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The Essence of Therapeutic Relationships in Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy

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Abstract

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MS, Walden University, 2013

BA, University of Montana, 2003

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

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Abstract

Traditional psychotherapeutic approaches are not always effective in alleviating psychological symptoms and improving functioning in young adults. Equine-assisted psychotherapy (EAP) has been shown as a beneficial alternative therapeutic method developed for clients not helped by traditional methods. However, the essence of the therapeutic relationship that develops between the client, horse, therapist, and equine specialist has not been explored. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the lived experience of the therapeutic relationship in young adults who participated in EAP. The frameworks of person-centered theory and self psychology guided the development of interview questions, data analysis, and interpretation. Four participants ages 23-38 who had participated in EAP within the past 2 years were interviewed remotely and data were analyzed using methods consistent with phenomenological methodology. Key themes of clients' relationship with the horse, therapist, and equine specialist included feeling understood, accepted, comforted, and safe. The relationship with the horse was foundational to the relationships with the therapist and equine specialist. Further, horses provided the Rogerian necessary and sufficient conditions of empathy, positive regard, and genuineness. In addition, as viewed through the theoretical framework of self psychology, horses served as mirroring, idealizing, and twinship selfobjects for participants. Applications for positive social change include contributing to the development of best practices for EAP providers and increasing awareness and certification in EAP among mental health professionals.

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Dedication

To Diamond Willow, Running Elk, Winter, Wildfire, White Cloud, Raindance,

and Viking, beautiful Nez Perce Appaloosa horses, who provided unending inspiration

for this project. And to my sons, James and Jeremy, for their unfailing support and love.

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I owe a debt of gratitude to Walden University, and to all of the amazing professors from whom I have learned over the years. Without their support, expertise, and mentoring, I would never have attempted to earn a doctorate.

Finally, I would like to thank my grandmother, who insisted that I could achieve any goal I set for myself in life, and whose unfailing encouragement and pride in my academic achievements set me down this path from a very young age. Her shining face has been the light guiding me forward when it seemed that this process would never end.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Since Eysenck's (1952) seminal investigation of the effectiveness of psychotherapy, a significant body of research evidence has demonstrated that psychotherapy results in improvements in presenting symptoms and general functioning (Lambert & Vermeersch, 2002; Seligman, 1995). Meta-analytic reviews have demonstrated that these improvements result for most presenting issues and populations and with all theoretical approaches to psychotherapy, with effect sizes consistently in the range of .80 (Smith et al., 1980; Wampold, 2019). Additionally, extensive research efforts have focused on studying the psychotherapeutic factors contributing to positive outcomes; results have underscored the vital importance of a strong therapeutic relationship (Horvath & Symonds, 1991; Saunders, 2000). However, some client populations do not improve after psychotherapy (Bachi, 2012; Smith & Jensen-Doss, 2017; Walker & Baird, 2019). In recent years, increasing scientific attention has been focused on the study of alternative approaches to psychotherapy to help clients for whom traditional therapeutic approaches are ineffective, including veterans, prison inmates, youth, and young adults (Bachi, 2012; Kemp et al., 2014). These alternative treatments include experiential therapy, dance and movement therapy, and animal-assisted therapy (Masini, 2012).

Equine-assisted psychotherapy (EAP), a specific type of animal-assisted therapy utilizing horses, is one approach that has been growing rapidly over the past 3 decades (Bachi, 2012). EAP is a brief, experiential therapy in which horses act as the focal point in a treatment team consisting also of a licensed mental health professional and an equine

specialist. In this approach, the client, horse, equine specialist, and therapist form a diamond of relationships, adding to the complexity of the therapy (McCullough et al., 2015; Thomas & Lytle, 2016). There is increasing empirical support for the efficacy of this approach for diverse populations and presenting issues, with results including decreased symptoms of depression, anxiety, and aggression and improved self-esteem and social skills (Lentini & Knox, 2015). However, many scholars have indicated the need for more rigorous, methodologically sound research studies on EAP, and a richer, more detailed understanding of the mechanisms of change operating in EAP to affect these positive outcomes (Bachi, 2012; Kemp et al., 2014; Lentini & Knox, 2015; Schultz et al., 2007; Selby & Smith-Osborne, 2013). This study was an attempt to expand understanding of EAP, and ultimately to improve access to EAP for those clients who may be the most difficult to engage and whose mental health issues may be the most resistant to traditional psychotherapeutic approaches to treatment (see Nilsen et al., 2015)

In the following sections of this chapter, I provide a brief overview of the research literature, define the problem statement and purpose for the study, and delineate the research questions. Then I identify and describe the conceptual framework that informed the study, explain the nature of the study, and provide definitions of terms used in this paper. The chapter closes with a discussion of the assumptions, scope and delimitations, limitations, and significance of the study.

Background

The informal practice of animal-assisted psychotherapy has existed for many years. Sigmund Freud's dog accompanied him in his sessions with clients where he

commented on the animal's behavior, connecting it to clients' emotional states (Bachi & Parish-Plass, 2017). Boris Levinson (1962), a child psychologist, wrote about the bonds formed between humans and animals and the efficacy of these bonds to facilitate healing in therapy, thus pioneering the field of animal-assisted psychotherapy. Scientific research has revealed the therapeutic benefits of human-animal interactions, including decreased anxiety, social isolation, blood pressure and cortisol levels; increased beta endorphins and dopamine production; and enhanced emotional and cognitive functioning (Bachi & Parish-Plass, 2017; Odendall & Meintjes, 2003; Strand, 2001). Although research on animal-assisted therapy has lagged behind research on human-companion animal interactions, the existing research is promising. There is considerable evidence that the presence of an animal in therapy facilitates the development of the therapeutic relationship and results in decreased anxiety and improved therapeutic outcomes (Bachi & Parish-Plass, 2017; Balluerka et al., 2015; Zilcha-Mano, 2017).

EAP is a therapeutic intervention that falls underneath the larger umbrella of animal-assisted psychotherapy. McCormick and McCormick (1997) wrote about the powerful healing benefits horses bring to the therapeutic milieu. Kemp et al. (2014) suggested that the horse-human therapeutic bond can provide a corrective emotional experience and a bridge to attachment with the therapist for difficult-to-engage clients. Selby and Smith-Osborne (2012) conducted a meta-analysis of 14 quantitative studies of EAP and found that overall, there is strong evidence for the efficacy of EAP; however, they described a need for more rigorous research with diverse populations and longitudinal studies. Wake (2014) conducted a study of EAP practitioners and concluded

that while EAP is a promising alternative intervention for at-risk youth and other

difficult-to-treat populations, there is a lack of knowledge of this modality. In summary,

the current scientific literature on EAP simultaneously demonstrates its efficacy and

points to the need for more extensive and rigorous research.

Problem Statement

There is a recognized need for alternative therapeutic interventions to engage

clients for whom traditional psychotherapy is ineffective (Bachi, 2012; Kemp et al.,

2014; Smith & Jensen-Doss, 2017; Walker & Baird, 2019). There is evidence

demonstrating that treatment as usual is ineffective for many older youth and young

adults (Manteuffel et al., 2008; Nilsen et al., 2015; Smith & Jensen-Doss, 2017; Warren

et al., 2012). Manteuffel et al. (2008) studied 8,484 youth ages 14-22 years with serious

mental illness. These researchers utilized a reliable change index to analyze data from a

national database evaluating community-based outpatient mental health services, and

found that on average, 36% of the youth improved, 50% showed no reliable change, and

14% had deteriorated after treatment. In addition, the results demonstrated that youth 18-

22 were more likely to live in poverty and with fewer social supports, had more severe

substance use and conduct disorders, were less likely to access mental health services,

and showed less improvement in functioning and symptoms after therapy than younger

youth (Manteuffel et al., 2008). In another study utilizing a large, naturalistic database

showing outcomes for youth receiving treatment in a community mental health setting,

Warren et al. (2012) found that 31.6% of youth in community settings utilizing evidence-

based treatments showed no reliable change in symptoms or functioning, 24.1%

deteriorated, while 27.5% showed improvement and 16.8% recovered. Similarly, in a study of outcomes for 84 adolescents with mood disorders receiving outpatient therapy in community mental health centers in Norway, Nilsen et al. (2015) found that only a small percentage of youth showed clinically and statistically significant improvement in symptoms and functioning, and a small percentage demonstrated worsening of symptoms and functioning.

