

## Perceptions of research and practice among domestic violence researchers

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### **Abstract:**

This article presents the results of a study involving 261 domestic violence researchers representing a variety of professional disciplines. The purpose of this study was to identify researchers' perceptions of the connections between research and practice in domestic violence. The study builds on previous literature that identified a gap between research and practice in domestic violence. Through a factor analysis of the Domestic Violence Research– Practice Perceptions Scales: Researcher Form, a new instrument developed for this study, a four-factor conceptual framework for understanding the domestic violence research–practice gap was identified. The four factors identified were labelled as follows: (a) personal practice orientation, (b) beliefs about practitioners, (c) beliefs about researchers, and (d) beliefs about a research–practice gap. Researchers were shown to differ in their scores on the first factor subscale based on whether they had prior experience of providing services to clients affected by domestic violence and whether domestic violence is the primary focus of their research agenda. Implications of the findings for integrating research and practice in domestic violence are then discussed.

**Key Words:** Domestic violence; research–practice gap; Domestic Violence Research–Practice Perceptions Scales: Researcher Form.

### **Article:**

Many scholars have identified a gap between domestic violence research and practice (eg. Edleson & Bible, 2001; Guterman, 2004; Hamberger, 2001; Kilpatrick et al, 2001; Murray & Welch, 2008a; 2008b; National Violence Against Women Prevention Research Center (NVAWPRC), 2001). In this article, we use the term research–practice gap to refer to a disconnection between existing research findings and common service delivery practices in a particular area, in this case domestic violence prevention and intervention. Relevant research findings may not be applied to practice settings for many reasons, including a perception among practitioners that the topics studied by researchers are not relevant to their work and that there are limited opportunities for communication between researchers and practitioners (Murray, 2009). Such a gap has the potential to hinder innovation and advancement in both research and practice.

In recent years, there has been an increased focus on the need to minimise the domestic violence research–practice gap in order to enhance both the practical relevance of research and the evidence basis of practice strategies (Edleson & Bible, 2001; Hamberger, 2001; Kilpatrick et al, 2001; NVAWPRC, 2001; Riger, 1999; Williams, 2004). However, few efforts have been made to understand the exact nature of this gap – including its causes, consequences, and severity – or to address and minimise this gap. Most of the existing information is based on qualitative research (eg. NVAWPRC, 2001) or scholarly commentaries (eg. Edleson & Bible, 2001; Hamberger, 2001), and the perspectives of practitioners have been emphasised more than those of researchers (eg. Murray & Welch, 2008a; 2008b; NVAWPRC, 2001). Therefore, to build on previous research, the purpose of this study was to use quantitative methodology to examine domestic violence researchers' perspectives on the connections and gaps between research and practice in domestic violence prevention and intervention.

## Review of the literature

The existing research suggests that the domestic violence research–practice gap is compounded by a history of antagonism between researchers and practitioners, challenges associated with researcher–practitioner collaborations, and a limited amount of information about the unique backgrounds of practitioners and researchers. For this study, we define *researchers* as individuals who carry out domestic violence-related research (ie. studies that use data collected from human participants to provide statistical and/or qualitative information about the dynamics of domestic violence and the effectiveness of domestic violence prevention and intervention strategies). Thus, our classification includes only those researchers who conduct data-based studies (ie. not conceptual or theoretical work alone). We use the term *practitioners* to refer to individuals who work in a variety of fields and are involved in prevention, treatment, and intervention with individuals and families affected by domestic violence. This may include healthcare professionals, criminal justice workers, staff of battered women's shelters, victim advocates, facilitators of batterer intervention programmes, and mental health professionals. Over the years, there has been an increased overlap in the work of domestic violence researchers and practitioners; however, the existing literature suggests that researchers and practitioners can generally be considered as two groups because most people identify as being one or the other (Riger, 1999). It should be noted that the majority of the existing research on this topic has been conducted within the USA, and therefore the applicability of the findings described in this section to other nations is presently unknown.

### The context of antagonism in the research–practice gap in domestic violence

Gaps between research and practice are common in the applied social sciences field (Murray, 2009). However, the history of the research–practice gap in domestic violence is unique in that there is not only a disconnection between researchers and practitioners, but the relationship between these groups has been characterised at times by antagonism and tension (Riger, 1999; Williams, 2004). This has been especially true for researchers and advocates (Gondolf et al, 1997; Hamberger, 2001; Riger, 1999). The literature demonstrates that many practitioners and researchers have come to view members and the work of the other group negatively.

### Research-related frustrations among practitioners

Practitioners have levied many complaints against the process of conducting research and researchers themselves. Among many practitioners, the costs of research involvement outweigh the benefits (NVAWPRC, 2001), as their participation is often perceived as being impractical or inconvenient in light of the demands they already face (Kilpatrick et al, 2001). Furthermore, many practitioners are concerned that research could be harmful if it shows that their programmes are ineffective (Williams, 2004). Many practitioners also believe that researchers do not pay adequate attention to safety issues and how their research might impact on clients (Gondolf et al, 1997; Kilpatrick et al, 2001; NVAWPRC, 2001; Williams, 2004). Researchers may also be viewed as insensitive to the potential negative impact of controversial findings (Gondolf et al, 1997; NVAWPRC, 2001; Williams, 2004). According to Levin (1999: 1214),

‘Evaluators and researchers frequently come into our agencies with little understanding of the complexities of the problems that we are addressing and the difficulties of actually doing something to try to improve the situation, and are ready to discredit our programs if they do not conform to their expectations.’

Practitioners also may view researchers as insensitive to the time demands of research, unappreciative of the perspectives of practitioners, unwilling to share the results of the study with the practitioners involved, and not concerned about paying practitioners for their time (Kilpatrick et al, 2001; NVAWPRC, 2001; Williams, 2004). Researchers also may be viewed as ‘drive-by’ collaborators (Williams, 2004: 1352), who are only available when the practitioner is needed and then disappear. Some other terms that practitioners have used to describe researchers include ‘abstract’ (Gondolf, 2007; Gondolf et al, 1997; Hamberger, 2001), ‘out of touch’ (Gondolf, 2007), ‘arrogant’ (Gondolf, 2007; Kilpatrick et al, 2001; NVAWPRC, 2001; Williams, 2001), and ‘remote’ (Kilpatrick et al, 2001; NVAWPRC, 2001; Williams, 2004). These perspectives have led many practitioners to view researchers with suspicion and distrust (Gondolf, 2007; Hamberger, 2001; Kilpatrick et al, 2001; Riger, 1999).

