

Professionals' attributions about domestic violence cases, and their effect on processing pathways

Dr Fiona Murphy

& Dr Terry Bartholomew

Forensic Psychology Program
Deakin University, Melbourne
terryb@deakin.edu.au



Objectives of presentation

- Detail the rationale for, and aims of, the study;
- Outline design and method;
- Discuss results of the study:
 - The relationship between situational and professional factors and attributions;
 - The relationship between attributions, situational and professional factors and service/referral decisions;
- Outline some implications of the findings.



Rationale for the study

- The initial study idea and its redirection
- The genesis of domestic violence services: political, functionalist; separatist.
- Organisational responses are shaped by ethos; thus likely to be varying policies, procedures and practices.
- Current service characterised by a lack of *empirically-based* best-practice guidelines and models.
- A range of professional *groups* play a role in responding to domestic violence, further increasing the potential for significant variation in service delivery.
- Practitioner responses may also vary as a function of *individual* attitudes and beliefs associated with intimate partner violence.

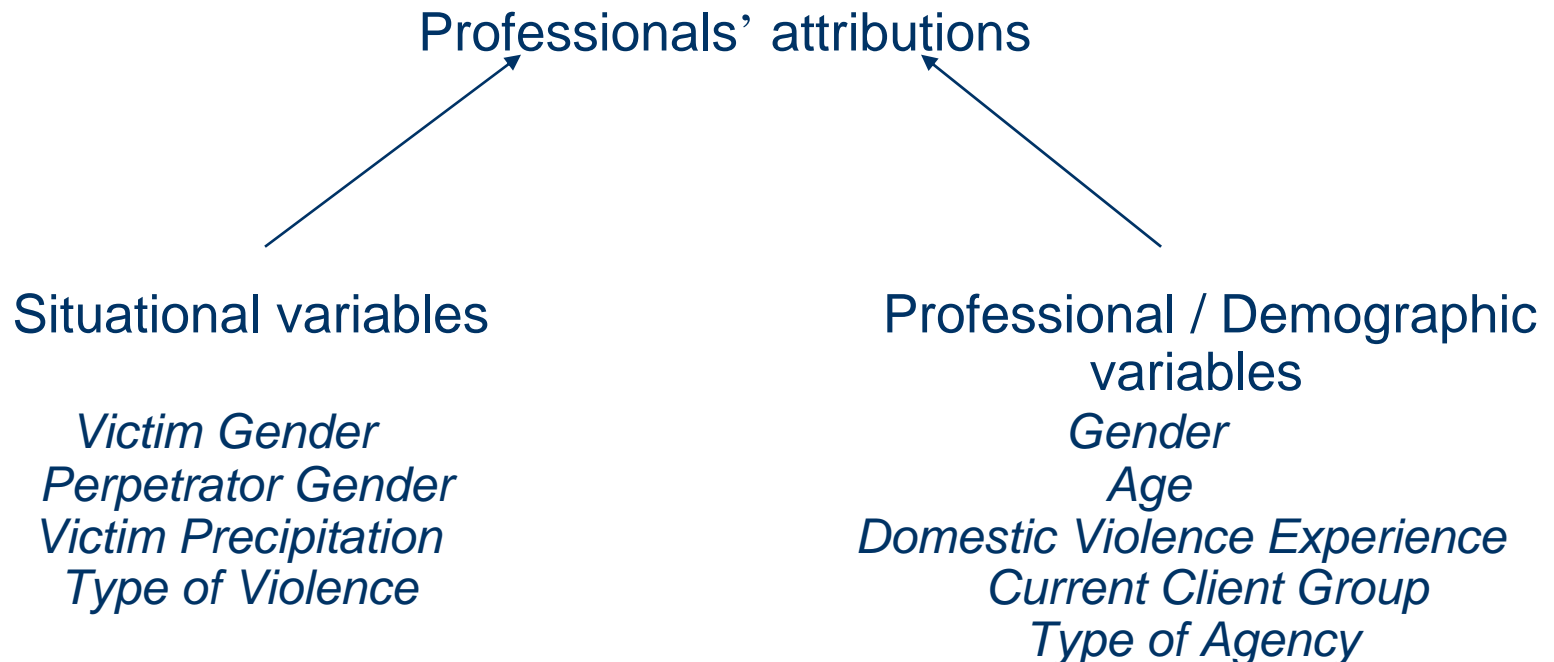


The role of discretionary practices by professionals

- A paucity of Australian research examining the attitudes and beliefs of practitioners who play a role in responding to domestic violence.
- Professionals' attributions and service/referral decisions are likely to impact upon the pathways taken by victims and perpetrators; ie the timing, nature and duration of their contact with the criminal justice system, intervention and/or counseling services