Young adults ages 16 to 25 years are transitioning into adulthood, and as a group they experience the highest levels of stress and mental health issues (Manteuffel et al., 2008). Young adults are also the age group least likely to seek mental health services and the most likely to terminate treatment prematurely due to the lack of engaging and developmentally appropriate treatment (Manteuffel et al., 2008; Walker & Baird, 2019). There is an urgent need to develop effective mental health treatment for this population (Nilsen et al., 2015; Smith & Jensen-Doss, 2017). Research has shown that the most effective treatment approaches for young adults are client-directed, strengths-based, and focus on the clients' perspectives and priorities (Walker & Baird, 2019).

EAP is an experiential treatment approach that incorporates client-directed practices focusing on client strengths, perspectives, and solutions (Thomas & Lytle, 2016). The evidence supporting the efficacy of EAP for diverse client populations with varied mental health diagnoses is promising. For example, several meta-analyses found that participation in EAP resulted in decreased symptoms of depression, anxiety, and externalizing behaviors, and in improved social skills, self-esteem, and self-efficacy in children and adolescents (Lentini & Knox, 2015; Schultz et al., 2007; Selby & Smith-

Osborne, 2013). Lentini and Knox (2015) found empirical support for the use of EAP

with children and adolescents, particularly at-risk youths and children with Autism

Spectrum Disorder. However, they and other researchers have noted the need for more

rigorous, methodologically sound research studies on EAP. They cited the need to

develop a richer, more detailed understanding of EAP in order to arrive at a consensus

regarding best practices for EAP and to ensure the well-being of clients (Bachi, 2012;

Kemp et al., 2014; Lentini & Knox, 2015; Selby & Smith-Osborne, 2013).

Current scientific research has revealed the importance of the therapeutic

relationship in effecting positive change in psychotherapy (Horvath & Symonds, 1991;

Saunders, 2000). Research has also highlighted the central role of the human-horse

relationship in creating positive outcomes in EAP (Bachi, 2012; Chardonnens, 2009;

York et al., 2008). However, no studies have focused on the therapeutic relationships in

EAP. Furthermore, there is an urgent need to improve mental health services for young

adults, for whom treatment as usual is ineffective. Researchers have not examined the

experiences of young adults who have participated in EAP. Initially, this study attempted

to address this gap by exploring the lived experience of the therapeutic relationship in

young adults ages 18-25 who have participated in EAP. However, data collection

procedures did not go according to plan and thus the age range was expanded. This

change is detailed in Chapter 4.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the lived experience

of the therapeutic relationship in young adults who participated in EAP.

Research Questions

Central Question

Research Question (RQ): What is the lived experience of the therapeutic relationships in young adults who participated in EAP?

Subquestions

Subquestion 1 (SQ1): What is the essence and meaning of the therapeutic relationship with the horse?

Subquestion 2 (SQ2): What is the essence and meaning of the therapeutic relationship with the therapist?

Subquestion 3 (SQ3): What is the essence and meaning of the therapeutic relationship with the equine specialist?

Exploring the essence of a phenomenon is consistent with Husserl's (1931) description of the intent of phenomenological investigations and is defined as the universal or common ingredients or quality of a phenomenon, without which it would not be what it is. These subquestions informed the interview guide development and analysis plan to explore the essence and meanings of the relationships among client, horse, therapist, and equine specialist.

Conceptual Framework

The primary phenomenon of interest for this study was the lived experience of the therapeutic relationships in EAP. A conceptual lens and a theoretical framework were utilized to illuminate this phenomenon. The conceptual lens utilized was person-centered theory (P-CT). The concepts embodied in Rogers' (1957) theory, discussed in detail in

Chapter 2, are empathy, positive regard, and genuineness. Rogers theorized that these three elements comprise the necessary and sufficient conditions to catalyze therapeutic change in a relationship. In addition, this study employed the theoretical framework of self psychology (Kohut, 1971) to further explore the phenomenon of therapeutic relationships in EAP. In this theory, also analyzed in greater detail in Chapter 2, *selfobjects* are persons, ideas, animals, things, or experiences that meet human psychological needs. These needs are encapsulated in three selfobject types or functions: mirroring, idealizing, and twinship (Brown, 2004; Kohut, 1971) Thus, P-CT and self psychology, and the six key elements derived from them, were utilized to inform the development of interview questions posed to the participants about their experience of therapeutic relationships with the horse, therapist, and equine specialist during their participation in EAP. During data analysis, P-CT and self psychology were consulted in the interpretation of results.

Nature of the Study

This phenomenological study started with the ontological assumption that there is no objective reality to be investigated. Rather, the reality of an object, or phenomenon, can only be known through the conscious perceptions, meanings, and interpretations of individuals who have experienced the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). A phenomenological approach was selected as the research methodology for this study because it sought a deep, rich understanding of the lived experience of therapeutic relationships in EAP. This study sought participants with diverse backgrounds who had all experienced EAP to elucidate their unique experiences and to discover the universal

essence of therapeutic relationships in EAP. Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants who had experienced EAP within 2 years prior to the interview. Data were collected through remote, semistructured interviews by me. Transcribed interviews were then analyzed utilizing Moustakas' data analysis methods.

Definitions

In order to provide the reader with a clear understanding, some key terms used in this doctoral dissertation need to be defined.

Animal-Assisted Therapy or AAT, was defined as a goal-directed intervention facilitated by a trained professional practitioner with the inclusion of animals (dogs, cats, birds, horses, etc.) into the therapeutic process with the goal of improving social, emotional, or cognitive functioning of the client (Fine, 2015).

Essence, as the concept is used in transcendental phenomenology, was defined as the universal or common ingredients or quality of a phenomenon, without which it would not be what it is (Husserl, 1931).

Equine-Assisted Growth and Learning Association, or EAGALA is the professional organization developed in 1999 that provides oversight, standards, licensing, and structure for equine-assisted therapy and learning. EAGALA utilizes a model of EAP which includes a mental health professional, an equine specialist, one or more horses, and the client ("What is EAGALA?," n.d.). The focus in this model is on groundwork exercises and interactions with horses, without a riding component (Wake, 2014).

Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP) is the term used by EAGALA practitioners to indicate the inclusion of the horse in experiential psychotherapy. Unmounted exercises

are utilized under the direction of a licensed mental health professional and an equine specialist to assist clients with working toward mutually established treatment goals. This term was utilized throughout this review to denote the use of the use horse as an adjunct to psychotherapy.

Equine-Facilitated Psychotherapy (EFP) is the term utilized by PATH Intl. practitioners to refer to the incorporation of a horse into the therapeutic process along with a horse expert and under the direction of a mental health professional. EFP includes both mounted and unmounted activities and thus is a more inclusive term (Wake, 2014)

Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship International (PATH Intl.) was formerly known as the North American Riding for the Handicapped Association. PATH Intl. is an organization that oversees various equine-facilitated activities and therapies to address both physical and mental health needs. This organization also provides professional oversight and standards for practitioners (Wake, 2014).

Assumptions

Phenomenology assumes that there is no objective reality or truth to be studied. Rather, the reality of a phenomenon can only be found through the perceptions, meanings, and interpretations of the unique individuals who have experienced it (Moustakas, 1994). More specifically, assumptions inherent in this phenomenological study were that participants had directly experienced EAP, that their memory of the experience was intact, and that they were able and willing to share deeply and insightfully enough to produce thick, rich descriptions of the experience. Finally, an

important assumption was that I had preconceptions about the phenomenon, the participants, and the results, that could potentially bias the methods and outcomes. Moustakas (1994) described the process of "bracketing" these preconceptions while collecting and analyzing data as part of a larger strategy to identify and minimize researcher bias.

