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## Risk Assessment in Context

by D. Kelly Weisberg

This Special Issue of **Domestic Violence Report** is the first of two issues devoted to the subject of risk assessment. These two issues of **DVR** with Guest Editor Jill Messing explore risk assessment in the context of domestic violence across various settings and substantive areas. Professor Messing and her mentor, Dr. Jacquelyn Campbell, work at the forefront of research on risk assessment, and innovative, collaborative interventions for survivors of domestic violence.

### What Is Risk Assessment?

As a preliminary matter, it is helpful to address the question: What is risk assessment? The field of risk assessment measures characteristics of a person, his or her relationships, and his or her conduct to assess that person's level of dangerousness in order to make better decisions about a variety of issues. In the criminal justice system, risk assessment occurs in many stages of the criminal process including bail, sentencing, probation, and parole. Risk assessment also is considered in treatment decisions for offenders. Many different professionals (including police, prosecutors, judges, and service providers) are called upon to make informed decisions that assess an offender's level of dangerousness. These decisions are useful for two primary purposes: accountability (to gauge the most appropriate punishment) and protection (to safeguard the victim

See *RISK ASSESSMENT CONTEXT*, next page

## The Use of Lethality Assessment in Domestic Violence Cases

by Jill Theresa Messing and Jacquelyn Campbell

Various forms of intimate partner violence (IPV) risk assessment predict different outcomes (re-assault, re-arrest, homicide), are intended to be used within different systems (criminal justice, social service), and require different information to complete (victim interview, offender interview, criminal justice case files).<sup>1</sup> Common IPV risk assessments intended to predict re-assault or re-arrest are the Spousal Assault Risk Assessment (SARA), the Ontario Domestic Assault Risk Assessment (ODARA), the

Domestic Violence Screening Instrument (DVSI), and revisions of each of these (DVSI-R, B-SAFER, DV-RAG).<sup>2</sup> There are also risk assessment tools that have not been developed specifically for IPV cases, such as the Arnold Foundation Public Safety Assessment. And, more recently, machine learning approaches which forecast outcomes (recidivism, no recidivism) without specifying particular risk factors have been used in domestic violence cases.<sup>3</sup>

See *LETHALITY ASSESSMENT*, page 72

## About This Issue . . .

We are pleased to present this special issue on lethality assessment with Jill Messing, Associate Professor in the School of Social Work at Arizona State University, as the Guest Editor. As a social worker and a researcher, she is moving the field forward by testing and developing versions of the Danger Assessment for specific interventions and populations, including culturally appropriate risk assessments.

This issue is dedicated to Jacquelyn Campbell, the developer of the Danger Assessment (see p. 74), a groundbreaking contribution to the field of lethality assessment. The articles in these two special issues demonstrate the impact that her work has had on the field of intimate partner violence, on domestic violence jurisprudence, and on the lives of domestic violence victim-survivors.

D. Kelly Weisberg, Editor, *Domestic Violence Report*

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*LETHALITY ASSESSMENT, from page 69*

A lethality assessment is a type of IPV risk assessment that is intended to predict intimate partner homicide. The Danger Assessment (DA; [www.dangerassessment.org](http://www.dangerassessment.org); see p. 74) is unique in that it is the only IPV risk assessment that is intended to predict lethality and gathers data from only the victim-survivor of violence. Yet, as is demonstrated in this special issue, the reach of the DA is much broader than informing services for victim-survivors. In this issue, for example, we address lethality assessment in the context of civil and criminal court decisions.

We have furthered the research on the DA by examining risk and protective factors for severe and near lethal IPV. Recently, we incorporated multiple strangulation into an 11-item version of the DA called the Danger Assessment for Law Enforcement (DA-LE). Multiple incidents of strangulation are associated with risk factors for homicide and appear to increase risk for attempted homicide over attempted strangulation. The DA-LE was developed in collaboration with the Jeanne Geiger Crisis Center for use with Domestic Violence High Risk Teams (DV-HRT), a risk-informed collaborative intervention that brings together criminal justice and social service practitioners to enhance victim-survivor safety and increase offender accountability. We recently completed a National Institute of Justice funded evaluation of the Lethality Assessment Program (LAP), a risk-informed collaborative intervention that provides high-risk women at the scene of a

police-involved IPV incident with access to telephone advocacy services. We found that the LAP increased women's help-seeking and decreased violent victimization.<sup>4</sup> Through this same study, we found that the Lethality Screen, a shortened version of the DA, has high sensitivity for screening women into the brief risk-informed intervention.<sup>5</sup> We recently received a grant from the National Institutes of Health to create and test culturally competent versions of the DA for immigrant, refugee, and Native American survivors of IPV. Throughout this work, we maintain a focus on the empowerment of women and the well-being of survivors.

Assessing risk, and making practice decisions based on those assessments, should be done within an evidence based practice framework where a risk assessment tool is treated as the best evidence of future risk of re-assault or homicide, and is considered within the context of survivor self-determination and practitioner expertise. Within this framework, IPV interventions should incorporate risk into their design and application to better tailor interventions for survivors. Education and survivors' autonomy are essential components of risk-informed interventions. As risk assessment becomes more common, it is important to recognize that domestic violence is not the same as other crimes and to listen to survivors' assessments of risk and safety in their relationships. When survivors' decision-making is respected, information from risk assessments has the ability to provide women with access to information and resources across the spectrum of

possible decisions that they may make about their intimate relationships.

