

# bystander attitudes toward victims of violence: who's worth helping?

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Most studies examining bystanders' reactions to a violent attack have used an experimental or hypothetical situation involving a single victim. This study compares the intention to intervene on behalf of three hypothetical victims: a woman, a child, and a dog. Using a sample of over 700 college students, we found that there was not a significant difference in intention to intervene by type of victim. However, there was a significant interaction between the sex of the bystander and the type of victim, such that women are most likely to intervene on behalf of children, while men are most likely to intervene to aid a woman. We found that people who perceived themselves to be stronger, more aggressive, and more sympathetic than others are most likely to intend to intervene.

The study of bystander behavior in cases of observed violence began in earnest almost four decades ago after the infamous Genovese case of 1964. That case raised questions about "the faith people might have that a neighbor or a stranger would recognize one's plight, would appreciate one's agony, and would be willing to render aid" (Sheleff 1978:203). Kitty Genovese was assaulted and

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murdered within sight and/or hearing of at least 38 persons, none of whom assisted her either directly by trying to stop the assailant or indirectly by calling the police, despite her screams and cries for help over a period of about 40 minutes. After the case came to public attention, a number of scholars conducted studies in an effort to understand bystanders' behavior, their motives for involvement or noninvolvement, and how bystanders resolve various dilemmas such as danger and inconvenience on the one hand, and guilt or feelings of powerlessness on the other. The present study adds to the bystander literature by examining whether some victims of violent attacks are more likely to be helped by a bystander than others.

Using a large sample, we asked respondents about their attitudes toward helping any of three victims of violence—a child, a woman, or a dog. We present in this article a review of the relevant theoretical and empirical literature, and then provide our rationale for having chosen certain bystander and situational characteristics for investigation. In asking about attitudes, we follow the reasoning of Feld and Robinson (1998) who state:

We do not assume that each respondent's report of how s/he would behave directly corresponds to how s/he would actually behave in real situations, but we do assume that variation in subjects' reports in response to variations in the experimental conditions reveals general tendencies of how their behavior would vary in response to similar variations in real situations. (p. 280).<sup>1</sup>

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Smithson, Amato, and Pearce (1983) have reviewed the theoretical perspectives that have been applied to the study of helping behavior. The broad approaches include learning theory, equity theory, attribution theory, cognitive development theory, and the sociobiological perspective. Specifically related to bystander intervention in emergency situations, middle-range approaches have been applied, the best known of which is Latane and Darley's

<sup>1</sup> In a field experiment testing the impact of incentives on the likelihood of bystanders reporting a crime (finding that incentives were ineffective), Bickman and Helwig (1979) compared experimental results with preincident survey results and report that the only factor relating consistently to actual reporting behavior was attitude or "intention to report" a witnessed crime.

(1970) decision making model,<sup>2</sup> based on reinforcement theory (see also Piliavin, Rodin, and Piliavin 1969; Kidd 1979; Clarkson 1987). Darley and Latane (1970) held that helping someone in distress arouses empathetic feelings in the observer; attempts to relieve the victim's suffering reduce the observer's own distress. These researchers also note that there are basic norms for helping persons in distress. For those who have internalized the norm, not helping subjects the bystander to guilt feelings (punishment) for failing to act.

Most studies of helping behavior have attempted to locate predictors such as demographic variables or personal characteristics. "Two of the most appealing clusters of studies with both theoretical development and empirical support revolve around the concepts of personal norms and empathy" (Smithson, Amato, and Pearce 1983:14; See also Rushton 1980). Others have added such factors as the dependency or deservingness of the victim as theoretically important (Howard and Crano 1974). In sum, the favored approach involves social psychological factors—the situation, the bystander's perception of it, and the bystander's competence—rather than larger social factors.

### RESEARCH ON BYSTANDER BEHAVIOR<sup>3</sup>

Many studies of bystander behavior have used college student samples and employed laboratory or field experiment designs to examine student behavior in simulated emergencies where actual involvement and risk are minimal (Huston et al. 1981). More recently, survey techniques have uncovered considerable amounts of helping behavior (Rabow et al. 1990). In these questionnaire surveys of small convenience samples, college students are asked about their attitudes toward violence in a variety of circumstances (Feld and Robinson 1998). One study (Davis 1991) asked 50 persons who had actually intervened or who had witnessed

<sup>2</sup> In that model, intervention depends on the bystander noticing the event, recognizing it as a serious situation calling for a response, deciding whether or not he or she has any personal responsibility in the situation, has the capacity to identify an effective form of intervention, and has the capability to undertake that intervention (Latane and Darley, 1970).

