



## Reading Research Articles: Information for Non-Academics

*Prepared by Carol E. Jordan, Executive Director  
Office for Policy Studies on Violence Against Women*

### Types of Research Journals and Articles

**THE EXCHANGE** uses research articles from select scientific journals that address intimate partner violence (IPV) or domestic violence, child witnesses to IPV, sexual assault, stalking, and other crimes or violence. The selected journals cover the behavioral and social sciences and public policy and law. The majority of the journals used for **THE EXCHANGE** are copyrighted, meaning that the author of an article is required to transfer the copyright to the journal publisher. More recently, a growing number of journals are so-called “open access” meaning that an author retains the copyright to the article.

Traditionally, journals in the behavioral and social sciences publish two main types of scientific articles, original research and reviews of already published studies. Both are included in **THE EXCHANGE**. There are other types of articles found in scientific journals, including theoretical articles, articles on research methodology, and articles that describe specific case studies. While valuable, those are less likely to be included in **THE EXCHANGE** as our focus is on practical or applied research that can be of most assistance to practitioners.

- *Original Research* includes studies that report findings from new research. They are classified as “primary literature.”
- *Review Articles* analyze or discuss research previously published by others on a specific subject area rather than reporting new experimental results. Because they focus on providing a synthesis of existing research, they are classified as “secondary literature.”

Scientific articles are usually peer-reviewed (or refereed) before they are published, meaning that they are independently reviewed by other academics in the field. When reviewing articles or manuscripts for potential publication, peer reviewers typically consider whether the study makes a significant contribution, whether it accurately represents and builds upon existing literature, whether legitimate research methods and appropriate samples were used, and whether the manuscript is written in a clear and concise way to communicate the study findings. In order to ensure an unbiased critique or review, many peer-reviews are “blind” reviews, meaning that the reviewer does not know the identity of the author.

### Human Subjects Protections

An important part of any research study is the emphasis on protecting the rights, welfare, and wellbeing of the individuals who participate in research (called participants or subjects). A number of federal regulations govern

the actions of researchers and the treatment of study participants (e.g., [34 CFR 97.102(f)(1) and (2)]). The federal government has identified particular populations of study participants who are considered special or who may be uniquely at-risk. They include children, pregnant women, persons with mental disabilities, and persons under the control of the justice system (i.e., persons who are incarcerated, jailed, or on probation/parole). Universities whose faculty conduct research that involves human subjects operate so-called Institutional Review Boards made up of other researchers who can closely analyze and approve/disapprove research protocols to ensure that all aspects of human subjects protections are guaranteed.

Human subjects protections are particularly important when research is conducted in the violence against women area as studies need to avoid retraumatizing victims and survivors; and must keep the safety of that population paramount when decisions are made about research methodologies, confidentiality, and related items. Professionals with expertise in working with survivors can provide exceptional perspective and guidance to researchers who are engaging in research in this field.

### **The Structure of Research Manuscripts: What You'll See**

- *Abstract:* the abstract is a summary paragraph that appears at the beginning of a journal article. The abstract describes the primary purpose of the study or what problem was investigated, the types of participants or sample used, the experimental method employed, and the key findings that resulted. In the case of review articles which focus on all relevant existing literature, not just one new study, the abstract also includes the theoretical construct or idea around which studies will be described or organized. Advocates and practitioners are cautioned not to read just the abstract in order to understand the study results, because abstracts rarely mention any limitations to the study, they report only key findings, and the brevity of the paragraph (typically 120 words) may tend to provide an overly optimistic read of the study and what was found.
- *Introduction:* the earliest section of a journal article (which may or may not be labeled as the introduction) states the problem addressed and provides a review of the extant (existing) literature related to the topic being studied. It may also be described as the literature review. After reviewing related studies, a literature review should highlight the gaps or weaknesses in the literature, and then explain how the current study fills those empirical gaps in knowledge. The section following the literature review should set forth the specific aims or research questions to be asked. In other words, what is the primary purpose of the study and what will it attempt to answer?
- *Method Section:* The methods section of a journal article describes the sample in the study (e.g.: women seeking protective shelter in an urban domestic violence program) and how the subjects were recruited into the study. It should also define key concepts or words (e.g.: for the purpose of this study, stalking is defined as...). Methods sections also spell out the specific experimental design used (e.g.: random assignment of subjects to groups), the methods of data collection (e.g.: type of survey instrument used), and the methods for statistical analysis of the data.

While advocates and practitioners do not need to become experts in research design in order to benefit from a journal article, a basic understanding of this section of an article can give clues to whether the study findings are valid and useful for practice. For example, by looking at who the participants in the study are, you can tell to whom the results of the study might apply (i.e.: generalizability). Would you believe the findings of a study on women's health if the sample was men? What should you say about a study of the impact of domestic violence when the study was limited to women who seek protective

shelter (women who seek shelter may be different than the general population of battered women in a community). Importantly, results of a study only apply to samples with similar characteristics. Professionals and advocates can also consider whether the investigators are using legitimate questionnaires that are scientifically validated (this should be described in the article).

- *Results:* The results section of a journal article summarizes the findings of the data collection and the way in which the data were statistically analyzed.
- *Discussion:* The discussion section highlights the significance of the findings, particularly in the context about what is already known about the topic being studied (i.e.: the existing literature). This section describes whether the data answered the research questions that were asked. The discussion should also identify limitations of the study (e.g., this study cannot be generalized to all rape victims because only those being served by a rape crisis center were studied). Discussion sections also identify questions which need to be answered by future research.
- *Implications for Policy and Practice:* Some journals are now requiring authors to set forth the primary implications of their studies as they relate to policy and practice (e.g., *Trauma, Violence & Abuse*).
- *Conclusion:* The closing section of the journal article should restate the purpose of the study and primary empirical (or scientific, verifiable) questions that were asked, and should restate the most significant findings. The concluding paragraph of a journal article should aid the reader in understanding the significance of the study in contributing to the base of knowledge about the subject.
- *References:* The reference section is generally an alphabetized list of all the academic sources of information utilized in the paper. That specifically includes all research studies cited in the paper, or other sources of data or information. The format of the references will match the format and style used in the paper, often guided by the format developed by the American Psychological Association (APA).