Scope and Delimitations

The macro research problem involved the need to develop and to increase knowledge about effective, alternative treatment approaches to improve outcomes for those who do not respond well to traditional therapeutic approaches, specifically young adults. Among other alternative treatment approaches, EAP was selected for this study due to the growing body of evidence supporting its efficacy for difficult-to-treat client populations with varied mental health diagnoses (Bachi, 2012; Kemp et al., 2014; Lentini & Knox, 2015; Schultz et al., 2007; Selby & Smith-Osborne, 2013). Many researchers have pointed out the need for scientifically rigorous, methodologically sound studies to increase knowledge of the mechanisms of change operating in EAP (Bachi, 2012; Lentini & Knox, 2015; Selby & Smith-Osborne, 2013). Although much research has demonstrated the important role of the human-horse relationship in EAP, there were no studies exploring this and other relationships in EAP. This study included adults who had experienced relationships in EAP within the 2 years prior to being interviewed. This focus excluded children and adolescents, older adults, and those whose participation in EAP did not occur within the past 2 years. These decisions were made based on the literature review (see Lentini & Knox, 2015; Selby & Smith-Osborne, 2012).

Finally, the study utilized the conceptual lens of Rogers' P-CT and a theoretical framework of self psychology. These theories were selected based on their applicability to the research questions; specifically, both of these theories provided well-developed frameworks to guide the exploration of the lived experience of relationship in EAP. Other theories that have been related to EAP, including attachment theory and Gestalt theory, were not investigated, and this may have altered data collection instruments or may have obscured possible alternative interpretations of results. In order to increase potential transferability, each step of the data collection and analysis process were carefully and clearly detailed in an audit trail and a researcher journal (Shenton, 2004).

Limitations

In this phenomenological study, the goal was ideographic, detailed exploration of the phenomenon of relationship in EAP. The study sought to focus on a relatively small target group of no more than 12 purposively selected individuals, based on their common experience of participation in EAP. These aspects of the research design may have limited transferability. However, heterogeneity among the participants from whom data was collected provided opportunities for triangulation in the comparing and enriching descriptions of the experiences of EAP participants, and may have increased transferability (Shenton, 2004). Thick, rich description was utilized, and discrepant information was included in data analysis. In addition, I clearly and carefully described the data collection and analysis process. Results were transparently presented including direct quotes. I provided information regarding inclusion and exclusion criteria for the study, participant selection activities, the time period and geographic locations of data

collection activities, and number and length of data collection activities. Finally, I recorded details about data collection settings and contexts in a researcher journal.

As one strategy to ensure dependability, the research design and implementation and any deviations, as well as data collection activities, were carefully described and recorded and included in the methodology, data analysis, and results sections of the final report. In addition, dependability was increased by keeping field notes to leave an audit trail that may be used in the data collection and analysis process. Researcher bias was addressed by utilizing ongoing *epoche,* also called bracketing, reflexivity, and keeping a research journal.

Significance

Much of the research that has been conducted to date has found that EAP is effective (Bachi, 2012; Chardonnens, 2009; Kemp et al., 2014; Lentini & Knox, 2015; Schultz et al., 2007; Selby & Smith-Osborne, 2013). This alternative, experiential intervention has the potential to create positive change in the lives of individuals suffering from depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, and other challenges in psychosocial functioning, and for whom traditional psychotherapy may be ineffective. Many of these individuals belong to treatment-resistant, difficult-to-reach groups, including veterans, at-risk youth, young adults, and children who have experienced trauma (Wake, 2014; Walker & Baird, 2019). By exploring participants' experience of therapeutic relationship in EAP, this study contributed to an in-depth understanding of this phenomenon in EAP, informed the development of best practices to aid providers of EAP, and provided direction for future research. Specifically, this study has the potential to improve mental

health symptoms and functioning of clients who do not respond positively to traditional therapy, as well as improving the well-being of their families. In addition, this study may have provided further evidence to justify insurance reimbursement for EAP. Finally, by improving interventions offered to difficult-to-treat populations, this study may have contributed to reduced societal costs in outpatient mental health, medical treatment and hospitalizations, inpatient treatment, correctional facilities, and welfare and unemployment systems.

Summary

Many clients do not respond well to traditional forms of psychotherapy. Consequently, mental health practitioners are searching for alternative, more effective means of helping difficult-to-treat clients to health and well-being. EAP is an innovative, experiential intervention that has been rapidly growing over the past 3 decades (Bachi, 2012) There is mounting evidence that this intervention is effective in improving symptoms for diverse clients and presenting problems (Lentini & Knox, 2015; Selby & Smith-Osborne, 2013). Previous research has revealed the important role of the human-horse relationship in EAP (Chardonnens, 2009; McCullough et al., 2015; York et al., 2008). However, no research studies have explored the human-horse relationship or the other therapeutic relationships in EAP. In addition, the current literature reveals the lack of effective treatment approaches for young adults. This study utilized qualitative, phenomenological methods in order to explore adults' experience of therapeutic relationships in EAP. This study contributed detailed, rich information about relationships in EAP, and provided direction for further research. This study has the

potential to improve outcomes for many clients for whom traditional psychotherapeutic

approaches have failed.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

"If I can provide a certain type of relationship, the other person will discover within

himself the capacity to use that relationship for growth, and change and personal

development will occur" (Rogers, 1961, p. 13).

An awareness is growing among mental health professionals of the need for
innovative, alternative interventions to meet the needs of individuals facing mental health
challenges in a complex, chaotic, and multifaceted world (Kemp et al., 2014). Traditional
models of psychotherapy have been successful in the treatment of many presenting
problems, including anxiety and depression. However, for many individuals and
presenting problems, traditional models of psychotherapy fall short (Smith & Jensen-
Doss, 2017; Wake, 2014; Walker & Baird, 2019). For example, for children and
adolescents, veterans, and young adults, traditional methods which emphasize verbal
communication in a clinic or other institutional setting, may not be effective. For these
client populations, trust in the professional is elusive; premature termination from
psychotherapy and recidivism to residential, inpatient, and corrective settings are
common outcomes (Bachi, 2012).

For several decades, research on animal-assisted therapy has demonstrated
significant benefits for many treatment-resistant clients. EAP is a relatively new animal-
assisted intervention that has produced positive outcomes for diverse client populations
with varied mental health diagnoses (Bachi, 2012; Lentini & Knox, 2015; Schultz et al.,
2007; Selby & Smith-Osborne, 2013).

Current research has revealed the central role of the human-horse relationship in effecting change in EAP participants (Bachi, 2012; Chardonnens, 2009; York et al., 2008). In traditional psychotherapy, the importance of the therapist-client relationship has received substantial empirical evidence (Horvath & Symonds, 1991). However, I found no studies that focused on the client-animal and therapist-client relationships in EAP. This study addressed this gap by exploring the lived experience of therapeutic relationship in EAP among adults ages 18 to 40 years who have participated in EAP.

In this chapter, I first briefly describe the literature search strategy employed. Second, I provide a historical framework for the study, outlining historical perspectives of human-animal interactions and contemporary theories which attempt to explain the human-animal bond. Third, I present the conceptual framework for the study. In this section, I identify and define the concepts and phenomenon to be studied, including the conceptual lens of P-CT and the therapist-client relationship, and the theoretical framework of self psychology. In addition, I synthesize primary writings by key theorists and seminal researchers related to the concepts and phenomenon of interest and summarized previous research. Fourth, I review current research on animal-assisted therapy and EAP. Finally, in the summary and conclusions section, I summarize the major themes found in the literature review, including what is known and not known with regard to EAP, describe how the current study fills the gaps found in the literature and advances knowledge in the field, and provide a transition from these gaps to the methodology outlined in Chapter 3.

Literature Search Strategy

The literature search strategy utilized for this paper was quite straightforward. I used the database PsycINFO, in the Walden University Library, in addition to the ProQuest Dissertation database. Search terms used were *animal-assisted therapy, animal-assisted psychotherapy, equine-assisted therapy, equine-facilitated psychotherapy,* and *equine-assisted psychotherapy*. Once an article was located, I utilized the reference list to locate other articles and then searched for them. An effort was made to select research studies completed within the last 5 years; however, due to the scarcity of current research, a number of seminal sources and older articles were utilized.

Historical Framework

Human-Animal Interactions

Since our genesis as a species, human beings have depended on other animals for survival. Their movements, habits, and characteristics became the object of study by early *homo sapiens*, and their importance to human survival, to life itself, took on spiritual significance. Animals were a vital source of food, clothing, and shelter for humans. Many cultures came to revere animals as sacred beings. Shamanic healers utilized totem animals in their healing practices. Animals were seen as guides and teachers in many cultures, aiding human beings, gifting them with qualities such as speed, strength, and keen senses, and assisting humans to gain insight and mastery of their inner and outer worlds (McCormick & McCormick, 1997; Serpell, 2010).

