

# About Response Based Ideas

Linda Coates, PhD & Allan Wade, PhD

Ideas are like people. Some are young and fresh. Others are tested and time worn. Some are refined. Others are rough and controversial. Some are irreverent and open space for dialogue. Others dress up as truth and demand loyalty. Ideas belong to a context and grow through interaction.

In this document we describe our relationship to the set of ideas and methods we call “response-based practice.” (The “we” in this context refers to the original working group, Linda Coates, Nick Todd and Allan Wade.) This is not an academic paper, however. Rather, we try to convey the social context and purpose of our work, the development of ideas over time, their application in diverse settings, some recent and useful influences, and important questions that remain.

No description of this kind can be complete. We cannot do justice to more than twenty years of conversations with colleagues and friends. Nor can we properly acknowledge the clients who have shared their experience with us over the years. With gratitude, we apologize in advance for any and all omissions.

We did not start out hoping to develop a model—response-based practice—and still have mixed feelings about giving our practice a name. A set of ideas with a name too easily becomes orthodoxy, or mere technique, and then property to be owned, promoted and defended. This is the death knell of open enquiry.

We knew only that we wanted to be better therapists and researchers, make some sort of difference, join colleagues in the pursuit of interesting ideas, support our families while enjoying and finding purpose in our work, and have some fun together as friends and colleagues. This attitude is an immense privilege. Initially, we did not identify the work as a social justice project, even though we worked primarily in cases of violence and injustice.

At least Nick and Allan did not identify the work as a social justice project: Linda always did.

Still, in some ways, the experience of developing response-based practice has been more like fumbling in a dark room, semi-conscious, crashing first into the coffee table, then the sofa and pole lamp, while forming a working map from missteps and dim outlines. Now that we can better glimpse the relation of one object to another-or think we can-we can ignore the fumbling about and present the process as the neat and tidy-and logical-progression of ideas.

There is some truth to this grand narrative, though, which is why it persists. Properly used, the logic of free enquiry, of "if-then" thinking, forces a person to keep asking questions. For example: "If resistance to violence is ever-present... then what?" Or, "If violence is with rare exceptions deliberate... then what?" What follows from these propositions; what other questions arise?

Unlike people, though, ideas live across generations and in many locations at once. None of us is the first to fumble about in the dark, semi-conscious, trying to make sense of things. Response-based practice builds on and creatively integrates the work of many others, present and past.

To begin, we turn to systemic and interactional ideas.

In 1991, Linda and Allan were working together at the University of Victoria on microanalysis of face-to-face interaction and critical discourse analysis of language in cases of violence. Linda was working as a researcher and doing some therapy. Allan was working as a therapist and doing some research. Nick was working as a therapist at the Men's Counselling Service attached to the Calgary Women's Emergency Shelter, primarily with men who had been abusive.

So, from the outset, we integrated practice with research and critical analysis.

Allan had worked in corrections, child protection, addictions, youth work and other settings. In 1983, Robin Routledge moved to the Duncan area, on Vancouver Island, and introduced Allan and others to the work of the Milan team and, through the Milan team, the work of the Palo Alto Group and Mental Research Institute (MRI). For Allan and others who joined the Nemo group, the systemic family therapy of the Milan team and larger set of systemic ideas were truly revolutionary.

We formed a small group called Nemo (Latin for "no name") to study systemic ideas, led by Robin. Nemo held several one-week seminars at a ramshackle inn on Shawnigan Lake, with Luigi Boscolo and Gianfranco Cecchin, and then with Lyn Hoffman. We then formalized the group as a private society under a new name, the Orcas Society.

Over the next ten years or so, the Orcas Society hosted training by Imelda McCarthy and Nollaig Byrne of the Fifth Province Associates, Michael White, Alan Jenkins, Bonnie Burstow the Just Therapy team, and Insoo Kim Berg and Steve de Shazer.

These events gave us the chance to meet and learn from leaders in the family therapy field and made money to fund smaller training events that were truly accessible to people on low income. In particular, we developed a series of events under the

general heading "Violence, Language, and Responsibility," as a platform for less known therapists and academics to discuss the connection between violence and language.

Allan was the most directly involved in these events, as a member of the Orcas Society, but Nick and Linda also attended several events.

We shared several key interests:

- Close analysis of interaction, especially in cases of violence
- Language in colonial discourse and in therapy
- The functional links between colonialism and western mental health traditions
- Developing effective responses to violence through therapy, research advocacy and analysis
- Brief, systemic, collaborative, feminist, and other social justice informed therapies.

We also shared the view that academic and professional views of victims and perpetrators of violence were too monadic (individualistic and psychological) and lacked appreciation of social interaction and social context.