  $n = 508$ ), it was alleged that children were being abused by their biological parents.

### Interactions Among Demographic Characteristics and Type of Abuse

Looking at those cases in which a single kind of abuse was mentioned, physical abuse was mentioned relatively more frequently by children and adolescents



( $\leq 19$  years) than by adult bystanders,  $\chi^2(1, N = 312) = 20.01, p < .001$ . Neglect was never mentioned by this younger group ( $\leq 19$  years), but only by adults,  $\chi^2(1, N = 312) = 7.91, p < .005$ . Other analyses concerning age of bystander and type of abuse mentioned did not reach statistical significance, nor did analyses concerning gender of bystander or age of child and kind of abuse mentioned reach statistical significance. As might be expected, females were more often reported to be abused sexually than were males, compared to the other kinds of abuse,  $\chi^2(1, N = 446) = 10.94, p < .001$ . Female bystanders called relatively more frequently about girls, as did male bystanders about boys,  $\chi^2(1, N = 445) = 13.74, p < .001$ .

### *Noticing Something Was Wrong and Its Interpretation as Child Abuse*

All bystanders who called had noticed that something was wrong and had interpreted the situation (with varying degrees of certainty) as child abuse. The results described earlier already partially answer our question. However, this answer can be refined by focusing on variables that are closely associated with noticing and interpretation, the first two steps of the Latané and Darley (1970) model of bystander behavior. With regard to noticing that something is wrong, the signals to which the bystanders attended constitute important variables. The interpretation of the situation as child abuse is expressed by the level of the bystander's certainty. In the following section, these variables are examined more closely.

### *Noticing Signals*

Table 3 shows the signals of abuse that bystanders mentioned. In about one quarter of all cases, the abused child had made vague or clear remarks (disclosures) that the bystander had attributed as a signal of abuse. For instance, one child had said that he was beaten if he didn't finish his food. Another child had said that she was locked up in the cellar by her mother. In a smaller number of cases, the child showed physical characteristics that were attributed as signals of abuse, such as bruises, broken arms or legs, or neglected clothing. The child behaved in a remarkable and worrisome manner (e.g., being extremely aggressive toward other children) or the alleged perpetrator of abuse behaved in a remarkable and worrisome manner (e.g., by excessive alcohol abuse). In still a smaller number of cases, the bystander had seen the abuse actually happening or had heard sounds associated with child abuse, such as yelling parents and screaming children next door.

In 4 out of 10 (42.7%) forms, only one of these signals of abuse was mentioned. Almost one quarter of the forms (23.1%) contained two signals. Almost 1 in 10 (9.3%) forms contained more than two signals. The other one quarter (24.9%) made no mention of a signal whatsoever.

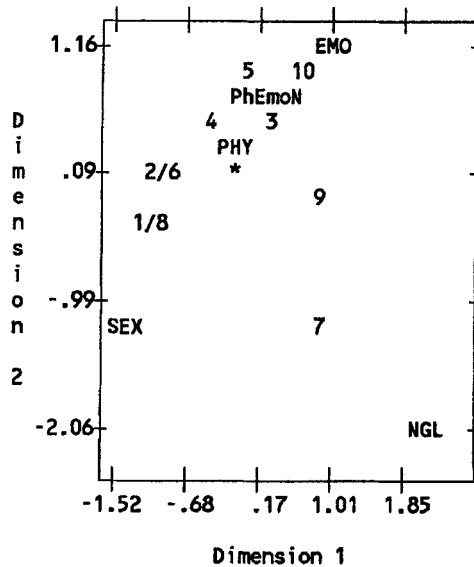


Figure 2. Associations among kinds of abuse and reported signals. The origin is indicated by an asterisk (\*). Types of abuse: SEX = sexual, PHY = physical, EMO = emotional, NGL = neglect, PhEmoN = combination of physical and emotional abuse and neglect. The numbers 1, 2, 3, . . . 10 plotted in the figure represent the reported signals: 1, . . . , 10 = signal; 1 = remarks child, 2 = physical characteristics of child, 3 = developmental problems child, 4 = fear child, 5 = behavior child, 6 = remarks perpetrator; 7 = behavior perpetrator, 8 = remarks of others, 9 = visual perception, 10 = auditory perception. Each category quantification is the average of the object scores for all objects (cases) in a single category.