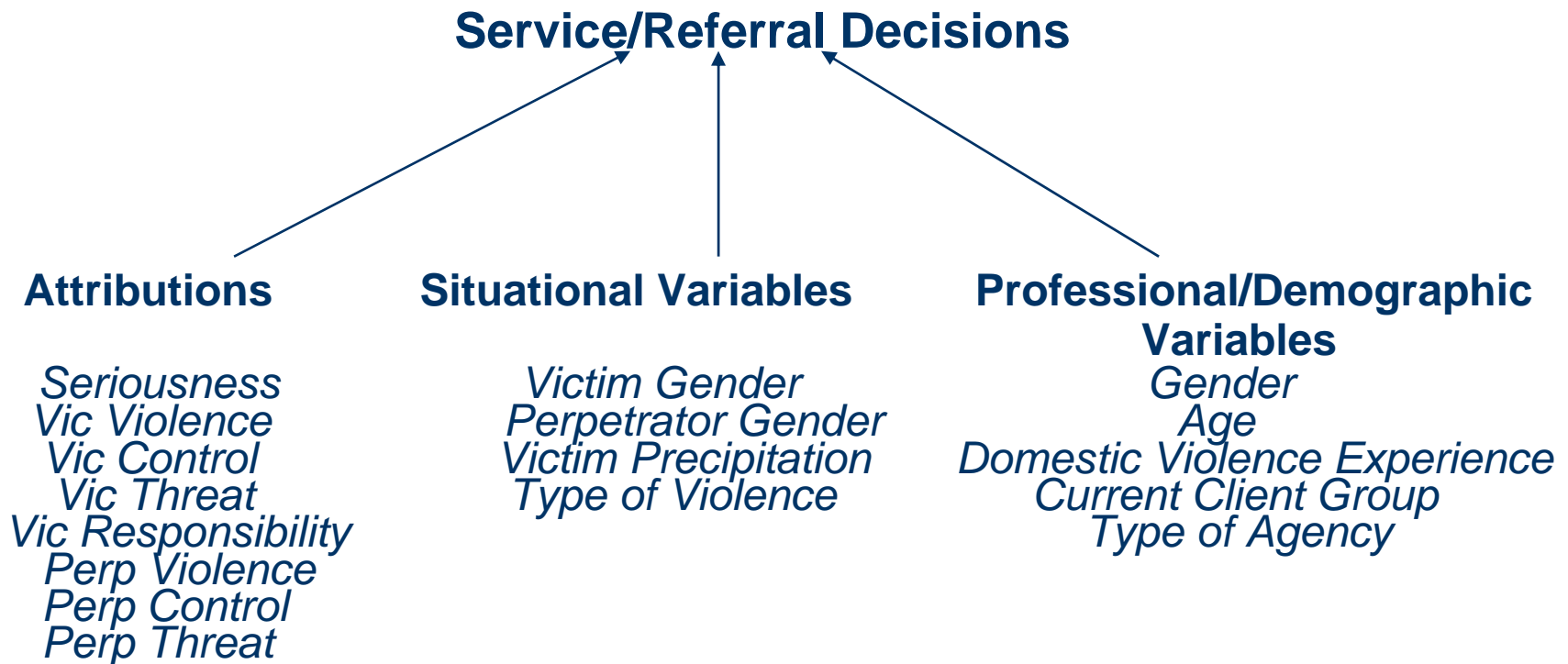
Aim of the study #1

1. To examine the relationship between situational and professional/demographic variables and professional attributions about the act (seriousness), victim (violence, control, responsibility, perceived threat) and perpetrator (violence, control, responsibility, perceived threat).