## **Practice-related frustrations among researchers**

One of the main areas in which researchers have expressed frustrations relates to the proliferation of practice standards for 'batterer' intervention programmes (Hamberger, 2001). A number of researchers have written about what they view as a problematic trend for state-legislated batterer intervention programme standards to be based on '*philosophical and political analysis*' rather than '*empirical analysis and systematically collected data*' (Hamberger, 2001: 268; See also Corvo & Johnson, 2003; Dutton & Corvo, 2007; Geffner, 1995; Gelles, 2001; Maiuro et al, 2001). Researchers have expressed concern that the standardisation of practices that have not been supported empirically, thereby excluding other approaches, can have the effect of thwarting the advancement of innovation in both research and practice (Corvo & Johnson, 2003; Hamberger, 2001).

Researchers' frustrations also relate to their perceptions of practitioners' attitudes toward research. Researchers may view practitioners as simply being disinterested in participating in research and applying research findings to their work (Gondolf, 2007; Kilpatrick et al, 2001). Many researchers also view practitioners as having a 'lack of open-mindedness to some research findings' (Williams, 2004: 1351). Practitioners may be seen as accepting of research findings only if they are consistent with their pre-existing beliefs and ideological perspectives about domestic violence (Gondolf, 2007; Williams, 2004; NVAWPRC, 2001).

Certainly, the beliefs held by groups of people are complex and multifaceted, and there is likely to be variation within groups. Nonetheless, the documentation of both the research-related frustrations of practitioners and the practice-related frustrations of researchers demonstrate that, at least among some segments of both groups, there is a historical context of antagonism that impacts the intergroup exchange of ideas, information, and practices. Therefore, those who are interested in advancing efforts to reduce domestic violence through integrated research and practice must consider strategies for overcoming this legacy and promoting a more effective interchange. One such strategy that has received considerable attention in the literature involves domestic violence researcher–practitioner collaborations.

## **Challenges associated with researcher-practitioner collaborations**

A collaboration is '*a partnership in which academics and service providers join together as equals, in their specialized roles, to develop and implement projects in a long-term relationship*' (Campbell et al, 1999: 1141). Many funding agencies that address domestic violence have begun to require projects to include collaborations between researchers and practitioners (Edleson & Bible, 2001; Gondolf et al, 1997; Riger, 1999). Although some researchers and practitioners resent these requirements (Edleson & Bible, 2001), successful collaborations can produce many beneficial outcomes (NVAWPRC, 2001; Riger, 1999).

However, many common challenges often arise through researcher–practitioner collaborations (Levin, 1999). Common challenges include:

- control and trust issues (Edleson & Bible, 2001; Williams, 2004)
- added financial costs (Levin, 1999; NVAWPRC, 2001)
- time demands (Campbell et al, 1999; Edleson & Bible, 2001; Gondolf et al, 1997; Levin, 1999; NVAWPRC, 2001)
- communication and conflict problems (Edleson & Bible, 2001; Gilfus et al, 1999; Gondolf et al, 1997).

In light of these challenges, successful domestic violence researcher–practitioner collaborations remain uncommon (Edleson & Bible, 2001). Also, in terms of the broader problem of addressing the domestic violence research–practice gap, such collaborations are limited in that they often are focused on localised needs. As such, their findings may generalise to other communities. The larger problem of integrating domestic violence research and practice is complex and multifaceted, and collaborations represent just one component of the overall issue.

## **The unique needs and professional contexts of practitioners and researchers**

Both researchers and practitioners play important roles in understanding and addressing the domestic violence research–practice gap. Therefore, researchers have studied the unique needs and professional contexts of both of these groups, although greater attention has been paid to practitioners (Murray & Welch, 2008a; 2008b; NVAWPRC, 2001).

### **Domestic violence practitioners**

In 1999, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention sponsored the NVAWPRC to conduct a series of exploratory focus groups with domestic violence practitioners and researchers, with the goal of identifying strategies for enhancing collaborations (Kilpatrick et al, 2001; Mouradian et al, 2001; NVAWPRC, 2001). The 14 focus groups with practitioners included approximately 130 individuals, representing 30 states, and the participants represented various roles within the domestic violence service delivery system (NVAWPRC). These practitioners provided insights into their research-related needs. First, the practitioners indicated that they need research findings that focus on the needs of their clients and address current issues. One of the greatest points of emphasis among the practitioners was that domestic violence research must be sensitive to victim safety. Furthermore, in order for practitioners to utilise research findings, the findings must be communicated to them in ways that are readable, understandable, brief, and accessible.

More recently, Murray and Welch (2008a; 2008b) conducted a statewide survey of domestic violence service providers in North Carolina. The study's sample included 122 service providers, representing a variety of professional affiliations, including advocates, professional counsellors, shelter staff members, and social workers. Murray and Welch (2008a) demonstrated a significant positive relationship between the extent to which practitioners believe that researchers understand the dynamics they face in their work, and the extent to which the practitioners report that research findings are influential on the decisions they make about their work. Among the service providers in their study, participants rated research studies published in peer-reviewed journals as the least influential out of a list of nine possible influences on the decisions that they make about their work with clients (Murray & Welch, 2008b). Although the service providers reported consulting a variety of publications to learn more about domestic violence, the most common resource consulted was organisational newsletters (52%) and the least common was academic journals (33%) (Murray & Welch, 2008b).

Murray and Welch (2008b) also reported the following findings.

- a) Participants' responses to an open-ended question about their motivation for working in the domestic violence field demonstrated that many practitioners have a high level of personal investment in the topic of domestic violence.
- b) Few participants had received extensive training in research methodology, with only 34% having taken an undergraduate course and 27% having taken a graduate course on the subject.
- c) Most participants lacked familiarity with statistical procedures, such as Analysis of Variance (ANOVA), chi-square, and structural equation modelling. In addition, the participants in the study by Murray and Welch provided suggestions to researchers to help them learn more about their work, and the most common themes were to gain personal experience working with victims/clients and to participate in vicarious learning experiences, such as shadowing or observing practitioners.