In order to provide insight into the associations between the nature of the signals and the kinds of abuse mentioned, a homogeneity analysis by alternating least squares (HOMALS) was performed. In this optimal-scaling technique, values are assigned to cases and categories (i.e., category quantifications). Its purpose is to find quantifications that are optimal in the sense that the categories are separated from each other as much as possible. Cases with similar values are partitioned into homogeneous groups. The results of this analysis, in terms of category quantifications (Van der Geer, 1988), are graphically depicted in Figure 2.

In interpreting Figure 2, it is sufficient to realize that the physical distances among the category quantifications plotted in the figure represent their measures of association: A shorter distance represents a stronger association. For example, most signals cluster around physical abuse and the combination of physical and

Table 4

*Logistic Regression Analysis With Number of Signals Mentioned as Response Variable*

| Predictor                         | <i>B</i> | <i>p</i> | OR   | 95% CI<br>(low-up) |
|-----------------------------------|----------|----------|------|--------------------|
| Kind of abuse                     |          |          |      |                    |
| Physical abuse versus other kinds | 0.91     | .01      | 2.48 | 1.51–4.07          |

*Note.*  $n = 399$ . *B* = regression weight, OR = odds ratio, CI = confidence interval. This outcome was not seriously affected if the median was involved in the analysis.

emotional abuse, indicating strong relationships. Remarks by the child or by someone else are the signals most frequently reported by the bystanders of sexual abuse.

To find out whether the number of signals mentioned depends on the type of abuse, the gender of the child, or the bystander characteristics (position with regard to the child; gender and age; adult or nonadult), a regression analysis including these variables was performed. The number of signals is not a normally distributed variable (Kolmogorov-Smirnov [K-S]  $z = 6.72$ ,  $p < .001$ ), nor is it when the data are restricted to nonfinished abuse (K-S  $z = 6.51$ ,  $p < .001$ ), nor is it in both of these cases in which the three highest values of the dependent variable have been collapsed (K-S  $z = 6.58$ ,  $p < .001$ , and K-S  $z = 6.36$ ,  $p < .001$ , respectively). Because of the nonnormal nature of this criterion variable, a logistic regression analysis was done for the values under and above the median ( $Mdn = 1$ ) of the number of signals. The results are presented in Table 4.

Whether no signal or more than one signals were mentioned appeared to be best predicted by the type of abuse of the child. This regression model given, the number of signals mentioned was independent of the gender of the child and the bystander, his or her age, and the position of the bystander with regard to the child. Physical abuse of the child increased the likelihood of reporting more signals of abuse.

From a clinical and preventive perspective, it might be interesting to know whether some signals co-occur frequently and if these combinations relate to specific kinds of abuse. Descriptive analyses containing all possible combinations of signals of abuse were run, revealing that the most frequently mentioned combination consisted of the signals "remarks of the child" and "physical characteristics of the child." However, this combination occurred in only 6.5% of the cases of abuse. All other combinations of signals of abuse were mentioned less frequently. These low frequencies precluded the usefulness, or even possibility, of assessing relationships with the kind of abuse.

Table 5

*Logistic Regression Analysis of Bystander Characteristics With Level of Certainty (of Suspicion of Abuse) as Response Variable*

| Predictors                       | <i>B</i> | <i>p</i> | OR   | 95% CI (low–up) |
|----------------------------------|----------|----------|------|-----------------|
| <b>Bystander characteristics</b> |          |          |      |                 |
| Peer (0 = nonpeer, 1 = peer)     | 0.94     | .01      | 2.56 | 1.48–4.43       |
| Gender (0 = male, 1 = female)    | 0.39     | .05      | 1.48 | 1.00–2.22       |

*Note.*  $n = 596$ . *B* = regression weight, OR = odds ratio, CI = confidence interval.