In some religions, such as Christianity and Islam, animals were viewed as utilitarian objects created by God and placed below human beings in the hierarchy, their

sole purpose to meet human needs. For example, Saint Francis, the Catholic patron saint of animals, believed that animals were emissaries of God (Beck, 2014). According to the Chinese zodiac, as well as Western astrology, each individual is born with a particular animal guide; the individual is believed to embody some of the animal's characteristics.

Humans have idealized the qualities of many animals. For example, the size, speed, strength, and beauty of horses have inspired awe, respect, and fear in humans for over 35,000 years (Abt, 2010). Throughout history and around the globe, animals have played leading roles in human events, and also in literature, myth, and art. Animals can be mythical creatures who capture imagination and become a part of an individual's or a community's psyche (Esbjorn, 2006; Kane, 2004; Kohanov, 2001). The horse, for example, has become a symbol of the mother archetype, or the nurturing, creative, feminine energy from which all life and renewal spring (Abt, 2010). Many of the major Jungian archetypes, including Dark Shadow and Bright Shadow, those aspects of self that are respectively feared and denied or aspired to, have become integrated in the living symbols of the horse and other animals (Kane, 2004).

Around 11,000 B.C. in Southwest Asia, domestication of animals by human beings resulted in their utilization in agriculture, hunting, protection, transportation, and warfare. In exchange, humans provided food, shelter, and protection for animals, which meant increased opportunities to reproduce and a higher likelihood of survival. Sometime after their domestication, humans adopted animals as their companions (Beck, 2014).

Contemporary Theories of the Human-Animal Bond

The human-animal bond is a phenomenon that has been much in the scientific spotlight in recent years. Some scholars believe it originated from the first human domestication of other animals. Boris Levinson, a psychotherapist, Konrad Lorenz, an ethologist, and Leo Bustad, the founder of the Delta Society, are credited with popularizing the term (Fine & Beck, 2015). The American Veterinary Medical Association's Committee on the Human-Animal Bond defined it as reciprocal relationship between humans and other animals which involves physical and psychological interactions and which furthers the well-being of both (JAVMA, 1998). Those in the veterinary medical field have documented that the ways in which humans relate to their animal companions ranges from valuing them only for utilitarian purposes to equating them with humans. According to recent statistics, 62% of households in the United States have companion animals. Many families view their companion animals as members of the family (Fine & Beck, 2015).

Most of the existing research and theories of the human-animal bond have focused on the relationship between humans and their pet companions. Kidd and Kidd (1987) analyzed theories explaining the human/companion animal bond. They found that these theories stemmed from diverse fields and included learning theory, developmental psychology, social psychology, ethology, and object relations theory, and were based on animal-animal, human-human, and human-object models; however, they concluded that none of the theories were sufficient to adequately explain the human-animal bond (Brown, 2004).

The human-animal bond seems to require certain relational prerequisites, including continuity, reciprocity, and mutual benefit. Both human and animal should derive an increase in well-being as a result of the bond. There is evidence to suggest that humans bond more easily with animal species who are more similar in terms of social organization (i.e., herd or pack animals) and communication systems. Dogs, for example, have the ability to inspect human expressions and gestures for information critical to their well-being, such as reassurance, alarm, or guidance (Fine & Beck, 2015). Several theories have been applied to understanding and explaining the human-animal bond.

Ecological Systems Theory

Ecological systems theory highlights the importance of social support in assisting humans to cope with stress and maintain mental health (Melson & Fine, 2015). There is evidence that many humans find it easier to obtain social support from animals than from other humans for a variety of reasons including a perception that pets are more available, dependable, and loyal (McNicholas & Collis, 1995). Animals provide unconditional love and acceptance; they are indifferent to material status, appearance, and age. Unlike humans, animals do not dissimulate or employ ego defenses; they act honestly and congruently (McCormick & McCormick, 1997). Animals are able to read nonverbal cues including gestures, movement, and pheromones, and respond authentically to our emotions (Fine & Beck, 2015). Animals appear able to provide social support in ways that parallel human-human relationships (Beck & Katcher, 2003). In part, this may be due to anthropomorphism (Serpell, 2010). Human beings often attribute human emotions, thoughts, and motivations to animals. Brown (2004) pointed out that whether or not these

projections are accurate is irrelevant; it is the individual's perception that an animal loves and understands her that can be reparative.

Morphic Resonance Theory

Throughout history, there have been numerous accounts of how animals have come to the rescue of humans in distress, suggesting that humans are not alone in the experience of empathy or telepathy. These stories defy rational, logical explanations. The concept of nonlocal mind was pioneered by Rupert Sheldrake (1988, 1995). This theory is based on the notion of morphic resonance and morphogenetic fields, and essentially proposes that all conscious creatures are connected via a universal consciousness and a shared memory that is inclusive of the boundaries of space and time. This theory can explain how animals sense when another being is in distress, even with miles of distance between them, and has been used in attempts to explain the human-animal bond.

Attachment Theory

Another theory that has been proposed to explain the human-animal bond is attachment theory, first developed by Bowlby (1980) and Ainsworth (1989) to explain the evolutionary need demonstrated by humans to connect and be protected. Attachment originates in childhood, with a parental or other caregiving individual, and results not only in survival but in a secure, well-adjusted individual who has the capacity for intimacy and trust as well as autonomy. According to Ainsworth (1989), there are four prerequisites for the formation of an attachment bond: proximity seeking, safe haven, secure base, and separation distress. Animals demonstrate the capacity to meet these four prerequisites in their interactions with humans, thus indicating their ability to serve as

attachment figures (Zilcha-Mano, 2017). Urichuk and Anderson (2003) proposed that animals meet basic human psychological needs for love, respect, usefulness, acceptance, and trust. They fulfill important roles including companion, friend, dependant, mirror, defender, and scapegoat.

Bachi et al. (2011) found that children who had been abused or neglected first formed an attachment bond with therapy horses and later extended this bond to the therapist. Through animal-assisted therapy, in this case with horses, clients experienced both emotional closeness and physical touch with the horse that is often not possible with human therapists due to ethical concerns. The resulting secure attachment became a secure base and a platform for exploration and reconstruction of internal models (Johansen et al., 2014).

Symbolic Interaction

Many sociologists now believe that animals are capable of symbolic interaction (Alger & Alger, 1997; Brandt, 2004; Flynn, 2000; Sanders, 1993). Historically, sociologist Mead (1962) argued that animals were incapable of symbolic interaction due to lack of language. According to symbolic interaction theory, individuals construct a shared reality through their interactions with one another; this requires the ability to imagine the perceptions and experiences of others, to empathize or to take on the role of the other, and to arrive at shared meanings of a given situation or event (Flynn, 2000). Brandt (2004) asserted that in animal-human relationships, nonverbal communication is used by both human and nonhuman animals to convey emotions, desires, and shared meanings and to understand the experience of the other. To accomplish symbolic interaction,

humans must learn both to understand the nuances of the nonverbal communication of animals and to convey intentional messages through their own bodies.

Biophilia Hypothesis

The biophilia hypothesis has been proposed as one more way to explain human relationships with other animals. This hypothesis, first coined by Edward Wilson (1984), describes the need of human beings to connect with nature and with other living organisms. According to Beck (2014), the human-animal bond originated in human evolutionary development from other animal species. Human animals' physiological development in utero parallels that of other animal species. Dr. Edward Creagan, an oncologist, believes that animals assist humans to create a balance between mind and body (Fine & Beck, 2015). According to Beck and Katcher (2003), the human brain has been programmed by evolutionary processes to pay close attention to other animals in the environment. Virtual reality, artificial environments, and technology may have spurred the need on the part of some individuals to reconnect with the natural world to which we also belong. When animals are incorporated into the therapeutic encounter, elements of reality, mystery, instinct, and a connection with nature emerge (McCormick & McCormick, 1997).