### **Domestic violence researchers**

The NVAWPRC (2001) study described earlier included a much smaller sample of researchers, with only four focus groups with 23 participants. The study was limited to researchers who attended four professional conferences during a one-year time span. Despite this limited sample, the findings, in combination with other scholarly commentaries about domestic violence researchers, provide initial indications of the unique needs and background characteristics of researchers. First, researchers may need assistance in identifying and communicating the practical applications of their research findings (NVAWPRC). The NVAWPRC researcher

focus group participants indicated that they appreciate the practical assistance that practitioners provide in planning research and addressing safety issues. Second, researchers face a significant need for funding sources that support the entire process of collaborating with practitioners and disseminating their findings to them (Mouradian et al, 2001; NVAWPRC, 2001; Williams, 2004).

Third, many researchers who work in academic settings are required to publish research findings in scholarly, peer-reviewed journals in order to meet promotion and tenure policies (Gondolf et al, 1997). The NVAWPRC (2001) practitioner focus groups identified a need for researchers to disseminate their findings in ways that meet practitioners' needs. However, as Kilpatrick and colleagues (2001: 34) noted,

‘The kinds of research products that are of interest to... practitioners may not be valued by the larger academic community. As one researcher stated, “We need to be able to publish work that’s accessible to the community, but these aren’t things that will get you tenure”.’

Therefore, researchers may not receive tangible support, recognition, or compensation for the time required to re-write the findings of their studies in a practitioner-oriented language and publication outlet, and many researchers simply may not have the time to do so.

Finally, the values of researchers can influence the manner in which they approach their work. Riger (1999) noted that the professional cultures of researchers and practitioners are typically rather different. Within their respective work settings, ‘*researchers may be most interested in developing knowledge and theories, whereas advocates may be concerned with social action*’ (Riger, 1999: 1100). Also, researchers and practitioners may have a different view of the time perspective of their work, with researchers likely to be focused on longer-term issues and knowledge-building, with practitioners needing more immediate information (Riger, 1999).

### **Need for the current study and research questions**

The research–practice gap represents a potential barrier to advances in both research and practice in domestic violence. Although there is general agreement that such a gap exists, the field is limited in its understanding of the nature of this gap and strategies that can be used to address and minimise it. Therefore, the current study aims to build upon previous research by developing a conceptual framework for further efforts aimed at integrating domestic violence research and practice. For this study, the perspective of domestic violence researchers were sought in order to gain a greater understanding of their backgrounds, needs, and perspectives related to the research–practice gap. The following research questions guided this study.

- a) What are the professional and domestic violence-related background characteristics of domestic violence researchers?
- b) What are the underlying dimensions of domestic violence researchers’ perceptions of the connections between research and practice?
- c) Do researchers differ in their perceptions based on whether domestic violence is the primary focus of their research agenda or whether the researcher has experience providing direct service to domestic violence clients?

For this third question, the first independent variable was hypothesised to impact on participants’ perceptions based on an assumption that participants whose primary research agenda focus was on domestic violence would have greater awareness of both research- and practice-related issues in domestic violence. The second independent variable (ie. direct service experience) was hypothesised to impact on participants’ perceptions based on an assumption that this type of work would inform researchers and make them more sensitive to numerous practice-related issues.

### **Methodology Instrumentation**

The instrumentation included the Domestic Violence Research–Practice Perceptions Scales: Researcher Form

(RPPS-R), which was developed for this study, and a demographic and professional background form. The instrumentation began by presenting the definition of domestic violence.

### **Domestic Violence Research–Practice Perception Scales: Researcher Form**

The RPPS-R was developed to assess various aspects of researchers' perceptions of the connections between research and practice in domestic violence. The definition of practitioners presented earlier in this article was presented to respondents, and participants were asked to indicate the category of practitioner that would be the most likely audience for the research that they conduct. Second, participants were asked to rate the extent to which they agreed with 45 statements related to their perceptions of various aspects of connections between research and practice in domestic violence. A 6-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly agree; 6 = Strongly disagree) was used. The items were developed by the first author based on the review of the existing literature summarised here. The major themes and specific issues reflected in the existing literature were consolidated into items reflecting various potential beliefs that domestic violence researchers may hold regarding research and practice in domestic violence. When available in the existing literature (eg. from previous focus group studies), direct statements made by researchers and/or practitioners were included in this list of items. If no such direct statements were available, then new items were developed in order to capture the meaning of these themes and specific issues. Prior to using the instrument, these items were reviewed and refined by the second author and another domestic violence researcher not affiliated with this study.

The initial conceptual framework for the RPPS-R included the following categories.

- a) Motivation/passion for domestic violence, which included items describing researchers' motivations for studying domestic violence.
- b) Perceptions of the existence of a research– practice gap, which included items assessing researchers' beliefs related to the extent to which there is a gap between research and practice in the area of domestic violence.
- c) Collaboration/contact with service providers, which included items assessing the nature of the researchers' involvement with practitioners.
- d) Perceptions of domestic violence services and service providers, which had three sub-categories: research-conducive perceptions (ie. Researchers' perceptions about the characteristics of practitioners that would be conducive to research being applied in practice); research-hindering perceptions (ie. Researchers' perceptions about the characteristics of practitioners that would be likely to hinder the application of research to practice); and service provider–researcher relationship perceptions (ie. items assessing the extent to which researchers believe that researchers and practitioners understand each other and are similar to one another).

### **Demographic and professional background form**

The characteristics assessed included age, gender, education level, length of time since completing highest degree, and household income level. The professional characteristics assessed included primary professional discipline/affiliation, work setting, tenure status (if working in a college or university), years in current position, and number of years conducting domestic violence research. Several questions related to participants' level of involvement in domestic violence research, including the number of research studies in which the participants had been involved, whether the participants had been a principal investigator or lead researcher, and the extent to which domestic violence is a focus of participants' research agenda (ie. their long range plans for the research they have conducted in the past and will conduct in the future). In addition, participants were asked to indicate the types of publications (eg. peer-reviewed scholarly journals, books, and organisation newsletters) through which they typically disseminate their research findings.

Finally, participants were asked to indicate the types of practice-oriented activities in which they had engaged. First, participants were asked if they had ever worked in a job that involved providing direct services to clients affected by domestic violence. Those who indicated that they had done so were asked the length of time they

worked in that position, the nature of the work they did, and the length of time since last working in that position. Participants were also presented with several practice-related experiences (which are detailed in the Results section) and were asked which ones they had experienced personally.