Aim of the study #2

- To examine the relationship between attributions, situational and professional variables and service/referral decisions:





Study design and methodology

- **Participants:** 273 professionals nationally from a range of disciplines (legal, medical, counseling, psychology, outreach and refuge workers).
 - 74% female
 - *Mean age of 42 years*
 - *Current client group – 51.9% victims only; 4.4% perpetrators only; 43.7% both victims and perpetrators*
 - *37% with dedicated experience working specifically with domestic violence clients.*

Study design and methodology (2)

- **Materials:**

1. **Demographic questionnaire;**

2. **Vignette: Systematically manipulated situational variables using a 2x2x2x3 design**

- ***Victim and Perpetrator sex*** systematically varied, creating a ‘victim/perpetrator gender dyad’ variable with four levels:
 - (a) *Female victim/male perpetrator*
 - (b) *Female victim/female perpetrator*
 - (c) *Male victim/female perpetrator*
 - (d) *Male victim/male perpetrator*
- ***Victim Precipitation*** had two levels (“yes” or “no”)
- ***Type of Violence*** (‘intimate terrorism’, ‘violent resistance’, and ‘mutual violence’).

Study design and methodology (3)

3. **Participant questionnaire to assess attributions and service/referral decisions. This generated both quantitative and qualitative data.**
 - **How would you describe this situation?**
 - **How serious do you feel X's behavior is? Why?**
 - **How much responsibility would you attribute to X (and Y) for these events? Why?**
 - **How violent do you see X (and sometimes Y's) actions to be? Why?**
 - **How controlling do you see X (and sometimes Y's) actions to be? Why?**
 - **How would you handle this situation if X, Y or X and Y presented to you in your work place?**

Results: Professionals' attributions

- The most significant variations were in relation to attributions about the depicted victim.
- Much greater consistency in practitioner beliefs about the depicted perpetrator.
- Professional attributions were explained by both situational and professional variables.
- Prof's own *demographic* factors did not predict these attributions.

Professional attributions: The role of situational factors

1. **Victim/perpetrator gender dyad:**
 - A salient variable that accounted for the most significant amount of variation in professionals' attributions.
 - Specifically, variations in attributions depended upon whether the situation involved a female victim/male perpetrator or a male victim/female perpetrator.
 - Regression analyses revealed a number of significant predictors.



Professionals' attributions: Victim/perpetrator gender dyad

	Serious-ness	Perp Violence	Vic Threat	Vic Control	Perp Control	Vic Responsibility
Vic / Perp Gender Dyad	Prof's perceived <i>less seriousness</i> when there was a male victim compared to a female victim of heterosexual relationship violence	In heterosexual couples, <i>female perpetrator perceived as less violent</i> than a male perpetrator	Female victims seen as experiencing more threat than male victims from heterosexual relationship violence	Male victims perceived as more controlling than female victims	In heterosexual relationship, male perpetrator perceived as more controlling than female perpetrator	In heterosexual violence, male victims perceived as more responsible than females



Professional attributions: Victim ‘precipitation’

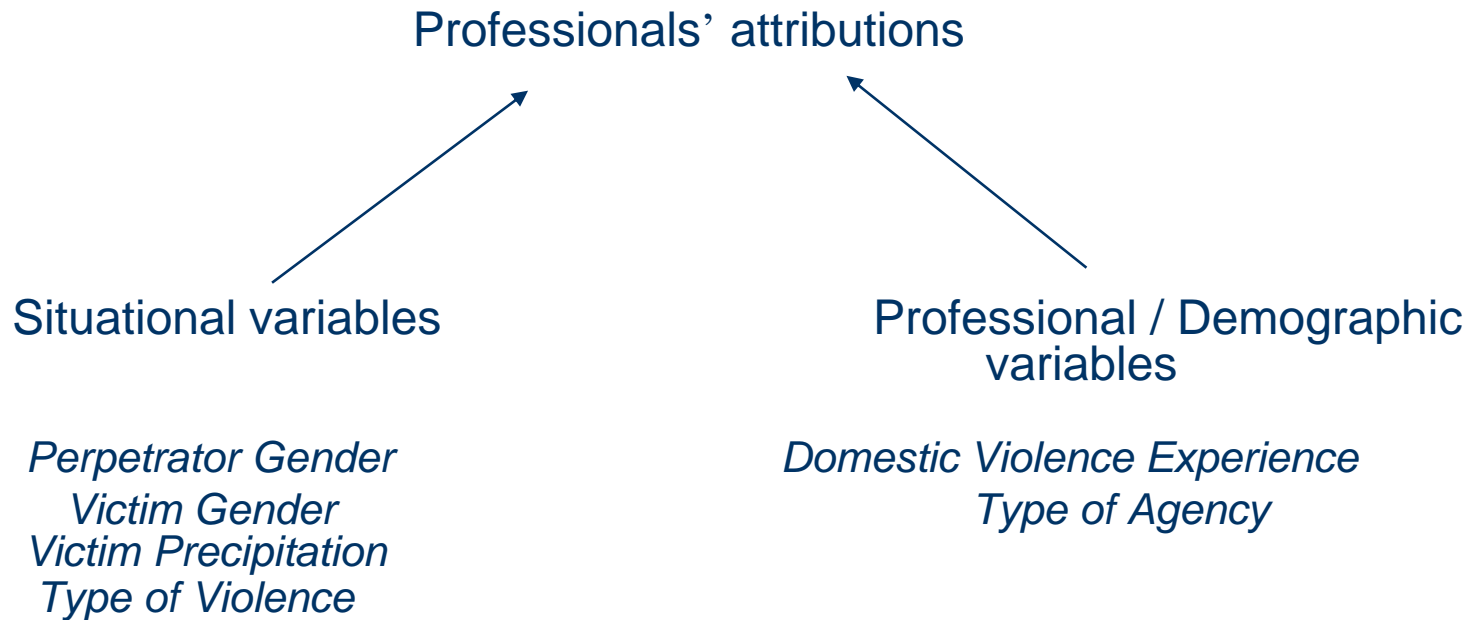
- The inclusion of a victim precipitation condition was associated with variations in attributions regarding the victim and perpetrator.