Therapeutic Models of Animal-Assisted Psychotherapy

As animals have become a part of human lives, awareness and appreciation of the benefits afforded by human-animal relationships has increased. Anecdotal case studies and increasing research efforts have demonstrated therapeutic outcomes of human-animal interactions including increased self-esteem, self-awareness, emotion regulation,

communication skills, and social interaction (Brandt, 2004; McCormick & McCormick, 1997; Nimer & Lundahl, 2007); decreased depression, anxiety, dissociation, and PTSD symptoms (Dietz et al., 2012; Odendaal, 2000); increased oxytocin levels (Odendaal & Meintjes, 2003); and decreased aggression and lower levels of cortisol and blood pressure (Nimer & Lundahl, 2007). Most research conducted to date has involved human-companion animal interactions; there is a dearth of research investigating human-animal interactions in animal-assisted therapy. Nevertheless, over the past several decades animals have been deliberately included in professional therapeutic efforts to heal, rehabilitate, and reconstruct the lives of human beings.

The Delta Society (1996) defined animal-assisted therapy as an intervention with specific goals and objectives delivered by a health or human services professional with expertise in using an animal as an integral part of treatment. It involves the purposeful inclusion of animals in a treatment plan in which the aid of an animal is enlisted to help achieve specific, predefined outcomes (Nimer & Lundahl, 2007). The clinician makes a professional decision to include an animal in therapy based on therapeutic goals and the needs of the client.

There are few formal models of animal-assisted therapy. Clinicians most often integrate animal-assisted therapy within the context of their own theoretical orientation, or the animal is incorporated into an already existing manualized treatment program (Wharton et al., 2019). Many of the animals utilized in therapeutic interventions have current registrations with a nationally recognized therapy animal organization, such as Therapy Dogs International or Pet Partners (previously Delta Society; Fine, 2015).

Fine (2015) proposed a problem-solving template to assist clinicians when considering if, when, and how to include animals in treatment. The template included the following questions: What benefits can the animal provide this client? What added benefit can the animal provide in the clinical intervention? What specific interventions or strategies can the therapy animal provide? How will the therapist need to adapt or modify his or her theoretical or clinical approach? Other important considerations include the characteristics of the therapy animal and the characteristics of the client.

Social psychology suggests that selected factors in the environment can act as social accelerators, making it easier for human beings to communicate and connect with one another (Kidd & Kidd, 1987). In animal-assisted therapy, many professionals include animals due to their facility in acting as "social lubricants" (Fine, 2015). O'Callaghan (2008) investigated animal-assisted interventions implemented by mental health professionals and found that the majority reported including animals in their therapeutic repertoire to build rapport in therapeutic relationships with clients. The presence of the animal appears to provide a sense of safety and security to the client, an alternate focus of attention for the client and therapist, and a stimulus for conversation (Fine, 2015). Therapy animals often greet clients with warmth and affection, reducing tension in initial sessions. Levinson (1964) believed that animals assist with overcoming resistance and promoting engagement in therapy. In this case, it seems that it is the differences versus similarities between animals and humans that are at work. Animals do not prejudge or categorize and are free to demonstrate unconditional affection during a first meeting in ways that would be unacceptable for humans (Fine, 2015; Kidd & Kidd, 1987). Finally,

many professional providers of animal-assisted therapy point out that animals help

humans release emotion (Fine et al., 2011; McCormick & McCormick, 1997). The

presence of an animal can elicit emotions including sadness, humor, and joy, while also

provide soothing and calming when clients are exploring difficult emotions in therapy

(Fine, 2015). Animals can also act as emotional barometers, letting clients know when

their emotions or behaviors may be out of control.

McCormick and McCormick (1997) found that horses acted as a powerful catalyst

and mirror for emotions, even those of which clients were unaware, and provided

immediate and authentic feedback. They also pointed out that in their work with clients

with psychotic illnesses and personality disorders, horses were able to differentiate

between outward display of emotion, or affect, and true feelings, as well as incongruence

between affect and feelings. Horses, due to their finely honed ability to detect

incongruence, are invaluable diagnostic instruments (McCormick & McCormick, 1997).

Developmental psychology is another source of interventions utilized in animal-

assisted therapy, again relying on analogies between human-human and human-animal

relationships (Kidd & Kidd, 1987). For example, because of the developmental

importance and therapeutic benefits of touch in human-human relationships, it has been

assumed that touching animals can produce similar benefits. Research has demonstrated

the therapeutic effects of touching animals. Fine (2015) has suggested the application of

animals in Erik Erickson's Theory of Psychosocial Development, stating that animals

may be able to assist individuals with achieving the developmental goals of each stage.

Kidd and Kidd (1987) issued a call for more research on the factors involved in the human-animal bond. They pointed out that there is a need for a functional theory combining both inductive and deductive methods to explain or describe the human-animal bond and the role it plays in animal-assisted therapy. In addition, Fine (2015) and others (Stewart et al., 2013) have indicated an urgent need for more research on the mechanisms of change operating to produce therapeutic changes in animal-assisted therapy, as well as research investigating under which theoretical orientation the incorporation of animals is the most therapeutically effective. There is a need for a theoretical framework to guide the application of animal-assisted therapy (Fine, 2015; Stewart et al., 2013).

Summary

This historical and theoretical overview of human-animal relationships situated the study in the context of the significance of human-animal interactions throughout human history, beginning with animals as vital sources of food, clothing, and shelter to ensure human survival, to the domestication of animals, to the therapeutic benefits humans have derived from their animal companions, and lastly to the inclusion of animals in psychotherapy. This section outlined the evolving ways in which we have conceptualized, explained, and applied the human-animal bond in animal-assisted therapy.

<div align="center">Frameworks for the Study</div>

Over the last several decades, research has demonstrated that the therapist-client relationship is an essential component of effective psychotherapy (Horvath & Symonds,

1991). Gelso and Carter (1994) defined the therapeutic relationship as the thoughts, emotions, and behaviors participants in therapy experience and express toward one another during their interactions. There is evidence that a strong therapeutic alliance is a powerful variable in effecting positive client outcomes (Saunders, 2000; York et al., 2008). Psychotherapists from many different theoretical orientations agree that the therapeutic relationship, incorporating elements of attachment, engagement, and task, is foundational to change (Bowlby, 1980; Hougaard, 1994; Wampold, 2001). However, there is still a lack of consensus on how the therapeutic relationship contributes to positive outcomes (Saunders, 2000).

Some researchers have compared the therapist-client relationship and the human-animal bond in animal-assisted therapy (Fine, 2011; Strand, 2004). York et al. (2008) investigated the bond between participants who had suffered trauma and their equine companions, and found many parallels with therapist-client alliances, including elements of attachment and task. Parish-Plass (2008) suggested that animal-assisted therapy is based on a strong emotional connection between therapist, client, and the animal. However, there is a lack of understanding of both therapist-client and animal-client relationships in animal-assisted therapy. Therefore, to illuminate the therapeutic relationships in EAP, the frameworks to be employed in this study are the conceptual lens of P-CT and the theoretical framework of self psychology.

Conceptual Lens: Person-Centered Theory and the Therapist-Client Relationship

Carl Rogers (1957) developed his client-centered, nondirective approach to psychotherapy, now known as person-centered therapy (P-CT), in the 1940s. P-CT

included both a theory of therapy and a theory of personality development, and its

effectiveness as a therapeutic approach has been supported by ample empirical research

evidence (Murphy & Joseph, 2016). P-CT is based on the assumption that each client

carries the solutions to problems within him or herself, and that the therapist's role in

therapy is to reflect feelings and to follow the client's lead (Rogers, 1961). The client is

viewed as the expert on his or her own life. P-CT recognizes each client's right to self-

determination. P-CT, furthermore, is based on Rogers' theory of personality

development, which asserts that all humans have an innate actualizing tendency or a

natural inclination toward development, maintenance, and growth. Beginning at birth,

infants are motivated to seek and value new and enhancing experiences in a self-directive

process Rogers called organismic valuing. The infant develops a self-concept as

differentiation occurs, and a need for positive regard from the environment emerges and

influences the self-concept. When the child's self-concept and organismic valuing

process are in agreement, a healthy personality unfolds.