### **Sample and recruitment strategies**

The target population for this study were individuals who conducted research related to domestic violence in the United States and abroad. The sample recruited for this study included all members of this population whose names and contact information were able to be located. Because domestic violence research occurs in a wide range of professional disciplines and settings, we aimed to include scholars and researchers representing diverse backgrounds. The economy of the internet-based recruiting and instrumentation used allowed the entire identifiable population to be included in a cost- and time-effective manner.

Prospective participants were identified through two methods: (a) by searching scholarly databases and researcher profiles in Community of Science (<http://www.cos.com/>) to identify authors of domestic violence-related research studies, and (b) by searching for such terms as ‘domestic violence research’ and ‘domestic violence researcher’ using internet search engines. The scholarly databases searched included PsycInfo, Social Science Citation Index, Medline, EBSCO, CINAHL, Sociological Abstracts, Social Work Abstracts, Family and Society Studies Worldwide, and SOCIndex. A variety of search terms (eg. domestic violence, intimate partner violence, dating violence, relationship violence, and spousal abuse) were used so that various definitions and components of domestic violence were included. The search of these databases was limited to authors of studies published in the English language since 2000, in peer-reviewed publications. In an effort to include only researchers with significant roles on published domestic violence research studies, researchers identified through these scholarly databases were required to be the lead author of at least one data-based (ie. not conceptual) or the non-lead author (ie. second, third, fourth, etc. author) for at least two domestic violence research studies. In Community of Science, the COS Expertise Database was searched using similar search terms as were used to search the scholarly databases. Individuals who self-identified as having expertise in this area were added to the population list. The use of internet search engines produced few unique researchers to add to the population list. The search for researchers continued until saturation occurred (ie. no new names were identified).

### **Once prospective participants were**

identified, their contact information (ie. email addresses) was located. When available in the scholarly databases or in the Community of Science Profiles, researchers’ email addresses were located from these sources. If the contact information was not available through these sources, the project research assistant attempted to locate the researchers’ current contact information by searching the publicly-available directories and websites of the organisations in which they worked. If contact information was not available through these sources either, internet search engines were used to attempt to locate the current work setting and contact information for researchers. All domestic violence researchers whose names and contact information were identified through these means were invited to participate in this study. Efforts therefore were made to conduct an exhaustive search for current domestic violence researchers and their contact information.

The initial list of prospective study participants included 682 domestic violence researchers. However, during the initial attempt to contact participants to request their study participation, the emails sent to 103 individuals on this list were returned as undeliverable. The email addresses of these individuals were reviewed to ensure that there were no spelling errors, and, finding none, we concluded that the majority of these addresses were no longer valid, likely due to the researchers no longer working at the institutions in which they had conducted their research or other factors, such as retirement and other career transitions. In addition, during the course of the study, 16 individuals contacted the lead researcher to indicate that they did not consider themselves to be a domestic violence researcher and therefore were not eligible for the study. Therefore, not counting these 119 individuals, a total of 563 domestic violence researchers were contacted and invited to participate in this study. Of these, a total of 261 participants completed the instrumentation, an overall response rate of 46.4%, which also represented a sufficient sample size for conducting the planned factor analysis (Munro & Page, 1993).

## Procedures

Prospective participants were contacted up to three times in weekly intervals via email. The initial invitation included a description of the survey and instructions for accessing the confidential, secure, internet-based survey used for this study. Participants names and email addresses were used only for data collection and were not linked to their responses, thus allowing anonymous responses. Participants were offered the incentive of a summary of the results of the study, which was requested in a manner that did not link participants' identities to their responses. Sixty-two (23.8%) participants requested this summary.

## Results

### *Description of the sample*

Of the 261 participants, the majority (n = 191; 73.2%) were female. The vast majority (n = 216; 82.8%) of the sample had completed a doctoral degree, with another 36 participants (13.80/6) possessing a master's degree and two (0.80/6) Participants having a bachelor's degree. The sample included individuals who had completed their highest level of education recently [0–5 years: n = 70 (26.8%); 6–10 years: n = 61 (23.4%)] and individuals who had greater levels of experience since completing their education [11–20 years: n = 79 (30.3%); 21+ years: 41 (15.7%)]. The household income levels of participants were most likely to be above US\$50,000 [below US\$25,000: n = 6 (2.3%); US\$26,000– 50,000: n = 19 (7.3%); US\$51,000–100,000: n = 67 (25.7%); US\$101,000–150,000: n = 76 (29.1%); and above US\$150,000: n = 67 (25.7%)]. The mean age of participants was 46.9 years (SD = 10.9), with a range of 25 to 70 years.

### **Professional background characteristics of domestic violence researchers**

Participants were asked to describe the type of practitioner they believed would be the most likely audience for the findings of their research. The most frequent responses were social workers (n = 40; 15.3%), psychologists (n = 33; 12.6%), and doctors/physicians (n = 29; 11.1%). All categories of practitioners [ie. advocates (7.7%), attorneys (2.3%), criminal justice workers (6.1%), doctors/physicians, epidemiologists (5.4%), marriage and family therapists (5.0%), nurses (7.7%), professional counsellors (3.4%), psychologists, public health educators (3.4%), shelter staff workers (2.3%), social workers, and other healthcare professionals (7.3%)] were represented in the sample. These responses corresponded with participants' reports of their primary discipline or professional affiliation, with 23.4% (n = 61) of the sample representing psychology, 18.8% (n = 49) of the sample representing social work, and 10.0% (n = 26) of the sample representing physicians/medical doctors. Again, all categories of professional disciplines [ie. anthropology (1.9%), criminal justice/criminology/law (6.5%), family studies/human development (1.5%), marriage and family therapy (2.7%), nursing (9.6%), physicians/medical doctors, professional counselling (1.9%), psychology, psychiatry (0.8%), public health (8.8%), social work, sociology (6.50/6), women's studies (1.90/6), and other (3.8%)] included on the background form were represented among the sample.