*End Notes*

1. Messing, J.T. & Thaller, J. (2015). Intimate partner violence risk assessment: A primer for social workers. *British Journal of Social Work*, 45(6), 1804-1820.
2. Messing, J.T. & Thaller, J. (2013). The average predictive validity of intimate partner violence risk assessments. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 28(7), 1537-1558.
3. See Berk, R.A., Sorenson, S.B. & Barnes, G. (2016). Forecasting domestic violence: A machine learning approach to help inform arraignment decisions. *Journal of Empirical Legal Studies*, 13(1), 94-115.
4. Messing, J.T., Campbell, J., Webster, D.W., Brown, S., Patchell, B. & Wilson, J.S. (2015). The Oklahoma lethality assessment study: A quasi-experimental evaluation of the Lethality Assessment Program. *Social Service Review*, 89(3), 499-530.
5. Messing, J.T., Campbell, J., Wilson, J.S., Brown, S., & Patchell, B. (2015, online first). The lethality screen: The predictive validity of an intimate partner violence risk assessment for use by first responders. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*. doi: 10.1177/0886256015585540.

Jill Messing, MSW, Ph.D., is an Associate Professor in the School of Social Work at Arizona State University. She is particularly interested in the use of risk assessment to inform innovative and collaborative interventions for survivors of intimate partner violence. Email: [Jill.Messing@asu.edu](mailto:Jill.Messing@asu.edu).

Jacquelyn Campbell, Ph.D., RN, FAAN, is Professor and Anna D. Wolf Chair at The Johns Hopkins University School of Nursing. She created the Danger Assessment, the only lethality assessment specific to intimate partner violence. She has been the Principal Investigator on 11 major federally funded studies on the prevention of homicide, intimate partner violence, and the physical and mental health consequences of trauma. Email: [jcampbe1@jhu.edu](mailto:jcampbe1@jhu.edu). ■

## DANGER ASSESSMENT

*Jacquelyn C. Campbell, Ph.D., R.N.*  
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Several risk factors have been associated with increased risk of homicides (murders) of women and men in violent relationships. We cannot predict what will happen in your case, but we would like you to be aware of the danger of homicide in situations of abuse and for you to see how many of the risk factors apply to your situation.

Using the calendar, please mark the approximate dates during the past year when you were abused by your partner or ex partner. Write on that date how bad the incident was according to the following scale:

1. Slapping, pushing; no injuries and/or lasting pain
2. Punching, kicking; bruises, cuts, and/or continuing pain
3. "Beating up"; severe contusions, burns, broken bones
4. Threat to use weapon; head injury, internal injury, permanent injury
5. Use of weapon; wounds from weapon

(If **any** of the descriptions for the higher number apply, use the higher number.)

Mark **Yes** or **No** for each of the following. ("He" refers to your husband, partner, ex-husband, ex-partner, or whoever is currently physically hurting you.)

- \_\_\_ 1. Has the physical violence increased in severity or frequency over the past year?
- \_\_\_ 2. Does he own a gun?
- \_\_\_ 3. Have you left him after living together during the past year?  
 3a. (If have *never* lived with him, check here\_\_\_)
- \_\_\_ 4. Is he unemployed?
- \_\_\_ 5. Has he ever used a weapon against you or threatened you with a lethal weapon?  
 (If yes, was the weapon a gun?\_\_\_)
- \_\_\_ 6. Does he threaten to kill you?
- \_\_\_ 7. Has he avoided being arrested for domestic violence?
- \_\_\_ 8. Do you have a child that is not his?
- \_\_\_ 9. Has he ever forced you to have sex when you did not wish to do so?
- \_\_\_ 10. Does he ever try to choke you?
- \_\_\_ 11. Does he use illegal drugs? By drugs, I mean "uppers" or amphetamines, "meth", speed, angel dust, cocaine, "crack", street drugs or mixtures.
- \_\_\_ 12. Is he an alcoholic or problem drinker?
- \_\_\_ 13. Does he control most or all of your daily activities? For instance: does he tell you who you can be friends with, when you can see your family, how much money you can use, or when you can take the car? (If he tries, but you do not let him, check here: \_\_\_)
- \_\_\_ 14. Is he violently and constantly jealous of you? (For instance, does he say "If I can't have you, no one can.")
- \_\_\_ 15. Have you ever been beaten by him while you were pregnant? (If you have never been pregnant by him, check here: \_\_\_)
- \_\_\_ 16. Has he ever threatened or tried to commit suicide?
- \_\_\_ 17. Does he threaten to harm your children?
- \_\_\_ 18. Do you believe he is capable of killing you?
- \_\_\_ 19. Does he follow or spy on you, leave threatening notes or messages, destroy your property, or call you when you don't want him to?
- \_\_\_ 20. Have you ever threatened or tried to commit suicide?
- \_\_\_ Total "Yes" Answers

**Thank you. Please talk to your nurse, advocate or counselor about what the Danger Assessment means in terms of your situation.**



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