Within this theory of personality development, psychological distress and

maladjustment occur when there is incongruence between the self-concept and the

organismic valuing process (Rogers, 1957). The primary task for the therapist is to assist

the client to restore harmony between the self-concept and the organismic valuing

process. In order for positive change to occur, Rogers believed that therapy must provide

six necessary and sufficient conditions: the client must be in a state of incongruence, the

therapist and the client must be in psychological contact, and the client must perceive the

therapist's empathy, positive regard, and congruence. The therapist must be highly

attuned to the expression and experience of the client during the session and be able to effectively communicate empathy, positive regard, and congruence to the client. When these six conditions are met, the client may begin to eject some of the values and influences in the self-concept that have contributed to incongruence and begin to trust in the organismic valuing process going forward.

P-CT has become one of the foremost theoretical orientations in the mental health field (Murphy & Joseph, 2016). It has become integrated with many other approaches, including existential therapy, positive psychology, and experiential therapy (Murphy & Joseph, 2016). There is an extensive body of research investigating the process and outcomes of P-CT, beginning with psychotherapy research Rogers pioneered in the 1940s (Murphy & Joseph, 2016; Elliott et al., 2004; Elliott et al., 2013). P-CT has resulted in increased psychological adjustment for a wide variety of clients and presenting issues, with outcomes equivalent to other leading therapeutic approaches, including cognitive-behavioral therapy and psychodynamic therapy (Smith et al., 1980; Stiles et al., 2006).

Although P-CT is a widespread and empirically supported therapeutic approach in traditional psychotherapy (Elliott et al., 2004; Elliott et al., 2013), there has been limited research on its applicability to animal-assisted therapy. Only one study was found that incorporated P-CT with animal-assisted therapy. Chardonnens (2009) conceptualized the horse as a co-therapist who was able to provide all of the necessary and sufficient conditions of P-CT, together with the person-centered treatment team, in their case study of an 8-year-old boy whose aggressive symptoms decreased while social skills increased after working with horses and other animals on a rural farm for one year.

Rogers' P-CT defined the necessary and sufficient conditions for change and growth to occur in a traditional therapeutic encounter, and research has provided support for their effectiveness. No research was found investigating these relational conditions in animal-assisted therapy or the human-animal bond. It is possible that during EAP, the horse may provide the necessary and sufficient conditions of empathy, positive regard, and congruence. P-CT may be an invaluable lens for understanding the three relationships (client-horse, client-therapist, and client-equine specialist) in EAP. In this study, P-CT was used to inform the interview questions asked of participants, as well as in data analysis.

Theoretical Framework: Self Psychology

The focus of this study was exploring the essence of human-human and human-animal relationships in EAP utilizing the EAGALA model. In this model, primacy is given to the client-horse relationship. As evidenced in previous sections, there is a clear and unequivocal need for a better understanding of the human-animal bond, why it is beneficial to humans, and its role in animal-assisted therapy.

Self psychology is one theory that has recently been applied to understanding the human-animal bond. Brown (2004) and others (Alper, 1993; Wolf, 1994) have presented theoretical arguments for how self psychology may be used to illuminate the bond between humans and their companion animals. Self psychology, a branch of psychoanalytic theory, was developed by psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut (1971). Self psychology focuses primarily on the early development of personality structures via relationships with significant caregivers during the first few years of life. Two of the core

concepts in self psychology are "self" and "selfobject". The self is the core of the personality, developed over time but with its genesis in early childhood. The self provides the individual with a sense of well-being, self-esteem, and cohesion (Wolf, 1988).

To build and maintain a healthy self, individuals need sustaining, empathic, soothing, calming and affirming responses from "selfobjects": people, animals, things, experiences, or ideas in the surrounding environment (Brown, 2004). However, it is not the person, animal, thing, experience, or idea that is the selfobject; rather, it is an individual's inner, subjective experience of some aspect of the selfobject that evokes, maintains, or adheres the sense of self (Brown, 2004; Wolf, 1988). Wolf (1988) stated that in order to be defined as a selfobject, the being or experience must "evoke, maintain and give cohesion to the self" (p. 63). Thus, if a mother provides nurturing, empathic, and soothing responses to her child, she fulfills a selfobject function for that child (Brown, 2004). Conversely, a child whose mother is abusive, neglectful, or emotionally unavailable would represent a selfobject failure, and the child could go on to develop psychopathology, including personality disorders and relational conflicts (Kohut, 1971). These individuals lack a balanced self-esteem and sense of identity or self-cohesion and tend to rely more on selfobjects throughout their lives in order to sustain a sense of self. According to Kohut (1971), the self continues to develop throughout the lifespan and requires responsive selfobjects to sustain a healthy, vibrant psychological life.

In self psychology, there are three types of selfobject functions as defined by Kohut (1971): (a) mirroring selfobjects, which offer a person the experience of feeling

valued and treasured through empathic attunement, affirmation, validation, and "recognition of the self in its grandness, goodness, and wholeness"; (b) idealizable selfobjects, which restore ideals, balance, solace, and calm by providing something or someone to identify with, look up to, or admire for their goodness, strength, calmness, or wisdom; and (c) twinship selfobjects, which create a feeling of intimacy, oneness, and communion with another being by offering "the experience of essential likeness of another's self" (Silverstein, 2007; Wolf, 1988, p. 55).

Self psychology has been applied in clinical settings as a developmental model and a guide for therapeutic intervention (Brown, 2004; Silverstein, 2007). Silverstein (2007) operationalized the selfobject functions of mirroring, idealizing, and twinship in order to develop an assessment tool for identifying selfobject needs in psychological assessments. In psychotherapy, it is assumed that the therapist can serve selfobject functions and thus stimulate change in the self-structures of clients. However, possibly due to the abstract and often unconscious nature of self psychology concepts, no research could be found on the application of this theory in psychotherapy (Brown, 2007).

Brown (2004) asserted that companion animals serve as selfobjects in the lives of humans. She pointed out that a person whose animal greets them every day with behaviors including tail wagging, licking, or verbal expressions such as purring, meowing, barking, or whinnying may interpret these behaviors as expressing joy and affection, and will reciprocate with feeling love and happiness in return. "The person's internal, subjective experience of love is the important element, not whether the animal's behavior really means love" (Brown, 2004, p. 71). The person's perceptions are what

matter in determining what constitutes a selfobject. Frequently, companion animals are more available, consistent, noncritical, and trustworthy than other human beings. When parents are unable to provide nurturing and safety, children often rely on their family pets to meet their psychological needs. Research has shown that companion animals act as protective factors in the lives of abused or neglected children, allowing them to weather stress and find emotional balance and security (Alper, 1993).

Self psychology may offer an explanation for how the human-companion animal bond provides therapeutic outcomes: animals are meeting the selfobject needs of humans. However, only one research study has been conducted to investigate this phenomenon. Brown (2007) conducted a qualitative study of 24 participants who had a strong attachment to their companion animals. She conducted one-hour, semistructured interviews with each participant with a 16-question interview instrument she designed to reveal selfobject needs (Brown, 2007). The 24 participants each identified one companion animal with whom they were very attached; the sample contained 10 horses, nine dogs, four cats, and one rabbit (Brown, 2007). All but one of the participants was found to have a selfobject relationship with her companion animal, and 67% scored as having two selfobject functions provided by their companion animals. Mirroring was the most common selfobject type scored, with the majority of the mirroring selfobject functions provided by dogs. Idealizing and twinship selfobject functions were most commonly scored in participants who had horses (Brown, 2007). With the idealizing selfobject function, participants identified that their relationships with horses "brought them closer to a higher power, spirituality, or nature…almost having access to higher

levels of consciousness" (Brown, 2007, p. 334). Admired traits of horses included strength, power, connection to nature, "truthfulness", and making the participant "feel trusted, like a leader and part of something bigger" (p. 335). Eight of 10 horses in the study provided twinship selfobject functions to their human companions, which included an "intense, nonverbal communication, which gave them a feeling oneness" (p. 336). Brown (2007) concluded that self psychology provides a convincing explanation of the benefits provided by the human-animal bond, and that animals can meet selfobject needs of humans as well as, and sometimes better than, other humans.