<sup>3</sup> We do not review in detail the many studies that have focused on variations in the size of the bystander "group" and its effects (Latane and Darley 1970; Howard and Crano 1974; Darley and Latane 1968; Feld 1977).

interventions for their recollections, but interview-based research in this area is rare.

Latane and Darley's studies raised strong doubts about the utility of either social norms or personal characteristics as being important in predicting bystander intervention in emergencies (although some scholars have focused on personality, network, and biological factors; See Amato 1990; Dovidio 1984). Most norms, they held, were too vague and general, and characteristics were poor predictors. Rather, the situation itself, they contended would override values, norms, and dispositions.<sup>4</sup> In subsequent investigations, a large number of situational variables were studied including the ambiguity of the situation, the cost involved in the intervention, the severity of the victim's distress, the victim's level of dependency, the style of the request for help, the degree of threat in the situation, and the physical attractiveness of the victim, among other factors. However, according to a review of research findings, factors such as race, intelligence, and social class have not yielded consistent results, but the bystander's competence has been consistently relevant (Midlarsky, 1968).

Huston et al. (1981) found that interveners in several kinds of dangerous events had more exposure to crime, both in personal experience and in witnessing others' victimization. They were also taller, heavier, better trained to cope with emergencies (e.g., significantly more life-saving, medical and/or police training) and were more likely to see themselves as physically strong, aggressive, emotional, and principled. Thus, they were not motivated to intervene by strong humanitarian purposes but rather acted out

<sup>4</sup> However, Latane and Darley's work has been challenged by Huston and Korte (1976) who contend that bystander response may be more complex than Latane and Darley suggested (see also Geis, Huston, and Wright 1976). They argued that intervention may be not just a product of altruism but based on a desire to foment trouble or to mete out immediate punishment to the harm-doer. Intervening bystanders may also be risk takers for whom "violence and the potential of violence, is something with which they are on familiar and rather amiable terms . . . it is often primary anger toward the offender rather than concern for the victim which induces intervention" (Geis et al. 1976). Still, as Shleff (1978) points out, research has indicated a fairly widespread willingness to help, especially where there is no ambiguity as to the need of the victim, and minimal inconvenience as to the nature of the required intervention" (p. 19; See also Clark and Word 1972). Other scholars who disagree with Latane and Darley about the place of altruism in bystander motivation are Berkowitz 1972, Lerner 1966, and Schwartz 1977. Lerner, for instance, argues that belief in a just world leads to concern for the victim but that instances of apparently undeserved suffering threaten that belief. The bystander then has two alternatives: Aiding the victim or deciding that the victim deserves the suffering (which reduces the desire to give aid). Note the conjunction of this view with Ryan's (1972) discussion of victim-blaming.

of a sense of capability. Geis and Huston (1983) also found that those attributes were more strongly related to intervening than were rewards. Finally, Ofshe and Christman (1986) argued that it was not internalized rules but rather one's behavioral skills, activated by situational cues, that were related to intervening. Situational cues, they suggested, are neither available to verbalization nor to introspection. These scholars applied their theory of bystander intervention to selected studies as well as to other bodies of research. As Sheleff (1978:25) points out, "While the concept of altruism does conjure up the idea of sacrificing behavior, it involves sacrifice within the framework of one's competence."

With regard to bystanders, a large number of studies have found no differences between men and women in rates of helping, but a few have found differences. The probable explanation lies in the nature of the help required in the situation. Active, doing, spontaneous, and anonymous acts are more likely to be carried out by men than by women. Women are more likely to help than men (as a small number of studies have found) when helping is more planned, formal, personal, and less likely to involve direct intervention.

## VICTIMS OF VIOLENCE IN BYSTANDER INTERVENTION STUDIES

Women are much more likely to receive help from strangers than are men (Howard and Crano 1974). Male aggression toward female victims is seen as less acceptable, more injurious, and more criminal than female aggression toward male victims (Bethke and DeJoy 1993). However, women as targets have not been compared with other targets such as children—a consideration that the present study addresses.