*Interpretation: Certainty of Suspicion*

More than 6 out of 10 (66.2%) bystanders ( $n = 625$ ) said that they were certain that the situation was a case of child abuse. The rest (33.8%) were not absolutely sure. Another logistic regression analysis was run to find out if the level of certainty of the bystander could be predicted by the kind of abuse, gender of the child, gender and age group of the bystander, and position of the bystander with regard to the child. For this and the next analysis, the cases in which the abuse was terminated were excluded from analyses because the knowledge of termination of abuse might have biased the results. The predictors affecting the outcome are presented in Table 5.

In this regression model, being a peer of the child and being a female bystander increased the level of certainty of suspicion of abuse. Controlling for the effect of gender of the bystander, peer bystanders were 2.5 times more often certain of the abuse than were nonpeers. In addition, adjusting for the effect of being a peer or adult, female bystanders were almost 50% more often certain of the abuse than were male bystanders. From this model it appears that other factors—bystander position with regard to the child, gender of the child, or type of abuse—did not contribute to a lower or higher level of certainty. However, the type of abuse marginally added to the prediction of the regression model. The significance of the parameter estimate of sexual abuse, as opposed to the other single kinds of abuse, was just too low to be entered in the model ( $p = .0558$ , odds ratio = 0.55, confidence interval = 0.32 to 0.97), potentially increasing feelings of uncertainty.

*Associations Between Noticing (Signals) and Interpretation (Certainty of Suspicion)*

A final logistic regression analysis was performed to find out whether specific kinds of signals predicted the level of certainty that the abuse, according to the bystander, was actually taking place. The outcome is presented in Table 6.

Table 6

*Logistic Regression Analysis of Signals With Level of Certainty (of Suspicion of Abuse) as Response Variable*

| Predictors              | <i>B</i> | <i>p</i> | OR   | 95% CI (low–up) |
|-------------------------|----------|----------|------|-----------------|
| Signals                 |          |          |      |                 |
| Seeing abuse happen     | 0.70     | .02      | 2.02 | 1.12–3.65       |
| Hearing sounds          | -0.53    | .03      | 0.59 | 0.36–0.96       |
| Behavior of perpetrator | 0.52     | .04      | 1.69 | 1.03–2.77       |

*Note.* *n* = 597. *B* = regression weight, OR = odds ratio, CI = confidence interval.

Of all the signals mentioned in Table 3, three predicted the bystander's level of certainty of abuse. Two of these were signals that the bystander had to be near enough to the alleged abusive situation to notice. When these two signals were noticed, other signals concerning the remarks, behavior, and looks of the child did not affect the bystander's level of certainty. Seeing an alleged abusive situation oneself predicted a higher level of certainty (i.e., being sure), but hearing abusive sounds decreased bystanders' certainty that abuse was truly taking place. Besides these factors, only worrisome behavior of the perpetrator added to a sense of being certain of the abuse.

Earlier studies that we reviewed within the presented theoretical frame concerned violent episodes in public environments. In this study, however, predominantly domestic violence was documented. Some of the bystanders were outdoors, and some of them were living in the same home as the children whom they reported as being abused. It is, therefore, interesting to know whether the reporting behavior of outdoor bystanders differs from the domestic bystanders. We analyzed whether the signals, the bystander's certainty of abuse, and the type of abuse were associated with bystander status. The results are presented in Table 7.

These results show, as might be expected, that reporting sexual abuse and the visual perception of abuse were associated with domestic bystanders. Hearing sounds that may indicate that abuse is occurring was a signal reported in particular by outdoor bystanders. Additional analyses reveal that hearing these sounds was highly prevalent among neighbors: In 86.2% of the times that this signal was reported, it originated from these physically close outdoor bystanders. The other signals (presented in Table 3) and the bystanders' certainty were not related to the bystander's status.

### Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine which characteristics were associated with noticing and interpreting cases of child abuse. From the perspective of

Table 7

*Logistic Regression Analysis With Bystander Status as Response Variable*

| Predictors                      | <i>B</i> | <i>p</i> | OR   | 95% CI<br>(low–up) |
|---------------------------------|----------|----------|------|--------------------|
| <b>Signals</b>                  |          |          |      |                    |
| Seeing abuse happen             | -0.99    | .00      | 0.37 | 0.19–0.71          |
| Hearing sounds                  | 2.29     | .00      | 9.86 | 1.28–22.46         |
| <b>Type of abuse</b>            |          |          |      |                    |
| Sexual abuse versus other kinds | -1.49    | .00      | 0.22 | 0.13–0.39          |

*Note.*  $n = 564$ . 0 = domestic bystander, 1 = outdoor bystander. *B* = regression weight, OR = odds ratio, CI = confidence interval.

the bystander research tradition, it is interesting to note that although the violent actions and situations themselves in this study were unseen in most instances, bystanders were nevertheless involved. Who are they, in what relation do they stand to the victims, and how are their interpretations triggered? We shall first reflect on these questions and then discuss some of the methodological shortcomings of the present study.

*Who Are the Bystanders?*

Probably the best answer to this first question is that the bystanders are characterized by their diversity. Bystanders were of the age of childhood until 90 years; male and female; relatives and nonrelatives; neighbors, friends, and parents of friends of the alleged abused child; and so forth. Even if a person hardly ever has face-to-face contact with children, it is difficult to guarantee this person's noninvolvement in a case of child abuse. For example, a person may become a bystander if he or she is informed by a colleague about the abusive parent, or may know the perpetrator personally, or may hear unusual sounds in the apartment building he or she lives in and consider these sounds to be abuse. Although our study did not assess potential differences between intervening and nonintervening bystanders, the findings of Christy and Voigt (1994) provide indirect support for this diversity. From all their studied demographic variables, adjusting for capitalizing on chance, only one reached significance between intervening and nonintervening bystanders. (Interveners were 5 years older than were noninterveners in their relatively small age-range student sample.)

Generalizing from this diversity, the data clearly indicate two characteristics worth mentioning from a theoretical bystander perspective. First of all, three out of four bystanders were female. On the one hand, this finding is significantly

different from the expected distribution in the general population (binomial  $p < .001$ ); but on the other hand, this gender effect resembles that found in most research assessing the relationship between likelihood to report child abuse and gender (Buffing & van der Zanden, 1992; Dukes & Kean, 1989; Kean & Dukes, 1991). The answer to the question as to why females reported abuse three times more frequently than males did is, however, less clear. There is good reason to believe that because of different societal roles, females are, on average, more frequently in touch with children, so their "time at risk" will be accordingly longer (Künzler, in press; Straus, 1979). This difference favors the first step in the Latané and Darley (1970) model, in which the perception of an abnormal situation is essential.

On the other hand, there is empirical evidence that females interpret scenarios as being more abusive than do males (Dukes & Kean, 1989). Various factors may account for this. Under the assumption that parents are the potential abusers and that parenting is more closely identified with the female role, a violation of the expectation of behavior associated with that role will be evaluated more critically by females than by males (Kean & Dukes, 1991).

With regard to child sexual abuse, the type of abuse most frequently perpetrated by nonparenting figures (Langeland & Van der Vlugt, 1990), much research on professionals working with abused children has established that females perceive this type of abuse as being more serious than do their male colleagues. Their "personal characteristic" of gender overrules their "professional characteristic" of discipline (Hoefnagels, 1994; Jackson & Nuttall, 1993; Trute, Adkins, & MacDonald, 1992).