Self psychology has not been utilized as a conceptual or theoretical framework in research on animal-assisted therapy. Melson and Fine (2015) mentioned it in their theoretical paper as a possible theory to explain how and why animals can impact child development. However, they pointed to one potential problem with the application of self psychology to animal-assisted therapy. In animal-assisted therapy, clients do not have the long-term, daily contacts with animals they do with companion animals. Self psychology requires that a selfobject must be crucial to a person's sense of self, such that the loss of the selfobject would result in a sense of disintegration and decompensation of the self (Brown, 2011; Kohut, 1971). Melson and Fine (2015) stated "it is unclear how long, broad, and deep contacts with another individual need to be for a therapeutic relationship to emerge" (p. 183). Animal-assisted therapy sessions are generally time-limited. However, self psychology assumes that human therapists in a time-limited clinical setting can serve selfobject functions for clients, although there has been little research to test this assumption (Brown, 2004). Companion animals have been shown to meet the

selfobject needs of their human counterparts. For this study, self psychology and the tenet that animals serve as selfobjects for clients in animal-assisted therapy formed the theoretical framework. This theory informed the questions asked of participants and was utilized in interpretation and analysis of results.

Animal-Assisted Therapy: Characteristics and Research

The Human-Animal Bond

Regardless of how it is defined or explained, the human-animal bond provides psychological and physiological benefits to the lives of humans (Bachi & Parish-Plass, 2017; Fine & Beck, 2015). Its power has been documented in ancient literature, modern fiction and media, and, more recently in scientific research literature. Bachi & Parish-Plass (2017) found that interaction with family pets can boost emotional and cognitive growth in children. In another study, Strand (2001) discovered that developing a relationship with a pet creates a buffer against stress for children in homes with interparental conflict. Caring for animals provides benefits including improved physical fitness, decreased loneliness, and decreased anxiety (Friedmann, 1995).

In a ground-breaking study, Odendaal and Meintjes (2003) studied 18 subjects and the effects of gently petting their dogs. They found that the subjects' levels of oxytocin nearly doubled, with similar effects in the animals. Oxytocin is a chemical in the brain which has been associated with bonding and love. In studies with prairie voles, levels of oxytocin increased in response to experiences of affiliation and love (Odendaal and Meintjes, 2003). In addition, during animal-human interactions blood pressure and cortisol levels dropped in both animals and humans and beta endorphins and dopamine

production increased in the human participants (Bachi & Parish-Plass, 2017; Odendaal &

Meintjes, 2003). A reduction in cortisol results in lowered anxiety (Bachi & Parish-Plass,

2017; Odendaal & Meintjes, 2003). This is of vital importance for child victims of

trauma, who are often characterized by distrust and whose baseline levels of cortisol are

often elevated (Bachi & Parish-Plass, 2017).

Flynn (2000) conducted interviews with 10 female survivors of domestic

violence, all of whom had companion animals. He found that not only were these animals

also targets of violence, but these women and their children included animals in their

construction of family, and the pets responded emotionally and behaviorally in various

ways to the domestic violence including providing comfort, trying to protect the women

or children, and demonstrating symptoms of their own emotional distress (Flynn, 2000).

This demonstrates that nonhuman animals "are emotional beings capable of not only

experiencing and expressing emotion but are attuned to human emotional states and are

capable of creating shared definitions of situations with their human companions" (Flynn,

2000, p. 124). These findings have important implications for understanding the human-

animal bond in animal-assisted therapy.

Animal-Assisted Therapy

Although many people believe that animal-assisted therapy is a new phenomenon,

reports indicate that during the ninth century in Belgium, patients with disabilities were

prescribed the care of animals to assist with rehabilitation (Serpell, 2010). Animals were

incorporated into the treatment of the mentally ill at the York Retreat in England during

the 18th century: the staff at the facility believed that the presence of animals improved

the morale and behavior of the patients (Fine, 2011).

In the early 1960s, child psychologist Boris Levinson began to include his dog

Jingles in psychotherapy sessions. He found that the presence of the dog seemed to

increase the client's sense of safety and trust in the therapeutic relationship. Although his

case studies were greeted with skepticism by his fellow psychologists when he presented

them at an American Psychological Association conference in New York, Levinson is

credited with the first modern conceptualization of animal-assisted therapy (Fine, 2011).

He wrote extensively about the inclusion of animals in psychotherapeutic interventions

with children (Levinson, 1962, 1984; Levinson & Mallon, 1997). However, it was not

until 1987, when the National Institutes of Health convened a workshop on the health

benefits of pets, that the scientific community began to consider the therapeutic potential

of the human-animal bond (Fine, 2011).

One of the initial goals in therapy is the development of a strong therapeutic

relationship. According to Herman (1997), "disconnection from others is a core

experience of psychological trauma and therefore recovery can take place only within the

context of relationships" (p. 133). For child victims of trauma as well as others suffering

from trauma, the development of a trusting therapeutic relationship is both more

challenging and more critical. Fortunately, there is growing evidence that the presence of

an animal in therapy can facilitate the development of the therapeutic relationship (Bachi

& Parish-Plass, 2017; Balluerka et al., 2015; Zilcha-Mano, 2017). With an animal present

in therapy, clients' anxiety may decrease and they may also become more cognitively and

emotionally available to bond and to process trauma-related issues (Bachi & Parish -

Plass, 2017; Zilcha-Mano, 2015). The animal's presence shifts the focus from the client,

and the therapy animal may serve as a transitional object onto which clients project their

feelings and experiences (Chandler, 2005). The involvement of animals in the therapy

setting reduces the level of cortisol in clients and therapists (Barker et al., 2005), thus

potentially improving their ability to provide empathic responses and corrective

emotional experiences.

Recent developments in therapy approaches for children suffering from

maltreatment and trauma focus on effects on the child's neurodevelopment (Perry, 2009).

The Neurosequential Model of Therapeutics identifies key areas and systems in the brain

that are influenced by adverse developmental experiences (Perry, 2009). According to the

Child Trauma Academy (2016), three of four functional domains in the brain may be

positively impacted by animal-assisted therapy: sensory integration, self-regulation, and

relational. There is evidence that animal-assisted therapy may also be instrumental in

integrating related areas of the brain, which is essential for healing (Bachi & Parish-Plass,

2017).

As stated earlier, research has demonstrated that a strong therapeutic alliance

predicts better outcomes in psychotherapy (Horvath et al., 2011). Unfortunately, alliance

ruptures commonly occur between therapist and client, and these may result in decreases

in symptom amelioration, premature termination of therapy, and less than optimal

outcomes (Zilcha-Mano, 2007). This is particularly true for those clients who come to

therapy with a pattern of maladaptive interactions with others because they often reenact

these interactions in the therapeutic relationship. If therapist and client are able to work together on resolution of alliance ruptures, the process can result in a stronger alliance and a transformational interpersonal experience (Zilcha-Mano, 2017).

The inclusion of animals in the therapeutic milieu creates three potential relationships: client-animal, client-therapist, and therapist-animal. If an alliance rupture occurs between the client and the animal, the therapist can assist the client with processing this experience, while also acting as a secure base (Ainsworth, 1989). Similarly, the animal may serve as a safe haven and secure base when a client does not trust the therapist initially, or when an alliance rupture occurs between client and therapist. When conflict arises between therapist and animal, the therapist has the opportunity to demonstrate healthy and constructive ways to handle disagreement (Zilcha-Mano, 2017).

Children who have been abused or neglected may tell an animal about the abuse before they tell a therapist, because the animal's unconditional love and calming physical presence allows them to feel safe and more at ease (Dietz et al., 2012). In a study of 153 child survivors of sexual abuse, these authors found that the presence of a dog for only a few minutes during a therapy session resulted in decreased trauma symptoms of depression, anxiety, PTSD, and dissociation (Dietz et al., 2012). Three different therapeutic groups offered no dogs, dogs only, and dogs with stories. The children's symptoms improved in all three groups, with the greatest changes in the dogs and stories group, where the dog handlers read stories tailored to the group topic (i.e., trust, self-esteem, boundaries) written from the dog's perspective, followed by questions for

discussion to transition back to the therapeutic goals (Dietz et al., 2012). The authors

cited threats to internal validity including no random assignment to treatment groups and

the possibility that changes observed could be attributed to maturation.