Approval for physical punishment of children is widespread. In the face of such approval, what does a bystander do when rules for intervention are not formalized, and it is difficult to judge whether the punishment is normal or deviant? Davis' (1991) study, mentioned earlier, provides descriptions of intervention events that had occurred anywhere from earlier the same day to 12 years before. These were all cases of children being abused in a public setting. However, his sample consisted primarily of women who were parents. Would men or nonparents take the same considerable risks as Davis' sample recalled? Christy and Voight (1994), using college students and faculty members as

respondents to a questionnaire, examined decisions to intervene in the case of a child being abused in public. They located factors related to decisions that included bystander, victim, and abuser characteristics as well as situational factors. However, since there was no comparison with any other target or victim, it is not known whether the same factors would apply across the board or are unique to the case of child victims.

We know of no studies that examine victimization of a dog. Most Americans, however, have pets and in the majority of cases, that pet is a dog (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1997). We can assume, then, that there would be empathy for an abused dog, and that the helping norm would apply in the case of this nonhuman victim of abuse. The present study includes, for comparative purposes, a dog, a child, and a woman—all victims of violence taking place in a public setting. Our inclusion of the dog as victim follows Flynn's (2000) contention that we should not neglect violence toward animals since, he argues, it "is a serious antisocial behavior . . . [and] is related to interpersonal violence" (2000:87), among other negative connotations.

The Good Samaritan law (ARS 32-1471) in the state where this study was conducted indicates that anyone rendering emergency care in a public place is not liable for any civil or other damages that might occur, either as a result of the intervention or of a failure to act. (The only exception is for gross negligence in the event of rendering care.) Thus, these laws do not compel intervention and for practical purposes, exempt interveners from liability.

## METHODS

It has been shown that feelings of "we-ness" with a victim influence a bystander's arousal level and the perceived costs and rewards for intervention. "Helping is most likely when a bystander's arousal is high, and perceived costs are low and rewards high for helping" (Brigham 1986:177; see also Masser & Brown 1996). In this study, we are interested in the relative likelihood of helping any of three target victims. We held constant the level of bystander arousal by presenting respondents with vignettes that differed only by the identification of the victim.<sup>5</sup> All other conditions remained the same. Our vignette for the child victim was as follows:

<sup>5</sup> We know of only one other study that examined responses to different victims. Ungar (1979) assessed the likelihood of intervention when a victim was stigmatized (wearing an eyepatch but not disabled) and when the same victim was not wearing an eyepatch.

The scene: You are in a parking lot and there in front of you is an approximately 140–150 pound man kicking, yelling at, and hitting an approximately 6-year old child. The child is crying and seems to be in pain. You can't tell whether the man is the father or not. The child is not putting up a defense. There is no one else around. What do you think you would do?

The man's size was 180–190 pounds for half of the questionnaires. The victim was alternatively a woman and "an approximately 40 pound dog." The statement that "You can't tell whether the man is the *father* or not" was changed to "husband" and "owner" for the woman and dog respectively. The statement that the victim is crying was changed to whimpering for the dog. Otherwise, the vignette remained the same.

A series of questions asked respondents how likely they are to intervene on behalf of the victim. *Intervene* is our primary dependent variable and is measured on a 1–4 scale, where 4 = very likely to intervene.

Our first independent variable is the *victim*. The three victims were a 6-year old child, a 40-pound dog, and a woman. We also measured the physical characteristics of the respondent. These are the respondent's *sex*, *age* (measured in years), *height* (measured on a 1 [ $\leq 5'2''$ ] to 8 [ $\geq 6'3''$ ] scale); and *weight* (measured on a 1 [ $< 100$  pounds] to 9 [ $\geq 205$  pounds] scale). We also asked about *life experiences* that might affect the respondent's likelihood of intervening. We asked if respondents had personally *witnessed* or *been a victim* of a serious crime (or if a *family member* had been such a victim) and if the respondent had ever *broken up a fight* between persons he or she knew. We asked if the respondent had training in *self-defense* or *life-saving* since these are potentially relevant to intervention. These variables were measured on dichotomous scales, with 0 = no experience (training), 1 = experience (training).