To sum up, both the first (noticing) and second (interpreting) step in the model may be taken earlier by female bystanders than by males. At this stage, it is merely speculative to infer how the effect of gender influences each step. Slightly in favor of the first step might be the finding that female bystanders tend to report more signals than do their male counterparts, as additional analyses (Gender  $\times$  Number of Reported Signals) have shown ( $p = .10$ ). However, according to Table 5, the odds of females being certain of the abuse are significantly higher than the odds of males being certain.

In addition to, and quite contrary to expectation, almost 4 out of 10 bystanders were not yet adults, but were children and adolescents. In our literature search, we were not able to find any publications in which children or adolescents were the objects of bystander research. The developers of the campaign had not even expected that children would call, since the commercial that mentioned the telephone number, in contrast to other commercials, was specifically developed for adults (*Stichting Samenwerkende Organisaties tegen Kindermishandeling* [SotK], 1991).

Several mechanisms may account for the substantial prevalence of children in this sample. The first argument that we have proposed for the relatively high

contribution of females in the sample may also hold for children, simply because in daily life peers accompany peers. As a result they are "easy targets" for signals of abuse. But this likelihood of perception and attention probably is not the only mechanism involved. Children's interpretations of the situation may have been facilitated by the clarity of one particular signal to which they were exposed much more than were adults; that is, the disclosure of abuse,  $\chi^2(1, N = 312) = 16.88, p < .001$ . In addition, the potential inhibitors that are more commonly noticed in adults may be absent in children. For example, the loyalty conflict that adults may experience toward an abusive parent may be expected to be less prevalent in bystanding youngsters. Moreover, as a consequence of the fact that we are dealing with the problem of children as alleged victims, one reason that adults might be inhibited is the same reason that children were facilitated: The age-based loyalty that we assume is present in adults might also be felt among children, resulting in their increased commitment to other children and hence in the unexpected prevalence of their contribution.

Another factor that may account for a differential interpretation between children and adults might be labeled *cognitive (and behavioral) promptness or developmental directness*, which can be viewed as the reverse of the ability to inhibit actions and which develops over the course of childhood (Dempster, 1993, as cited in Siegler, 1998). Faced with an emergency, youngsters may be more inclined than most adults to interpret (and act) in a straightforward manner, less aware of or less concerned by the potential consequences of their decision, and focusing directly on a solution. To date, the results of studies concerning personality characteristics in bystander research have been conflicting (Latané & Darley, 1970; Schreiber, 1979). However, these studies did not examine youngsters, which makes it difficult to infer valid interpretations regarding issues of the age and developmental stage of younger bystanders. The inclusion of youngsters in future bystander research may elucidate this cognitive-promptness hypothesis. In any event, the finding that a great many youngsters are exposed to signals of abuse, together with the extent to which they felt responsible, may have implications not only from a scientific standpoint, but also from a practical and ethical point of view.

#### *What Is Their Relation to the Victims?*

The children who were alleged to have been abused covered all ages, as well as the whole spectrum of abuse. As has been published regularly by reporting agencies, in one fourth of the cases, the bystander was alarmed by the abuse of more than one child; and in one of out five cases, there was more than one perpetrator (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1996; *Landelijke Stichting Buro's Vertrouwensarts inzake Kindermishandeling* [SBVK], 1996). However, in relating our data to the regular pattern of reports to official agencies



and the Christy and Voigt (1994) study, the emphasis is on physical abuse, rather than physical and emotional neglect. This may be interpreted as a result of the commercial prompting to call the telephone line that we studied, which covered physical abusive situations in particular. In common with much clinical experience, in many instances several types of abuse were intertwined and described in the telephone calls.

The question as to who the bystander stands by affects the potential relationship between bystander and child. In accordance with other research (e.g., Dukes & Kean, 1989), we found that female bystanders called more frequently about girls and males called more frequently about boys, a phenomenon that has been called *gender-based empathy* (Olesker & Balter, 1972). If we take this finding and the aforementioned age-based loyalty into account, as well as a finding of Christy and Voigt (1994) that African American abused children were the least likely to receive help from interveners in a mostly White sample, we can suggest a more general similarity hypothesis in bystander research. We propose that bystander behavior is affected by demographic similarity between the bystander and the target of aggression.