Participants were asked about their experiences conducting research related to domestic violence. Most participants (n = 207; 79.3%) said that they conduct their research in college/university settings. Of these, 106 (51.2%) were tenured. Of those not currently tenured, 60 (56.6%) were pursuing tenure. Other settings in which participants conducted research included non-profit organisations (n = 18, 6.9%) and federal government organisations (n = 7, 2.7%). Five or fewer participants indicated working in the following types of settings: research institutes, state government organisations, self-employed businesses, and other types. The sample included researchers with a range in the number of domestic violence-related research studies in which they had been involved: one study (n = 10; 3.8%); two studies (n = 24; 9.2%); three to five studies (n = 96; 36.8%); six to 10 studies (n = 67; 25.7%); and 11 or more studies (n = 56; 21.5%).

Most participants (n = 208; 79.7%) had been the principal investigator (ie. lead researcher) on at least one domestic violence-related research study. Participants were asked to select from a list the statement that best reflected the focus of domestic violence in their overall research agendas, and the greatest percentage of participants indicated that domestic violence was the primary focus of their research agenda (n = 93; 35.6%). Other research agenda descriptions included domestic violence being a focus of the research agenda but not the primary one (n = 65; 24.9%), domestic violence being a secondary focus of the research agenda (ie. the

participant studies domestic violence in relation to another area of research that is the primary focus of his or her agenda) (n = 45; 17.2%), and having a primary focus in either sexual violence against women (n = 15; 5.7%), elder abuse (n = 13; 5.0%), or child maltreatment (n = 8; 3.1%). Additionally, participants were asked to indicate the communication channels that they used to disseminate their research findings. The percentages of participants indicating that they used each of the communication channels was as follows: (a) peer-reviewed scholarly journals: n = 188; 72%; (b) books: n = 71; 27%; (c) organisation newsletters: n = 35; 13.4%; and (d) professional conferences: n = 158; 60.5%.

Participants were also asked to describe their experiences with various practice-related aspects of domestic violence. Over half (n = 150; 57.5%) of participants had worked in a position that involved providing direct services to individuals affected by domestic violence. The types of work in which participants were involved included counselling, medical work, social work, advocacy, law enforcement, and legal work. The mean amount of time that participants had worked in these positions was 7.3 years (SD = 6.9 years). Among these participants, the mean length of time since they had worked in these positions was 8.2 years (SD = 7.3). However, a number of these participants indicated that they were currently working in that position.

Participants also were asked to indicate whether they had participated in any of the following activities: (a) visited a battered women's shelter to learn more about their operations and needs (n = 182; 69.7%); (b) observed a batterer intervention programme group (n = 105; 40.2%); (c) been an active participant of a state-level domestic violence coalition or policy board/steering committee (n = 107; 41.0%); (d) been an active participant of a national domestic violence coalition or policy board/steering committee (n = 53; 20.3%); (e) been on the board of directors of a local domestic violence programme (n = 63; 24.1%); (f) been a volunteer with a local domestic violence programme (n = 105; 40.2%); (g) served in an advisory capacity for a domestic violence programme in the local community, such as a health care intervention programme, a faith-based coalition, or batterer treatment programme (n = 127; 48.7%); (h) attended a conference sponsored by a state-level or national domestic violence coalition or organisation such as the Family Violence Prevention Fund (n = 171; 65.5%); and (i) worked with a local domestic violence service organisation to recruit participants for a study they conducted (n = 123; 47.1%).

### **Underlying dimensions of domestic violence researchers' perceptions of the connections between research and practice**

Prior to conducting any further analyses on the RPPS-R, the response patterns for the individual items were examined. Four interrelated items were dropped from subsequent analyses due to inconsistent response patterns indicating that the questions did not make sense to participants. With the remaining 41 items (total Scale Cronbach's alpha was  $\alpha = .72$ ), a principal components factor analysis with varimax rotation was conducted to identify the actual underlying factor structure of the scale. In the initial solution, without limiting the number of possible factors, 12 factors with eigenvalues greater than 1 were identified. The scree plot indicated that a four-factor solution was the best fit for the data. (Note: Other factor models were tested to verify the scree plot test. However, the four-factor model remained the best fit for the data.) Therefore, a second iteration of the factor analysis was conducted to limit the number of factors to four. Items that did not load onto any of the four factors (using a cut off of 0.40) or loaded onto multiple factors were eliminated, leaving 31 items for the final scale. Table 1 presents the items included in the factors and the factor loadings for each item. To convey a general indication of participants' responses patterns, Table 1 also includes the percentage of participants indicating agreement (ie. strongly agree or agree) with each statement.

The first factor was labelled '*personal practice orientation*'. This factor contributed to 15.9% of the variance. This factor assessed the extent to which researchers were oriented toward doing research that is relevant to practice and/or includes the involvement of practitioners. This factor also encompassed the extent to which the researchers are invested in making a practical difference in the area of domestic violence through their research. With 11 items, the Cronbach's alpha for this factor subscale was  $\alpha = 0.83$ . The possible range of scores was 11–66, with an observed range of 20–66. The observed mean was 50.04 (SD = 8.48). Scores were coded so that higher scores indicate a greater practice orientation/ investment.