Following Huston et al. (1981), we also asked respondents to assess themselves relative to others regarding whether they were *stronger*, *more aggressive*, *principled*, *religious*, *sympathetic*, or *emotional* than other people. These variables were measured on a 1–5 scale with 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree (with having the trait). We also varied the size of the perpetrator. In half of the vignettes he was a 140–150 pound man, while in the other half he was 180–190 pounds.

We were interested in the impact that the relationship between the abuser and victim would have on intention to intervene. To measure the impact that knowledge would have, we added a statement to the vignette in which the abuser's relationship to the victim (as father, husband, or dog owner) is established. Respondents were asked "What do you think you would do, now that you know that the child (woman, dog) is the man's child (wife, dog)?" Respondents are again asked how likely they would be to intervene on a four point scale. *Knowledge* is the difference between the likelihood of intervening before and after they learn that the victim is related to the abuser.

We obtained our data from college students during class from several different sociology classes that are taken by both majors and nonmajors, such as Introduction to Sociology, Social Problems, and Adolescence. The enrollment of the classes totaled 795; 711 students were in class and completed and returned the questionnaires. Respondents in each class were randomly given one of six scenarios (child, dog, or woman victim with a large or medium-sized perpetrator). Our sample was typical of college students: Sex is evenly divided (females = 51%). Although our respondents ranged in age from 17–54, 96% were 30 years old or under. Sixty percent of our students were upperclassmen, typical of this university which has a large number of transfers from local community colleges. The students were fairly evenly split between social science, business, and other majors (39%, 37%, and 24%, respectively).

The variables included for study are based on our review of the relevant literature, as are the following hypotheses:

- H1 Children will be most likely to be helped; then women, then dogs.
- H2 Sex of respondents will not affect the intention to intervene.
- H3 Physical characteristics of respondents will affect the likelihood of intervention. Specifically, taller, heavier, and younger respondents will be more likely to intend to intervene than shorter, lighter, and older respondents.
- H4 Previous experiences of respondents with crime, fighting, and intervening will increase the perceived likelihood of intervention. Specifically, people who have been a victim or whose family member has been a victim of a crime, those who have witnessed crime or fights between parents, have experience breaking up fights, or have had training in self-defense or

life-saving will be more likely to intend to intervene than those who have not had those experiences.

- H5 Self-Perceptions of respondents that they are stronger, more aggressive, principled, sympathetic, religious, and emotional than the others will be more likely to intend to intervene.
- H6 Size of the abuser will affect the likelihood of intervention. Respondents will be more likely to intend to intervene with mid-sized rather than with larger abusers.
- H7 Knowledge that the abuser is related to the victim will affect the likelihood of intervention. If respondents know that the abuser and victim are related (or the abuser is the owner in the case of the dog) respondents will be less likely to intend to intervene.

The first hypothesis is derived from Howard and Crano's (1974) contention about differences in dependency and deservingness of victims. The second hypothesis derives from Latane and Darley's (1970) contention that personal characteristics such as the sex of the bystander are relatively unimportant. Our third hypothesis rests on Midlarsky's (1968) contention that the bystander's competence is an important consideration. We chose his or her size, strength, and age as the characteristics relevant to the bystander's perception of his or her intervention capability or competence. Hypothesis four also derives from Midlarsky (1968) in that previous experience with crime, with fighting, and with intervention comprise a relevant part of the bystander's assessment of his or her intervention capabilities, or perception of the situation. The fifth hypothesis is based partly on Midlarsky's (1968) notion that aggressiveness and strength form part of the bystander's perception of the situation (i.e., response capability), and partly on Smithson et al. (1983) and Rushton (1980) who argue that personal norms such as seeing one's self as principled, sympathetic, religious, and emotional affect one's decisions about intervention. Midlarsky's (1968) theory forms the basis for our sixth and seventh hypothesis—specifically, that the size of the abuser and knowledge of the abuser's relationship with the victim are particulars of the situation that make a difference in intervention decisions.