#### *How Are Their Interpretations Triggered?*

Some remarkable features have been noticed, which turned out to be at least part of the bystander's trigger. First, there is the finding that in almost one quarter of the cases (23.7%) people had actually witnessed some of the abusive incidents. These bystanders are classical bystanders in the sense that they perceived behavior or events (e.g., sounds) that they attributed to child abuse. These findings appear to be in contrast with the literature on child abuse and clinical experience in which the direct visibility of abuse is seldom described. The emphasis in non-medical settings is on the presence of multiple (behavioral) signals from the child, not on the abusive situation itself.

We offer three explanations for the relatively high proportion of perceived abusive situations within our sample. First, the perception of the abusive situation might be viewed as one of the features of this specific sample, because of sample variation or a history effect (e.g., the aforementioned mass-media awareness campaign on child abuse; cf. Cook & Campbell, 1979). A second explanation is that visual cues may add to a bystander's readiness to interpret a situation as abusive. For example, Wollman, Griggs, and Stouder (1990) found that offering visual cues to males in a help-demanding situation increased their intention to help the adult victim in their sample. They interpreted this by suggesting that males needed visual cues that served to increase their empathy. Additional analyses reveal that our field research does not directly sustain this argument in the sense that there is no gender difference between those who perceived the abuse visually and those who did not ( $p = .556$ ). However, the visual perception of

child abuse was the signal that best predicted and increased the bystander's certainty of abuse. Stimulated by a highly professional television commercial starring a well-known anchorman, being recently or repeatedly confronted with a real or potential abusive situation in daily life, experiencing that "seeing is believing," and given the scale of underreporting of child abuse, these undeniable events might be particularly detected when given the opportunity to call a telephone line, and so be present in the sample of this study.

A third explanation for the relatively high proportion of signals of the abusive situation itself might be that this signal either has been overlooked or underreported in the empirical literature. If this is the case, it might be the result of the dominance in the literature of mandated reporters and mandatory reporting systems. In these systems, professionals in touch with families and children have a primary and legal responsibility to report their allegations of abuse; that is, they are mandated (e.g., Lamond, 1989). It might be argued that, compared to people in the immediate vicinity (e.g., relatives and neighbors), professionals are generally further removed, thus having less access to the direct perception of cases of child abuse. As a result, their input may differ from the input of nonprofessionals. In a system that focuses on the reporting of allegations of abuse by mandated professionals, the allegations and sources of nonprofessional reporters may be considered as less relevant. Hence, the visual and auditory perception of child abuse itself might be obscured in the literature. This is supported in the only reference that called attention to precisely this less mentioned source of information about abuse: In this research, neighbors were studied (Paquin & Ford, 1996).

A second remarkable feature with regard to the potential bystander's triggers is that the abused children themselves alerted the bystander to a considerable extent. In more than one quarter of all cases (27.9%), it was an indication or disclosure of the abuse by the child that signaled the bystander. Because of its relative clarity, a child's disclosure might be an important tool by which to make the abuse amenable to intervention by the child-protection system (Hoefnagels & Baartman, 1997).

Both the visual perception of abuse and the disclosure of abuse may be interpreted as clear signs and tools facilitating progress through the first two steps in the Latané and Darley (1970) model. Their clarity may serve to reduce the ambiguity of the situation (e.g., Christy & Voigt, 1994). We examined the relative weights of sources affecting the interpretation (Step 2) by entering all of the signals in a regression model (Table 6). In terms of adding to perceived certainty, the clarity of the two signals mentioned is only partially supported by this analysis. Only those signals relating to the direct perception of abuse helped to predict the extent to which a bystander was certain of the abuse. Visual perception of the actual abuse made bystanders feel quite certain, but bystanders who had to cope with the sound of abuse (e.g., spanking or screaming) felt uncertain. Given these predictors, the remarks of the child, as an indication or disclosure of abuse, did

not improve the fit offered by the regression model. The somewhat surprising finding that these remarks did not add to hypothesized certainty may be a result of the vagueness of such disclosures (Waller & Ruddock, 1993) and conflicting disclosures (Sorensen & Snow, 1991), which probably outnumber purposeful disclosures (Campis, Hebden-Curtis, & Demaso, 1993).