	Perpetrator Violence	Victim Control	Victim Responsibility
Victim ‘Precipitation’	Victim precipitation associated with increased ratings of perpetrator violence	Victim precipitation associated with increased ratings of victim control	Victim precipitation associated with higher ratings of victim responsibility

Professional attributions: The role of professional variables

- Type of agency was the most salient professional variable associated with attributions.
- Indicative of variations that appear to depend on professional group membership.
- Differences between professionals from the criminal justice, healthcare and welfare systems
- Groups adopted positions that were consistent with their prof background
- Specific DV experience also highly predictive

Study #1 - Findings

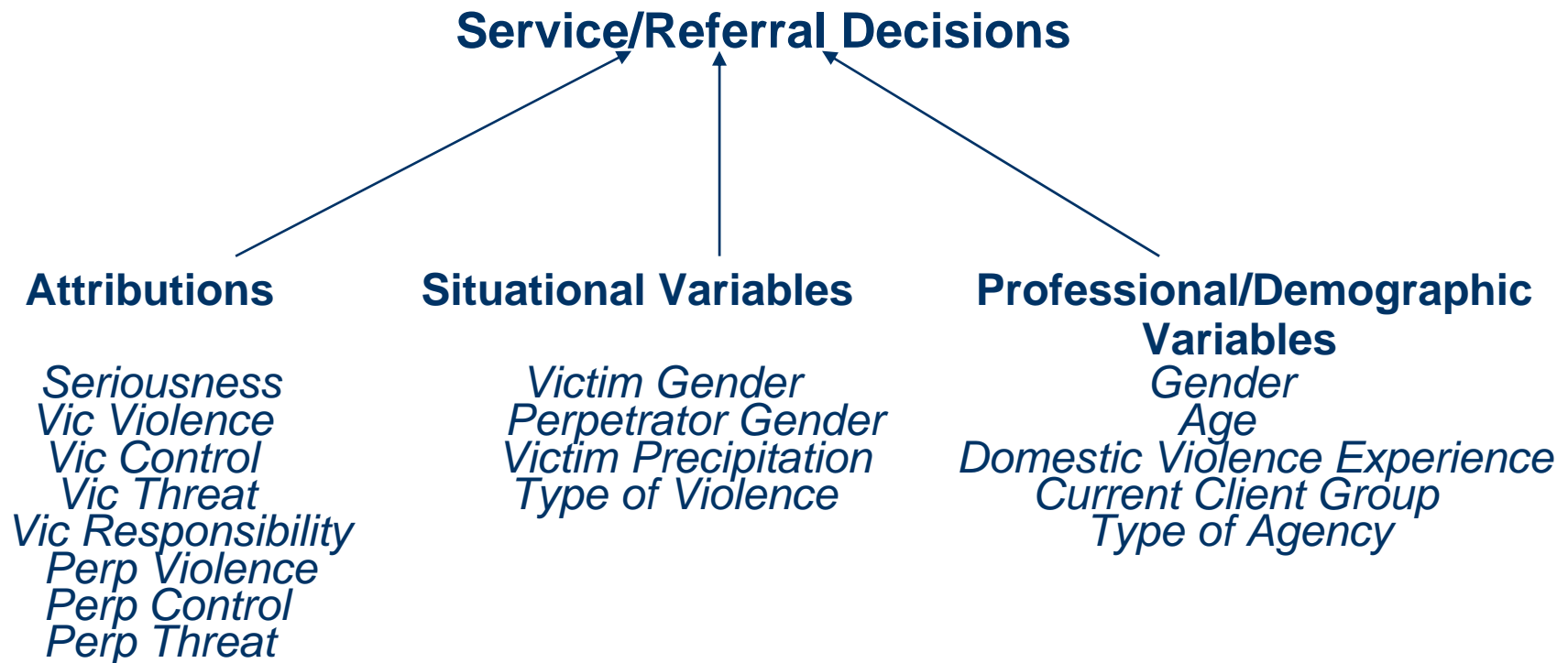


Qualitative data

- Revealed much about the processes of reasoning underlying these often disparate findings.
- Enabled us to ‘theory build’ about the patterns
- In general, prof’s constructed narratives based on their professional (and sometimes personal) experience, and filtered these through one or more broad philosophical positions
- Although quite easily understood, these positions were often based on stereotypes and biases

Reminder – Aim #2

- To examine the relationship between attributions, situational and professional variables and *service/referral decisions*:



Professionals' Service/Referral Decisions

- Service/referral decisions could be broadly categorised into three models:
 - Feminist;
 - Family Systems;
 - Individual.
- Professionals often recommend approaches that were based on more than one theoretical model.



Feminist-based service/referral decisions: Domestic violence services and psychoeducation

- The relationship between attributions, situational and professional/demographic variables and referrals to domestic violence services and the provision of psychoeducation:

	Seriousness	Victim Responsibility	
Domestic violence referrals and psychoeducation	Higher ratings of seriousness associated with an increased likelihood of domestic violence referrals	Higher ratings of victim responsibility associated with decreased likelihood of this service/referral	



CJS involvement

- Police / legal involvement was predicted by:

	Respondent's Age	Type of Agency	Domestic Violence Experience
Criminal Justice system involvement	Prof age was negatively associated with a professionals' likelihood of recommending criminal justice system involvement (older prof's less likely)	Legal practitioners were more likely than counselors to recommend police or legal intervention	Professionals with specific DV experience were more likely to recommend criminal justice system involvement