## RESULTS

Table 1 gives the means for the continuous variables and percentages for the dichotomous variables included in this study. Most

TABLE 1 Descriptive Statistics

Ordinal and continuous variables			
	Mean	Standard Deviation	N
Intention to intervene (4 = very likely, 1 = very unlikely)	3.25	.85	711
Age	21.97	4.32	705
Weight (9 point scale [4 = 130–144, 5 = 145–159])	4.90	2.10	709
Height (8 point scale [4 = 5'7"–5'8", 5 = 5'9"–5'10"])	4.22	1.96	710
Strong <sup>a</sup> (5 point scale [1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree])	3.59	.54	704
Aggressive <sup>a</sup> (5 point scale [1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree])	3.30	1.05	706
Principled <sup>a</sup> (5 point scale [1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree])	4.21	.71	697
Sympathetic <sup>a</sup> (5 point scale [1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree])	4.23	.75	705
Emotional <sup>a</sup> (5 point scale [1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree])	3.79	.94	702
Religious <sup>a</sup> (5 point scale [1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree])	3.20	1.21	705
Nominal variables			
	Percent	N	
Sex (female)	51.2	709	
Witnessed a crime in the past ten years (yes)	38.0	707	
Been a victim of a crime in the past ten years (yes)	20.9	708	
Family member has been a victim of a crime in the past ten years (yes)	29.9	708	
Been involved in breaking up a fight between people Respondent knows (yes)	73.5	705	
Had self-defense training (yes)	21.1	710	
Had life saving training (yes)	35.4	710	

<sup>a</sup>The preface to the question was "Compared to others I am ..."

of the respondents felt that they were somewhat likely to intervene. The average student was 22 years old, approximately 5'8" tall, and weighed around 145. Most students felt that they were more principled and sympathetic and principled than others and a bit stronger; they felt that they were slightly more aggressive

and religious than others. The vast majority had been involved in breaking up a fight between people that they knew, while a minority had been a victim or had a family member be a victim of a crime. Most had not had self-defense or life-saving training.

Our first hypothesis was that respondents would be most likely to perceive that they would intervene for children, and least likely to perceive that they would intervene for dogs. Our one way analysis of variance showed no significant difference in the likelihood of intervention by the type of victim.<sup>6</sup> Although children had the highest mean (3.34), the means for women (3.26) and dogs (3.16) were not significantly lower. Thus, our college sample reports a strong likelihood of intervening on behalf of any victim, and the support is not significantly lower for dogs than for children or women.

Our second hypothesis was that male and female respondents would not differ in reporting an intention to intervene. A *t*-test indicated a small but significantly higher perception of intervention by men (3.37) than women (3.14). Although this is not consistent with our hypothesis or with the prior literature, the *t*-test does not control for the size of the respondent.

We used multiple regression to test the effects of sex of the respondent and type of victim controlling for the height, weight, and age of the respondent. As the results in Table 2, Model 1 demonstrate, there is a significant interaction between the type of victim and the sex of the respondent in predicting the intention to intervene. Female respondents are significantly more likely than male respondents to perceive that they would intervene on behalf of a child. Figure 1 shows the estimated marginal means of intervention by the sex of respondent and the type of victim, controlling for the height, weight, and age of the respondent. Men are most likely to intervene on behalf of women, while women are most likely to intervene on behalf of children, and not any more likely to intervene for women victims than they are for dogs. Several interpretations of this result are possible. Perhaps the simplest explanation is that women perceive that they are more powerful than children, but are not able to handle an attacker any better than the woman in the vignette. Men's greater likelihood to intervene for women than children may reflect a clearer normative

<sup>6</sup> Since our sample was not random, statistical significance tests are not appropriate for the purpose of inference to the population at large. However, we use and report them as a heuristic device to decide which differences are large enough to merit further attention.

TABLE 2 Regression coefficients (unstandardized) for four models predicting perceived likelihood of intervention

	Model 1 <sup>a</sup>	Model 2 <sup>b</sup>	Model 3 <sup>c</sup>	Model 4 <sup>d</sup>
Intercept	3.097**	2.933**	1.327**	1.487**
Age	.002			
Height	-.049*			-.029
Weight	.074**			.038
Sex (F)	-.332**			-.339**
Child	-.182	.086	.108	-.146
Dog	-.245*	-.119	-.092	-.226*
Sex Child*	.469**			.425**
Sex Dog*	.260			.204
Witness		.058		
Been victim		.077		
Family victim		.049		
Break fight		.322**		.219**
Self-defense		.138		
Life save		.042		
Strong			.118**	.088*
Aggressive			.159**	.152**
Principled			.091	
Sympathetic			.191**	.214**
Emotional			-.027	
Religious			-.038	
	R <sup>2</sup> = .054	R <sup>2</sup> = .058	R <sup>2</sup> = .116	R <sup>2</sup> = .164
	N = 704	N = 704	N = 691	N = 699

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$

<sup>a</sup>Physical characteristics, type of victim, sex of respondent, and interactions between type of victim and sex of respondent

<sup>b</sup>Life experiences, controlling for type of victim

<sup>c</sup>Self-assessments, controlling for type of victim

<sup>d</sup>Best predictors of models containing physical characteristics, life experiences, and self-assessments

role for them as a defender of women than children when both are strangers.