The finding that hearing sounds decreased bystanders' certainty that abuse was taking place may appear to be counterintuitive. This may be understood by a difference between perception and interpretation of sounds. As sounds pass the threshold of perception, they require interpretation. However, in the absence of other indicators (which was true in 91.2% of the cases in our sample), sounds leave much room for imagination. The sounds of spanking and screaming could be attributed differently, eager as humans are to interpret events as being other than abuse (Warner & Hansen, 1994; Wissow & Wilson, 1992), in particular if one is close to the actors (Finkelhor, 1984).

Finally, the finding that in our data no single combination of signals emerged as a substantial frequency, even while relatively few signals were distinguished, is congruent with other research. Studies on child abuse (including child sexual abuse) stress the diversity of signals (e.g., Berliner & Conte, 1993; Lamers-Winkelmann, 1995), not their convergence. If clear-cut combinations were more prevalent, detection of child abuse would be easier than it is.

Interestingly, the results show that no relationship exists between the bystander's level of certainty of abuse and the bystander's status (domestic or outdoor). This possibly indicates that cohabiting persons, such as siblings, are insecure of or share norms about what constitutes child abuse, in particular physical and emotional abuse and neglect. Results show that these latter forms of child abuse are not overrepresented in the domestic-bystander category. The finding in this study that only a minority of the reports came from members of the nuclear families themselves resembles the statistics of the reporting agencies on child abuse in Europe and the United States (e.g., *Landelijke Stichting Buro's Vertrouwensarts inzake Kindermishandeling* [LSBVK], 1996; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1996). However, these bystanders are probably closer to the abusive episodes (or even witness them) than are outdoor bystanders. Apparently, the physical closeness of siblings and other family members itself, which facilitates perception of abuse, is not a sufficient condition to enter the next steps in the Latané and Darley (1970) model.

A much proposed mechanism in the literature is that feelings of loyalty, which may be present especially in close family members, inhibit the reporting of allegations of abuse (Finkelhor, 1984; McGee & Painter, 1991). The finding in this research may be interpreted as an additive mechanism for operation. Non-abused close family members (domestic bystanders) may be affected cognitively just as much by too harshly disciplinary tactics or verbal abuse as are the victims of abuse. If a parent is the abuser, the given messages, meant for the victim (e.g.,

aimed to justify these behaviors) are probably shared by all family members present. As victims of nonextreme physical abuse blame themselves for the abuse, witnesses also may be victims of cognitive distortion, and so judge these behaviors as justified (Ney, Moore, McPhee, & Trought, 1986). This may help to explain that the physical closeness of family members is unrelated to the bystander's level of certainty that abuse takes place.

This study suffers from a number of methodological limitations, the most important of which is that the data were recorded for reasons other than research. On the one hand, the material can be considered as being highly rich and relevant. Not only are the data collected in the real world and as such are not subject to the shortcomings of vignette studies, but also some insight into the black box between input (perception) and output (reporting) have raised their curtains. On the other hand, however, the primary focus in the telephone calls was counseling, not research. This is reflected in this study, which used no validated instruments and in which the values of several variables were missing. These missing values could indicate either that the subject of interest was not put forward in the telephone call by the bystander, or that it was put forward by the bystander but was not recorded on the form by the counselor. Such features underline the exploratory nature of this study. Being researchers, only post-hoc measures, such as assessing interrater reliability, were within our control.