Family Systems approaches: Relationship counseling

- A common service decision
- The aim of redressing dysfunctional relationship patterns that contributed to the domestic violence.
- There was a polarisation of opinion about the appropriateness of relationship counseling. While it was recommended by the majority of participants, there were also a significant minority who overtly stated that relationship counseling is not appropriate in cases of intimate partner violence.
- In these latter cases, relationship counseling was primarily seen as inappropriate due to issues relating to the unequal distribution of power and victim safety.

Service/referral decisions based on an individual model: Individual counseling

- Individual counseling was the most common service/referral decision for victims and perpetrators of intimate partner violence.
- There were no variables included in the study associated with this intervention decision.
- This indicates that individual counseling is the ‘fall back’ intervention strategy advocated by professionals irrespective of situational and professional factors.

Summary and Implications

In broad terms;

- Wide variation in professional perceptions and responses
- Perceptions and responses predicted by a range of ‘client’ and ‘professional’ factors – some of which were the same
- Some of these patterns raise questions about training and service delivery

Specifically ...

- Professionals not appropriately recognising or responding to atypical situations of domestic violence (e.g. male victim/female perpetrator)
- Male victims being unlikely to be provided with the same supports and services as female victims, and are unlikely to receive equal access to justice or protection.
- Perpetration of violence by females is minimised by professionals and this has implications for both perpetrators and victims
- The victim's behaviour, both pre and post their experiences of violence impacts on professional attitudes.

And....

- Professionals identify a range of intervention options for domestic violence clients, incorporating numerous theoretical models.
- These intervention decisions vary depending on the professional group from whom services are sought (and the indiv worker's direct experience).
- Many professional responses and referral decisions are more influenced by *their own* factors than situational ones
- Huge ramifications for client trajectories, experiences and outcomes

So...

- More *targeted* education and training is needed to reduce stereotypical attitudes towards domestic violence clients.
- A clear need for greater co-ordination, education and training of an array of professional groups.
- But we *first* need evaluative research that tells us about optimum policy.