Hypothesis three suggested that taller, heavier, and younger respondents would be more likely to say that they would intervene. As Table 2, Model 1 shows, weight ( $p < .01$ ) and height ( $p < .05$ ), but not age have significant effects on intervention intention. Controlling for age, gender, and height, heavier respondents report a greater likelihood of intervention. However, for a given weight

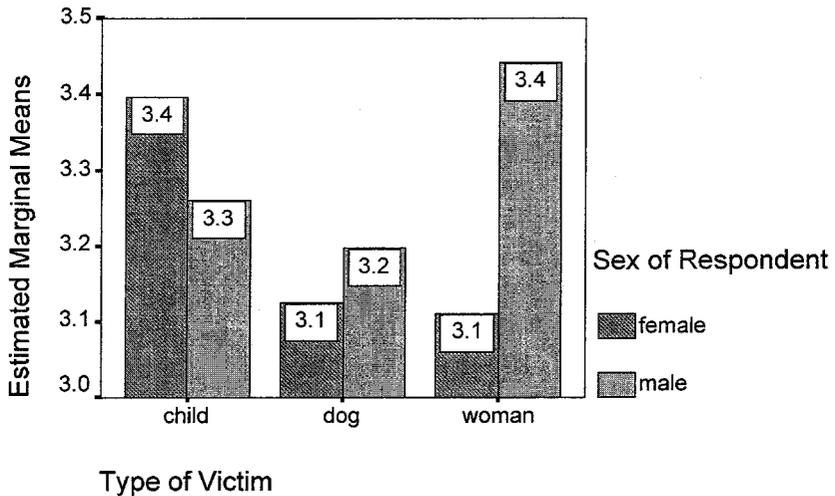


FIGURE 1 Estimated marginal means for intention to intervene by victim and sex of respondent controlling for respondent's age, height, and weight.

age and sex, it is the shorter respondents who are more likely to perceive that they would intervene. This could simply be that at a given weight, the shorter respondents have a stockier build, and they may perceive themselves to be stronger than the taller respondents. Stockier respondents may feel more confident in their ability to handle a potentially physical confrontation.

The age of the respondent was not significantly related to the perceived likelihood of intervening. However, we have limited variation in age in our college sample (95% of our sample is under 30 years of age). Age is much more likely to be a factor when a representative number of middle age and older adults are included.

Hypothesis four concerns the relevant life experiences of respondents. We had hypothesized that several types of exposure to violence and crime would significantly affect intervention expectations. However, as is shown in Model 2 of Table 2, having witnessed or been a victim of crime, and having had a family member be a victim were not statistically significant. The only life experience that was relevant to whether respondents believed that they would intervene is whether they had experience in breaking up fights. Experience as a victim or witness to crime and training in self-defense and life-saving were not important, controlling for experience in breaking up fights and type of victim.

Hypothesis five concerns the self-assessments of the respondents regarding physical and character traits. The results for Model 3 of Table 2 show that respondents who thought that—relative to others—they were stronger, more aggressive, and sympathetic were more likely to perceive themselves as intervening on behalf of a victim than respondents who didn't identify with these characteristics. Being more religious, principled, or emotional did not affect the perception of respondents that they would intervene. Since all of the perception variables are on the same scale, the difference in the magnitude of the coefficients reveals that perception of self as more aggressive and sympathetic predicted intention to intervene better than perception of self as stronger than others.

Hypothesis six concerns the size of the perpetrator. We hypothesized that respondents would be more willing to intervene when the man was medium-sized. A *t*-test for intervention by size of perpetrator showed no significant difference. However, it seems possible that the size of the perpetrator may be more important once the size of the respondent is controlled. Thus, we included sex, height, and weight of respondent and type of victim into a model which included size of perpetrator to predict intervention. In this more elaborate model, size of perpetrator again failed to achieve significance.

