

Arts-based research deepens understanding of intimate partner violence in pregnancy

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Western nursing professor Kimberley Jackson stands with a ceramic mosaic created to reflect research findings and to promote a deeper understanding of the benefits trauma- and violence-informed care brings to pregnant women who've experienced intimate partner violence. Credit: Kim McCready/Faculty of Health Sciences

A study led by Western nursing professor Kimberley Jackson shows the power of arts-based research to relay scientific findings and raise

awareness about a pervasive public health concern: intimate partner violence (IPV) and, specifically, IPV in pregnancy.

The project stems from a 2018 [intervention study](#) in which Jackson and health studies professor Tara Mantler studied the effectiveness of a trauma- and violence- informed (TVIC) care program for pregnant women who have experienced [intimate partner violence](#).

Results of the study were positive. Through cognitive behavioral therapy, participants learned more effective coping skills and experienced improved mental health. They felt better able to mother because of the "breakthrough moments" that came through the "life altering" program.

While those comments alone were heartening, Jackson said she and her team felt "morally charged to amplify and share the results in a more accessible and interesting way—not only to academics but to lay audiences."

Working with Brock university professor Sheila O'Keefe-McCarthy, Jackson conducted a secondary analysis of the data using an arts-based health research approach, integrating visual art, thematic poetry and performance to analyze, interpret and report qualitative data.

"An arts-informed methodology comes with an explicit intent to reach an audience, to mobilize the works of art to create [social awareness](#) in a way that's going to inspire positive change," Jackson said. "Sometimes conventional research methods can perpetuate notions causing stigma around this issue. We needed something to break that convention and seek a more empathetic understanding."

The team presented their findings in the [paper](#) "'Breaking through the Brokenness': An Arts-Based Qualitative Exploration of Pregnant Women's Experience of Intimate Partner Violence while Receiving

Trauma- and Violence-Informed Antenatal Care", recently published in *Creative Nursing*.

Raising awareness, evoking empathy through art

The project involved four key phrases.

First, O'Keefe-McCarthy analyzed transcripts of women describing their experiences throughout the TVIC program to create four themes and four poems: Black Deep Corners, Triggering my Thoughts, Breaking through the Brokenness and Now Perfectly Imperfect.

Local artists then created pieces of work based on a theme that resonated with them.

All the paintings—from one showing a hearty grove of aspen trees that overcame the [harsh conditions](#) in Saskatchewan to another depicting the Japanese tradition (Kintsugi) of repairing broken pottery with gold—reflected resilience and empowerment.

"We didn't guide the artists, but all their works came out showing strength, which was the underlying theme," said Jackson.

The poem Breaking Through The Brokenness inspired one artist to create a mosaic of broken ceramics.

"The mom has the baby at her breast and she's nurturing. There's a lot of little broken things about her, but the sun is beaming through the window and it's colorful. There's hope," Jackson said.

The art was then displayed at a special knowledge mobilization event, attended by academics, medical practitioners, IPV service providers, students and the public.

"We clustered the art according to the themes, which walked the audience through this healing journey — starting off feeling very broken, moving on to hope and empowerment," Jackson said.

A masked orator recited the poetry in theatrical form, adding another level of emotion to the exhibit, which drew an "overwhelming positive" response from the audience.

"Their reactions were profound," Jackson said. "Some students said they couldn't believe data could be translated in this way and were quite inspired to know there's more to knowledge dissemination than just papers and conferences."

The artwork will make its international debut this November at the Nursing Network on Violence Against Women conference in Phuket, Thailand.

Next steps, new study: The Art of Mothering

Jackson said more research is required to better understand the ripple effects arts-integrated research may have in engaging individuals across disciplines to make positive policy changes.

She and Mantler recently completed a follow-up study called The Art of Mothering, a new project in which [pregnant women](#) experiencing IPV created works of art to represent their individual experiences of motherhood.

"I'm really excited to share those results," Jackson said, energized by the novel approach of arts-based research and its power to cultivate empathy through visual and compelling narratives.

"We want people to be aware that intimate partner violence happens, and

that it is particularly problematic for childbearing women. We also want to help destigmatize it. The more we talk about it, the more people understand it, the less stigma there will be. We hope that will encourage women to seek out help and do what they need to do to have fulfilling lives."

More information: Kimberley T. Jackson et al, "Breaking through the Brokenness": An Arts-Based Qualitative Exploration of Pregnant Women's Experience of Intimate Partner Violence while Receiving Trauma- and Violence-Informed Antenatal Care, *Creative Nursing* (2024). [DOI: 10.1177/10784535241256872](https://doi.org/10.1177/10784535241256872)

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