### Conclusion and Implications

In this study, child abuse was considered as an example of domestic violence. Two conclusions may be drawn: one relating to the bystander and one relating to the model. With regard to the bystanders themselves, it is most interesting to note that, to date, a large part of the study group (namely, children and adolescents) is little involved in bystander research. The data in this field research confronted us with the fact that youngsters are frequent bystanders of child abuse. Other research has shown that they witness other violence as well, in particular the violence of parents and peers (Wolfe, Zak, Wilson, & Jaffe, 1986; Olweus, 1992). Studies on these subjects are primarily directed toward the mental-health effects of such episodes on children, not on their bystanding role. It could be argued that ethical problems would be involved in studying youngsters as bystanders, because of the responsibilities of parents and society in general. However, being unable to withdraw youngsters, including abused children, from their environment, the problem to be solved is as follows: What can we do to solve the bystander dilemma that children actually face?

Prevention may be part of the solution. Given the fact that children and adolescents are indeed confronted with abused friends, these young bystanders may be helped to find their way out. Several findings in the Christy and Voigt (1994) study provide support for the idea that early adaptation with the problem

facilitates bystander intervention. Factors that significantly increased the likelihood that a bystander would intervene were, for example, being a witness of abuse prior to the studied abusive episode; feeling responsible; and being certain how to intervene, a factor that Christy and Voigt characterize as one of the most important characteristics of intervention in child abuse in their study. Interestingly, one of the factors predicting direct intervention was witnessing abuse during childhood (Christy & Voigt, 1994). Accessible, developmentally adequate information in schools and the mass media may prepare young people for the possibility that they may be confronted with a friend being abused, and may facilitate coping with this upsetting circumstance. This information, containing the relevance of listening and believing the abused child, and of telling the bystander's parent or calling a ChildLine or local Child Protective Services (CPS), may solve the bystander dilemma that these youngsters may face. And even if the abuse does not stop, these are helpful bystanding behaviors toward the abused child from a social-support and mental-health perspective (Testa, Miller, Downs, & Panek, 1992). Even young abused children highly valued the quality of support from peers, which was particularly of a socioemotional nature (Vriesema & Roos, 1985). Also, instrumental social support, such as repeated efforts of the aforementioned kind by the bystanders, irrespective of age, increases the likelihood that the abuse will be stopped.

With regard to the model, it appeared to be possible to place the nontheoretically studied bystander dilemma in child abuse within the theoretical framework of the Latané and Darley (1970) model of bystander behavior. At least with regard to the first two steps in the model, the assumption that the model of bystander behavior can include domestic-violence emergencies, such as child abuse, apparently has not been falsified in this study. On logical grounds, it may be assumed that the next steps in relation to child abuse can also be studied within this framework. This study offers some empirical evidence that the first steps did indeed precede subsequent steps; the data reveal that in half of the calls, the official reporting agency on child abuse was a subject of discussion, or the bystander was even explicitly referred to this agency. Moreover, during the period in which the telephone line was operational, the regions from which many calls came were the same regions where these agencies have received a larger number of reports alleging child abuse. Additional research is needed to assess the suitability of the Latané and Darley model of bystander behavior in cases of domestic violence.

The extension of a model of bystander behavior to domestic violence is a matter of major concern because the field of secondary prevention of child abuse is in need of theory and models, both to reintegrate empirical data and to direct future research. Latané and Darley (1970) have provided such a model. If the etiology of child abuse suffers from an overkill of potential theories claiming to understand it (e.g., 25 theoretical approaches of child physical abuse alone by

Tzeng, Jackson, & Karlson, 1991, as cited in Coohy & Braun, 1997), theoretical knowledge of the process by which a bystander progresses from identifying to reporting allegations of abuse suffers from a shortage. More than three children die each day in the United States alone as a result of abuse or neglect, and many more suffer this abuse for their entire lives (e.g., Daro, 1990; Draijer, 1990). These tragedies are unnecessary and preventable if the perception of bystanders is followed by adequate behavior. Insight into the steps involved in this process and how these are linked is critical for the survival of such children, for it is ultimately these bystanders who decide whether to act.

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