We gathered all the significant predictors concerning the respondent from Models 1 through 3 into a final model, Model 4 of Table 2. This allows us to see whether physical characteristics, life experiences, or self-assessments are the most important predictors of intention to intervene. When combined, the physical characteristics of height and weight become insignificant, although the perception of self as aggressive remains significant. Perception of self as strong is only marginally significant, while perception of self as sympathetic remains highly important. The type of victim by sex of respondent interaction remains significant and the pattern is still consistent with Figure 1. Women are significantly more likely to intervene on behalf of children than men are. The experience of breaking up fights remains a powerful predictor. Thus, the combination of characteristics of respondents that is most likely to lead to intervention is aggressiveness, sympathy, and experience breaking up fights. Additionally, men are most likely to help women, while women are most likely to help children. The combination of factors in Model 4 explains 16% of the variation on intention to intervene.

The last hypothesis is that if respondents know that the victim and abuser are related (abuser is the owner in the case of the dog), they will have a lower intention to intervene than if they are not sure of the relationship between them. A paired *t*-test between the respondent's intention to intervene before and after knowledge of the abuser-victim relationship did not reveal a significant difference. However, it seems quite likely that the impact of knowledge could differ by the sex of the respondent, the type of victim, or the combination of the two. We regressed the difference between the intention to intervene before and after knowledge of the abuser-victim relationship on sex of respondent, type of victim, and the interaction between them. The interaction was significant and the pattern is displayed in Figure 2. For male respondents, knowledge reduced the likelihood of intervention a small amount for all victims; for female respondents, knowledge reduced the likelihood of intervention for children and dogs, but increased the likelihood for women. One plausible interpretation is that women feel less fearful for themselves when intervening between a husband and wife than between a male abuser and a woman with whom his relationship is not known. Female respondents may fear that they could easily become a second victim in the latter case.

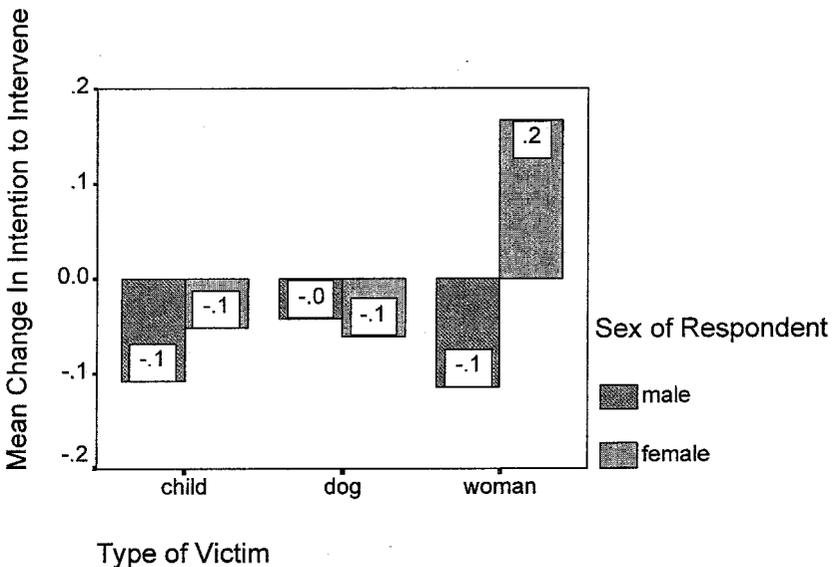


FIGURE 2 Change in marginal means in intention to intervene knowing that the abuser and victim are family (owner for dogs)

## DISCUSSION

Our primary goal was to add to the bystander intervention literature by examining the differences in respondents' willingness to give aid to three different victims: a woman, a child, and a dog. We had hypothesized that people would be most willing to intervene on behalf of children since children are less able than adult women to defend themselves against an adult male attacker. We assumed that the dog would have the least support for intervention because of the greater value placed on human than animal life. However, although the means for perceived intervention were in the expected direction (children highest, then women, then dogs), the closeness of the means (and lack of significance for the differences) was surprising. Several explanations are possible. One interpretation is that intent to intervene has more to do with the bystander than it does the victim. In other words, in a situation in which a person or a dog is being attacked, people who have the appropriate capacity and beliefs will report an intention to intervene, regardless of the victim. Another interpretation is that the norms regarding intervention are similar across victims. Bystanders must weigh the abusers' right to privacy against the victims' right for protection. Perhaps the point at which the abuser loses the right to privacy depends more upon the abuser's actions than the type of victim. The abuser's actions were identical in our scenarios.