**Table 1: Items in the Domestic Violence Research–Practice Perceptions Scales: Researcher Form factor subscales**

<b>Factor 1 (15.9% of the variance): Personal practice orientation</b>	<b>Factor loadings</b>	<b>Percentage indicating agreement**</b>
*I consult with practitioners when planning research studies on domestic violence.	0.73	59.8
*It is important to me that the research I conduct is relevant to practice.	0.71	90.0
*I consult with practitioners when I am interpreting the results of the domestic violence-related studies I conduct.	0.69	50.4
*I make intentional efforts to disseminate my research findings to practitioners.	0.69	64.7
*I have regular (ie. at least once per month) professional contact with practitioners who work in my local community.	0.67	48.5
*Researchers have a responsibility to consider the needs of practitioners when they design studies.	0.65	71.2
*In the reports of my research findings, I regularly discuss the implications for practice.	0.62	86.4
*It is important for domestic violence researchers to have first-hand experience providing (or, at minimum, observing) services to clients affected by domestic violence.	0.52	56.9
*As a domestic violence researcher, I am similar professionally to domestic violence practitioners.	0.49	23.9
*I have a good understanding of the dynamics that practitioners face in their jobs.	0.49	57.2
*I am very passionate about the topic of domestic violence.	0.45	81.5
<b>Factor 2: 9.79% of variance: Beliefs about practitioners</b>		
Most practitioners are set in their ways and not very open to new ideas.	0.80	12.5
Most practitioners do not understand the value of domestic violence research.	0.75	17.5
Practitioners are biased in their understanding of domestic violence.	0.74	14.4
*Practitioners have a high level of professional training for the work that they do.	0.64	34.5
*Practitioners are open to research findings that run counter to their beliefs about domestic violence.	0.63	9.7
I am frustrated by practitioners' lack of usage of research findings.	0.62	20.1
*Research findings are influential on the decisions that practitioners make about how they work.	0.59	17.8
*Practitioners are eager to learn more about domestic violence.	0.57	45.2
Many of the existing practices used by practitioners are ideologically driven.	0.55	40.1
The professional judgment of most practitioners is guided primarily by their personal experiences.	0.50	34.5
*Practitioners regularly read research published in scholarly peer-reviewed journals.	0.46	5.9
<b>Factor 3: 6.72% of variance: Beliefs about researchers</b>		
Most researchers are set in their ways and not very open to new ideas.	0.74	10.1
Researchers are biased in their understanding of domestic violence.	0.63	9.4
*Researchers are open to findings that run counter to their beliefs about domestic violence.	0.59	36.0
I am frustrated by the approaches to domestic violence research that are used by other researchers.	0.58	16.8
Most researchers do not understand the needs of battered women.	0.41	5.5
<b>Factor 4: 5.32% of variance: Beliefs about a research–practice gap</b>		
*A disconnect between research and practice in the area of domestic violence hinders the progress being made in each area.	0.62	68.7
*Practitioners face many challenges in applying domestic violence research findings to their work.	0.58	69.0
*In general, domestic violence researchers and practitioners have limited communication with each other.	0.56	50.8
*More efforts are needed to increase the practical application of domestic violence research.	0.50	83.9
<i>Notes:</i>		
* denotes that an item is reverse-scored. In the original score, 1 = Strongly agree and 6 = Strongly disagree.		
** The third column presents the percentage of participants indicating agreement (ie. Strongly agree or Agree) with each statement in its original form (ie. before reverse scoring).		

The second factor was labelled ‘*beliefs about practitioners*’, and it contributed to 9.79% of the variance. This 11-item factor assesses perceptions of the characteristics of practitioners that would be either conducive or a hindrance to the application of research into practice. The Cronbach’s alpha for this subscale was  $\alpha = .86$ , and scores could range from 11–66. The observed range of scores was 14–55, with a mean of 37.22 (SD = 8.51). In

interpreting this factor’s subscales, lower scores indicate more ‘research-hindering’ perceptions of practitioners; higher scores indicate more ‘research-conducive’ perceptions of practitioners.

The third factor assessed researchers’ opinions about the approaches to domestic violence research used by other researchers and was labelled ‘*beliefs about researchers*’. This five-item factor contributed to 6.72% of the variance and has a Cronbach’s alpha of  $\alpha = .67$ . The possible and observed range of scores was from 5–30, with a mean of 19.53 (SD = 3.79). For this subscale, lower scores indicate more negative views of other researchers, and higher scores indicate more positive views of other researchers.

The fourth factor was labelled ‘*beliefs about a research–practice gap*’, and it contributed to 5.32% of the variance. This factor assessed researchers’ beliefs about the extent to which a gap exists between domestic violence research and practice. The factor subscale includes four items and had a Cronbach’s alpha of  $\alpha = .58$ . Scores could range from 4–24, and the observed range was from 9–24. The mean for this sample was 18.94 (SD = 2.77), and scores on this scale were coded so that higher scores indicate a belief that the research–practice gap in domestic violence is more extensive.

**Table 2: Correlation matrix for the RPPS-R factor subscales**

	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4
Factor 1: Personal practice orientation	--	$r = .27^{**}$ $p = .00$	$r = .04$ $p = .50$	$r = .10$ $p = .11$
Factor 2: Beliefs about practitioners		--	$r = .20^{**}$ $p = .00$	$r = -.15^*$ $p = .02$
Factor 3: Beliefs about researchers			--	$r = -.17^{**}$ $p = .01$
Factor 4: Beliefs about a research–practice gap				--

*Notes:*  
\* denotes that the correlation is significant at the  $p < .05$  level (two-tailed).  
\*\* denotes that the correlation is significant at the  $p < .01$  level (two-tailed).

The factor subscale correlation matrix (Table 2) demonstrates that significant, albeit not strong, correlations were found between the second factor subscale and all three other subscales. More research-conducive perceptions of practitioners were related to greater personal practice orientation, more positive views of other researchers, and beliefs that the domestic violence research–practice gap is less extensive. In addition, there was a significant negative correlation between the third and fourth factor subscales, indicating that participants with more favourable views of other researchers viewed the domestic violence research–practice gap as less extensive.

Differences in researchers’ perceptions of domestic violence research and practice based on experience of providing direct services and focus of research agenda A multivariate two-way ANOVA was conducted to determine the impact (independently and their interaction) of the two independent variables, (ie. whether the researcher had ever worked in a job that involved providing direct services to clients affected by domestic violence and whether domestic violence is the primary focus of the participants’ research agenda) on the four RPPS-R factor subscales. For the second independent variable, participants were divided into two groups: those for whom domestic violence is the primary focus of their research agenda, and those for whom domestic violence is not the primary focus of their research agenda (ie. any of the other possible response options to this question). Multivariate ANOVA was determined to be appropriate for this data set because the independent variables were categorical, the dependent variables were continuous, and the observations were independent of one another. To test the assumption of homoscedasticity, we conducted Levene’s test for equality of the variances in the four RPPS-R factor subscales between the two groups within each independent variable. Only one statistically significant Leven’s test statistic resulted, in that the assumption of equal group error variance was not met on the fourth factor (ie. beliefs about a research–practice gap) ( $F = 4.72, p = 0.03$ ) for the independent variable of whether domestic violence is or is not the primary focus of the participants’

research agenda. All other comparisons met the assumption of equal group variance. Therefore, the assumption of homoscedasticity was generally met.

