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## Poetic licence to write resistance: women resisting intimate partner violence through poetry

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The poetry therapy programme discussed describes work alongside members of a rural women's support group addressing intimate partner violence. This approach contributes to social work theory/practice by expanding understandings of how women resist violence and affirms a tenet of Response-Based Practice: 'alongside each history of violence there runs a parallel history of prudent, determined, and often creative resistance' (Wade, 1997: 23). This approach to creative group-based work supports 'positive social responses' to women resisting intimate partner violence, expanding the ways in which social workers can respond to survivors of violence (Richardson and Wade, 2009: 209). Subtle and safer responses to violence are undervalued by dominant therapeutic practices. Response-Based Practice maintains that violence is resisted on a spectrum and that less noticeable forms of resistance are well reasoned and maintain dignity. This article describes how combining poetry therapy with Response-Based Practice can disrupt notions of resistance as solely outwardly expressed and large-action-oriented.

**key words** Response-Based Practice • poetry therapy • interdisciplinary and collaborative social science research • group work • intimate partner violence

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### Foreword

We wish to express gratitude to the remarkable women who participated in the poetry therapy groups described in this article. These participants, as well as other people resisting violence, continually inspire us and support us to grow our collaborative anti-violence theory and practice. We are deeply grateful for the important work of the Response-Based

Practice Dignity Team of practitioners/social justice activists (see Centre for Response-Based Practice, 2018).

The article title – ‘Poetic licence to write resistance: women resisting intimate partner violence through poetry’ – was chosen to recognise and name the work done in the poetry therapy group in a reflexive way. The ‘positive social responses’ – affirming responses to victims of violence and oppression – shared in the poetry therapy programme were collaborative and group-created (Richardson and Wade, 2009: 209). While group facilitation utilised Response-Based Practice, it is important to note that the theories and practices became a shared language among everyone in the group. The clichéd phrase ‘poetic licence’ is meant to bring attention to how group members addressed a gap between what they know and do to resist violence and how these actions are often dominantly constructed and recuperated as somehow not enough, and/or how their resistance is made invisible. The use of ‘poetic licence’ is meant to centre affirming responses to and to acknowledge the processes of what women always already know and do to resist violence. The validity of creativity in resistance to violence is centred and invoked by the word ‘licence’. We use this to disrupt dominant notions surrounding the meanings of the word ‘licence’ in favour of expanding the restriction in the word ‘licence’ to describe fluid, creative poetic resistance. Simultaneously, we invoke the clichéd meaning of ‘poetic licence’ to reveal and disrupt the dominant discourses that construct creative and spectral – specifically, more subtle or less noticeable or outward – resistance to violence as hyperbole, fiction and/or irrelevant to the ‘real’ (or more noticeable) work of specific kinds of dominantly sanctioned resistance. This article title is meant to operationalise Response-Based Practice at the site of language to reveal resistance and re-signify what is dominantly constructed and ‘known’ about how women resist intimate partner violence (Coates and Wade, 2007).

## Introduction

In this article, we<sup>1</sup> overview the approach and methodology of a poetry therapy programme and focus on the qualitative research results of the programme approach.<sup>2</sup> We summarise key concepts of Response-Based Practice to provide a scaffold for the poetry therapy programme research data. We then recount the research methods, offer analysis on the advantages of interdisciplinary teamwork, describe the women’s support group that participants for the poetry therapy group were recruited from and describe how these groups were bridged. We include and analyse pre-poetry therapy programme qualitative data and provide a brief overview of how Mazza and Hayton’s (2013) poetry therapy modalities correspond to Response-Based Practice ideas. We conclude with post-poetry therapy programme participant responses and link this feedback to the contribution offered by combining Response-Based Practice and poetry therapy.

The qualitative data included and analysed in this article are from a multi-year poetry therapy programme and longitudinal research study designed to investigate the efficacy of a co-facilitative poetry therapy curriculum in eliciting awareness of inner strengths (Dubrasky et al., 2019). This article specifically looks at how members of a rural women’s support group utilised poetry to resist intimate partner violence.

The eight-week women’s poetry therapy group was comprised of women who were recruited from a weekly psycho-educational women’s support group composed of women resisting – pushing back against and healing from – intimate partner violence. The poetry therapy group was a supplemental group co-facilitated by a professional poet and licensed