An important finding is that the gender of the bystander interacts with the type of victim to predict intention to intervene. Men and women were equally likely to report an intention to intervene, but women were most likely to help children, while men were most likely to help women. As mentioned earlier, women's greater intention to help children rather than other women may reflect these respondents' perceptions that they would not be any better able to handle the attacker than the other woman, but do feel more powerful than children. This interpretation is strengthened by the finding that women are more likely to intervene on behalf of other women if they know that the abuser and victim are husband and wife. Female respondents may feel concerned for their own safety if they believe the abuser is attacking a woman who is not his wife.

The fact that men have a greater intention to intervene on behalf of women than children may reflect that men have an unclear role as protectors of other people's children. Our male college students probably have had limited contact with young children, as they are unlikely to be fathers at their age and young men are unlikely to work in day care centers or as babysitters. Perhaps this greater

intention to help young women is simply a reflection of clearer norms about the appropriateness of male intervention on behalf of women than children when both are unknown to the man.

Huston et al. (1981) found that several measures of life skills (life saving, first aid, medical and police training), physical stature, and self-attributions of physical strength and aggressiveness were related to intention to intervene. However, those researchers used *t*-tests and other univariate analysis techniques and did not determine which factors were most relevant, controlling for others. In our final regression equation, we combined the best predictors from physical size, life experiences, and self-assessments of physical and personality traits, and found that controlling for other factors, perceptions of self as strong and aggressive were statistically significant while actual size was not. Experience breaking up fights was the only life experience that was an important predictor of intention to intervene, controlling for other factors. We found that people who rated themselves as more sympathetic than others were also significantly more likely to say that they would intervene on behalf of a victim. Thus, it is not simply factors related to competence of the bystander (experience breaking up fights, being stronger and more aggressive than others) which leads bystanders to intervene, but also being sympathetic to others.

Our interpretation that intent to intervene has more to do with the bystander than with the victim is consistent with Midlarsky's (1968) contention that intervention rests in part on the bystander's perception of the situation and on the bystander's competence. We also speculate that the norms regarding intervention may be similar across victims, which is consistent with Darley and Latane's (1970) argument that basic norms call for helping, and that not helping produces guilt feelings in bystanders. Moreover, we found that men and women evidently have different views of the "deservingness" of various victims, consistent with Howard and Crano's (1974) argument. Our finding that perceptions of the situation (including perceptions of one's capabilities) are more important than actual capabilities such as size of the bystander, reminds us of W. I. Thomas' famous dictum that what one perceives to be real *is* real in its consequences. Finally, bystanders' past experience in breaking up fights as an important predictor of intention to intervene is congruent with Midlarsky's (1968) reminder of the three basic relevant components of that decision: the situation, the bystander's perception of it, and especially, the bystander's competence.

Our results must be interpreted with caution. First, we measured intention to intervene and did not observe actual intervention. Thus, we can only assume that the factors related to intention to intervene would be related to actual intervention. Second, our respondents were college students in a large public university and therefore our findings should not be generalized beyond a similar population. Our contribution to the literature is that we have compared intention to intervene across three types of victims and we have examined how the sex of the respondent interacts with the type of victim to impact the likelihood that the respondent believes that she or he would intervene. By using multivariate statistical techniques we have been able to determine that controlling for other factors, respondents are most likely to believe that they would intervene if they perceive that they are stronger, more aggressive, and more sympathetic than others and if they have had experience breaking up fights. Further, men believe that they would be most likely to intervene on behalf of women, while women believe that they would be most likely to help children.

Using experimental designs of simulated emergency situations, researchers would be able to see whether the patterns of intention to intervene found in this study are repeated. Specifically, it would be useful to determine whether overall there is no difference in rates of intervention when the victim is a woman, child, or dog. Further, it would help our understanding of gender roles to determine whether women and men display different rates of intervention depending on whether the victim is a woman or child. Since our sample consisted of college students, it would also be useful to repeat this study with a more general population to determine whether intentions to intervene follow the same patterns among older adults and less well-educated adults.

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