<b>Independent variable</b>	<b>Dependent variable</b>	<b>df</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>Significance</b>	<b>Partial Eta-square</b>
<b>Research agenda focus</b>	Factor one: personal practice orientation	1	16.72	0.00	0.064
	Factor two: beliefs about practitioners	1	0.22	0.64	0.001
	Factor three: beliefs about researchers	1	0.51	0.48	0.002
	Factor four: beliefs about a research-practice gap	1	0.01	0.92	0.000
<b>Experience providing direct services</b>	Factor one: personal practice orientation	1	5.60	0.02	0.022
	Factor two: beliefs about practitioners	1	2.77	0.10	0.011
	Factor three: beliefs about researchers	1	0.14	0.71	0.001
	Factor four: beliefs about a research-practice gap	1	0.00	0.98	0.000
<b>Interaction between research agenda focus and experience of providing direct services</b>	Factor one: personal practice orientation	1	6.75	0.01	0.027
	Factor two: beliefs about practitioners	1	2.67	0.10	0.011
	Factor three: beliefs about researchers	1	0.14	0.71	0.001
	Factor four: beliefs about a research-practice gap	1	2.95	0.09	0.012

*Note:*  
Partial eta-squared is reported as an indicator of effect size.

As depicted in Table 3, there were no significant differences in participants' scores on the 'beliefs about practitioners', 'beliefs about researchers', or 'beliefs about a research-practice gap' factor subscale score based on either of the independent variables and their interactions. Significant differences (albeit small, as demonstrated by the effect sizes) were found in participants' personal practice orientation' subscale scores based on both of the independent variables and their interactions. First, participants' scores differed based on whether they had ever worked in a job providing direct services to clients affected by domestic violence ( $F = 5.60$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p = .02$ ). Participants who had never provided direct services had a lower mean ( $M = 49.27$ ) than those who had provided them ( $M = 51.81$ ), indicating that those with experience as a domestic violence practitioner had a greater personal orientation toward and investment in practice-related issues. Second, participants' scores differed based on whether domestic violence was the primary focus of their research agenda ( $F = 16.72$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Participants who indicated that domestic violence is not the primary focus of their research agenda had a lower mean ( $M = 48.34$ ) than those who reported that domestic violence is their primary focus ( $M = 52.74$ ). Researchers with a primary focus on domestic violence had a greater personal orientation toward and investment in practice-related issues. The interaction between the two independent variables was also statistically significant ( $F = 6.75$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p = .01$ ). Participants for whom domestic violence is a primary focus of their research agenda had similar scores regardless of whether they did ( $M = 52.62$ ) or did not ( $M = 52.87$ ) have experience of providing direct services. However, among participants for whom domestic violence is not the primary focus of their research agenda, those who had experience of providing services had a higher mean ( $M = 51.01$ ) than participants with no such experience ( $M = 45.67$ ). Thus, researchers for whom domestic violence is not the primary focus of their research agenda and who have never worked in a job providing direct services to clients affected by domestic violence had the lowest levels of personal orientation toward practice-related issues.

## Discussion

The findings of this study offer insight into the background characteristics of domestic violence researchers and can be used to construct a conceptual framework for understanding the domestic violence research–practice gap from the perspective of researchers.

### Personal and professional background characteristics of domestic violence researchers

This study demonstrates the diversity of professional backgrounds that exists among domestic violence researchers. The representation of all included categories of professional disciplines is indicative of the interdisciplinary nature of domestic violence work (Edleson & Bible, 2001; Gilfus et al, 1999; Gondolf et al, 1997; Hamberger, 2001). As anticipated, most researchers worked in college or university settings. The level of involvement in domestic violence research varied among the participants, although most had been involved in at least three studies and had been the principal investigator on at least one study. Approximately one-third of the participants indicated that domestic violence was the primary focus of their research agendas, with most others indicating that domestic violence was a secondary or related topic to some other area of investigation. The results also demonstrated that many domestic violence researchers have served in practitioner roles, either in the past or concurrently while conducting research. This finding suggests that the division of researchers and practitioners into separate groups may not account for the often overlapping experiences of certain individuals within these groups. Beyond formal work experience involving service provision, many of the researchers in this study had participated in other practice-oriented activities (eg. observing a batterer intervention programme group or serving on the board of directors of a local domestic violence programme).

A preliminary comparison can be made between some of the background characteristics of the domestic violence researchers who participated in this study and the domestic violence service providers who participated in the state-wide survey conducted by Murray and Welch (2008a; 2008b). Among both samples, the majority of participants were female, although the percentage of females was higher among the service providers (90.2%) than among the researchers (73.2%). Perhaps the most pronounced differences between the researchers' and service providers' demographic characteristics can be found in their education and income levels. Not surprisingly, researchers have higher levels of educational attainment and income. Nearly all of the researchers had graduate-level degrees, but Murray and Welch found that most of the service providers had a bachelor's degree or less, with only about one-fourth of the service providers possessing a graduate-level degree. Most of the researchers reported household income levels of over US\$50,000, with over one-half of the researchers reporting incomes of over US\$100,000. In contrast, nearly three-quarters of the service providers in Murray and Welch's study had income levels below US\$50,000. It is not possible on the basis of these studies to determine the extent to which these differences impact any perceived antagonism (Riger, 1999; Williams, 2004) between the two groups. However, these differences certainly warrant consideration.

As noted in the literature review, the types of publications that practitioners consult often differ from the types of publications that researchers use to report their study findings (Gondolf et al, 1997; Kilpatrick et al, 2001; NVAWPRC, 2001). A comparison of the publications used by researchers in this study and by the service providers in Murray and Welch (2008b) affirms that this difference is likely to be a major component of the existing research–practice gap in domestic violence (Kilpatrick et al, 2001; NVAWPRC, 2001). Most researchers (72%) indicated that they disseminate their findings through peer-reviewed scholarly journals; however, only 33% of the service providers in Murray and Welch's study consulted these journals. Furthermore, although Murray and Welch found that over one-half (52%) of the service providers consulted organisational newsletters to learn more about domestic violence, this type of publication was least likely (13%) to be used by researchers to disseminate their findings. In other words, researchers are most likely to disseminate their findings through publications that practitioners are least likely to consult. This finding is consistent with prior recommendations for practitioner-targeted strategies for research dissemination (Gondolf et al, 1997; Hamberger, 2001), such as for summaries of research studies to be written in accessible language and disseminated to practitioners.

## **Conceptual framework for the domestic violence research– practice gap**

The factor analysis of the RPPS-R revealed a four-factor framework for understanding the domestic violence research–practice gap from the perspective of researchers. The four factors identified related to researchers' personal orientation to practice and the involvement of practitioners in their research, researchers' beliefs about practitioners' level of interest and involvement in research-related activities, researchers' opinions about the approaches that other domestic violence researchers use in their work, and their beliefs about the extent to which a research–practice gap exists in domestic violence. In this study, the 'personal practice orientation' and 'beliefs about practitioners' subscales had strong internal consistency coefficients ( $\alpha = .83$  and  $\alpha = .86$ , respectively); the subscales for the 'beliefs about researchers' and 'beliefs about a research-practice gap' factors demonstrated more moderate internal consistency coefficients ( $\alpha = .67$  and  $\alpha = .58$ , respectively), indicating that these latter two subscales warrant further investigation. This four-factor framework can be used as a foundation for further research on the causes and consequences of the domestic violence research–practice gap, as well as in programmatic efforts to further integrate research and practice in domestic violence.

Among domestic violence researchers, the 'personal practice orientation' factor appears to have the most significant impact on beliefs about the research–practice gap. Furthermore, this factor subscale was the only one on which participants differed at a statistically significant level based on prior experience working as a practitioner and whether domestic violence is the focus of their research agenda. The results suggest that researchers with no experience as a domestic violence practitioner and whose research agenda is not focused primarily on domestic violence are the least oriented to practice-related issues. The extent to which a personal orientation toward and investment in practice impacts on the type of research done, as well as the applicability of that research to practice, cannot be determined from this study. However, we speculate that researchers who scored higher on this domain would be more receptive to efforts to integrate research and practice in domestic violence.

## **Limitations**

The findings of this study must be considered within the context of its limitations. First, as a new instrument, the RPPS-R warrants further examination and refinement. Second, the strategies used to identify members of the population may have missed some domestic violence researchers if they had not published their findings at the time of the search (eg. they were conducting research currently but had never previously published their findings) and were not registered in the Community of Science database. Third, despite the good response rate, a relatively high number of researchers who were identified were not able to be contacted due to invalid email addresses, and the level of current involvement in domestic violence research among those individuals is unknown. Finally, two of the identified factors (ie. 'beliefs about researchers' and 'beliefs about a research-practice gap') demonstrated less than adequate Cronbach's alpha coefficients (.67 and .58, respectively), and therefore the internal consistency of these factors should be considered in the further analyses of these factor subscales.

## **Implications for future research and practice**

In order to advance the integration of domestic violence research and practice, a combination of additional research and practical strategies is needed. The current study adds to the existing literature by identifying a conceptual framework for understanding this issue. In addition to examining the application of this framework to practitioners' understanding of the research–practice gap, efforts are needed to examine the extent to which the four factors reflect actual research- and practice-related activities of researchers and practitioners. The findings of this study also suggest a need for further examination of within-group differences among researchers and practitioners, and it may be useful to examine differences based on disciplines and professional roles. For example, this study revealed that some researchers engage in work as practitioners concurrent with conducting research. Further study of this group of researchers could contribute to greater understanding of the challenges and opportunities faced while integrating research and practice at an individual level. Research could also be useful for determining the value of other practice-related activities (eg. observing a batterer intervention group) for promoting a practice orientation among researchers.

Additional research efforts are needed to further examine the extent to which the demographic differences (eg. educational attainment and income levels) between researchers and practitioners contribute to the research–practice gap. One research question that could be addressed is whether these differences contribute to power and control dynamics in researcher–practitioner collaborations. In light of the differences in educational attainment, and particularly in the amount of training in research methods between the groups, further research could also be conducted to determine the appropriate language for conveying methodological terms and statistical procedures to practitioners. In addition, although this study was inclusive of international researchers, cultural and national differences were not included in the scope of this study. Therefore, international perspectives toward the integration of domestic violence research and practice warrant consideration in future research.

### **Implications for practice**

- A greater understanding of the background characteristics of domestic violence researchers may be useful for enhancing future researcher–practitioner collaborations.
- This study introduces a conceptual framework for future research and practice endeavours, aimed at integrating research and practice in domestic violence.
- The findings suggest that some domestic violence researchers are more oriented toward practice-related issues and have had more direct involvement with service provision than other researchers.
- The Domestic Violence Research-Practice Perceptions Scales: Researcher Form demonstrates a potential usefulness for identifying researchers who would be appropriate collaborators with practitioners.
- This study adds to the evidence for the need for practice-oriented publication outlets and dissemination strategies related to domestic violence research.

The four factors identified in this study can also serve as a framework for developing practical strategies to advance the integration of domestic violence research and practice. Attitudes and behaviours of both researchers and practitioners who promote this integration can be identified and incorporated into training and operating procedures. Such strategies could be aimed at increasing the practice-orientation of researchers and the research-orientation of practitioners. In general, researchers and practitioners alike can take further steps to acknowledge and respond to the research–practice gap, with the ultimate goal of preventing and responding to domestic violence. One practical area that warrants special attention is the need for the development of publication outlets and resources that meet the needs of both researchers and practitioners. Creativity and innovation are likely to be required to develop resources that meet the needs of researchers who face promotion and tenure policies (eg. peer-review, methodological rigor, and statistical sophistication), as well as the needs of practitioners who need clear, understandable research-based guidelines for their work. Nonetheless, such resources are likely to be a necessary component of the integration of domestic violence research and practice. Finally, the findings of this study hold promise for advancing researcher–practitioner collaborations. An instrument that assesses personal practice orientation could ultimately be used to identify researchers who would make appropriate participants in collaborations, and this represents an advance in the work of previous researchers (eg. Mouradian et al, 2001) who proposed informal questions to help researchers and practitioners find prospective collaborators.

In 1997, Gondolf and colleagues had the following to say about the domestic violence field:

‘The field itself may be maturing toward greater convergence as researchers and advocates realize their need for one another. The result should be a more grounded, practical, relevant, and influential knowledge about domestic violence.’ (Gondolf et al, 1997: 266)

Despite efforts to advance collaboration in the field of domestic violence, a gap persists between research and practice. The findings of the current study verify the complexity of this gap, and they also inform future directions for advancing both practice-relevant research and research-informed practice, as well as for promoting the exchange of ideas and innovative practices between interested groups of researchers and practitioners.

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