Animal-assisted therapy facilitates social skills acquisition and communication

(Nimer & Lundahl, 2007). In a meta-analysis of 49 quantitative studies on animal-

assisted therapy, Nimer and Lundahl (2007) found a moderate effect size for promotion

of social interaction among children diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder as well as

decreased levels of cortisol, decreased aggression, and reduced blood pressure. In a study

of three children ages 4-8 with language impairments, Boyer and Mundschenk (2014)

found that after 12 weeks of animal-assisted therapy with a cat, the participants

demonstrated improvements in verbal and nonverbal social communication as compared

with a control group with a toy cat. Lubbe and Scholtz (2013) conducted a case study of a

14-year-old boy who participated in animal-assisted therapy after experiencing trauma.

The authors utilized document analysis in this qualitative study, examining photographs,

letters, and drawing/paintings created by the participant during the therapy. The therapist

conducting the sessions utilized projection and storytelling, using the dog as a medium

through which she communicated with the boy, and he with her, in initial sessions. The

therapist wrote letters to the client from the dog, and the boy wrote back to the dog,

"Morkie". The boy, who initially avoided eye contact and gave only monosyllabic

answers to questions, began to initiate conversations, make eye contact, and smile. The

authors noted increased social skills, communication skills, self-esteem, and trust.

However, the researchers in this study were also the treatment providers, a potential source of bias and a limitation to this study.

<div align="center">**Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy: Characteristics and Research**</div>

Unique Characteristics of Horses

One of the characteristics of horses that makes human-equine relationships unique within animal-assisted therapy, and which contributes to their therapeutic effectiveness, is their size. Horses are large, powerful animals, capable of moving with incredible speed. These aspects introduce elements of awe, fear, and of potential danger into the relationship, making it essential that the humans interacting with them are alert and present, grounded in the moment (Brandt, 2004; McCormick & McCormick, 1997). Humans must learn to communicate nonverbally with the horse, both by using their own physical bodies to convey their intentions and emotions, and by learning to understand the nonverbal language of horses. This results in increased awareness of thoughts, emotions, physical movements, and gestures, resulting in more congruent nonverbal communication (Brandt, 2004). The imposing physical presence of the horse often elicits emotions in the client which may be a catalyst for the therapeutic process (Bachi et al., 2011).

The horse's gentle nature provides a contrast to their size and strength and becomes a useful vehicle for redirecting aggression. According to Nuremberg et al. (2014), EAP is more effective than therapy utilizing canines in decreasing aggressive behaviors and working with psychotic clients, and the effectiveness of EAP may be due to both the size and calm presence of horses. Other researchers have noted that the size

differential between equines and humans is roughly similar to that between a human infant and its mother, contributing to the creation of a holding environment (Horn, 2015). Furthermore, the experience of being able to gain the trust of this noble animal contributes to increased self-confidence, trust, self-esteem, self-control, and leadership skills (Bachi et al., 2011; Brandt, 2004).

Another unique attribute horses bring to the therapeutic relationship that distinguishes them from dogs and cats is the fact that they are prey animals. Horses' evolution has equipped them to become highly sensitive to the emotions, intentions, and nonverbal communication of predators and others in their environment (Bachi et. al, 2011; Johansen et al., 2014). The survival of horses depended on this keen perception. Horses sense and respond immediately to any discrepancy or incongruency in their environment, even within a human (Thomas & Lytle, 2016).

This quality makes the horse an excellent mirror, reflecting back to the client and the therapist the emotions he senses and to which he immediately reacts (Johansen et al., 2014; McCormick & McCormick, 1997). This is true whether or not the client is aware of his/her emotions and body language. For example, a client may be unaware of feeling aggression or anger, but the horse may mirror or respond to this aggression by pinning its ears back, turning its hind quarters toward the client, or walking away (Johansen et al., 2014). The ability of the horse to mirror internal states provides opportunities to increase clients' self-awareness, and to bring to a conscious level unconscious emotions, defenses, or motivations. This also provides an opportunity for clients to process the ways in which the horse's reactions are similar to those of people close to the client. Through working

out more appropriate ways to interact with the horse to achieve the desired response,

clients may develop more adaptive interpersonal patterns of behavior (Johansen et al.,

2014).

Furthermore, in spite of domestication, horses have retained a fierce independence

and strong will. While dogs are eager to please and labile, horses behave according to

their own needs and desires (Fine & Beck, 2015). First and foremost, horses seek safety,

food, and comfort in their environment. When these needs are met, horses demonstrate

curiosity and social behaviors (Thomas & Lytle, 2016). Horses are herd animals with

highly developed social systems, with many similarities to human social groups. Horses

formed herds to survive as well as to meet the emotional and social needs of individual

members. Within the herd, social behaviors are formed and a hierarchy of leadership is

developed. As with humans, horses continually test boundaries while also fulfilling

responsibilities of their social roles. These similarities create possibilities for comparisons

to human relationships and allow clients to assign roles to various horses that relate to

their own lives. Horses often treat humans as if they were a part of the herd, testing

boundaries and responding to leadership. This dynamic provides a useful tool for EAP

facilitators as they observe the interactions between clients and the horses (Thomas &

Lytle, 2016).

The Role of the Therapeutic Setting in EAP

EAP most often occurs in a natural setting, in a stable or outdoor arena, far from

artificial lights and the confines of an office. The experience of open space and freedom

offered in an outdoor setting may allow clients to connect with their feelings, instincts,

and physical sensations, versus the intellect (McCormick & McCormick, 1997). This

provides a more non-threatening, relaxed environment which affords clients a holistic

experience of physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual awakening and awareness (Bachi

et al., 2011; Brandt, 2004; McCormick & McCormick, 1997). Furthermore, EAP is an

experiential therapy in which clients engage in physical activities with horses. This

physical movement may act as a metaphor of, and catalyst for, inner, psychic movement

or change (Thomas & Lytle, 2016).

Considerations Regarding Appropriate Clients and Presenting Issues

Not all clients are appropriate for or have access to EAP programs. However,

existing research indicates that EAP is effective and appropriate for a broad range of

clients with varying treatment needs (Wake, 2014). McCormick and McCormick (1997)

utilized EFP with individuals with severe psychotic disorders including schizophrenia as

well as with adults and adolescents referred from the juvenile justice system. EAP may

be particularly effective with clients for whom traditional psychotherapy has been

ineffective and for clients with attachment disorders, trauma experiences, or difficulty

with verbal or nonverbal communication (Johansen et al., 2014). EAP has been found to

decrease depression among children, adults, and adolescents who have experienced

sexual trauma (Signal et al., 2013). Several researchers indicate that populations that

would most benefit from EAP are clients with eating disorders, ADHD, anxiety, trauma

or PTSD, Autism Spectrum Disorder, depression, and veterans (Horn, 2015; Signal et al.,

2013). Because of the flexibility and creativity possible in EAP, it may be customized to

fit almost any individual and diagnosis (Horn, 2015; O'Brien, 2016).

Wake (2014) interviewed professional providers of EAP. They indicated that EAP works best for clients who are able to think abstractly in order to understand the metaphors commonly used in this treatment (Wake, 2014). These professionals noted that clients who are overly concrete, do not like animals or have abused them, and actively psychotic patients or those who are currently abusing substances may not be appropriate for EAP (Wake, 2014). For many practitioners, the expense involved in the care and maintenance of horses, liability insurance, and other expenses involved including stable fees, etc., inhibit many professionals from incorporating EAP with other therapeutic interventions (Wake, 2014).

Models of Equine-Assisted Therapy

EAGALA Model

The Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association (EAGALA), founded in 1999, developed a model of EAP. The organization provides certification, safety standards, an ethics code, educational resources, and a training manual. Utilizing exclusively ground-based work with horses and rooted in psychotherapeutic principles, the model requires a licensed mental health professional, a qualified equine specialist, one or more horses, and the client. Both the mental health specialist and the equine specialist must complete an initial intensive, 5-day workshop, provide credentialing documentation, and complete ongoing education in EAP in order to obtain and maintain certification. The EAGALA model is experiential, client-directed, and solution-oriented. The EAGALA model is based on the belief that all clients have the capacity to find the best solutions for themselves when given the opportunity to discover them (Thomas &

Lytle, 2016). Although client-directed, EAP is metatheoretical; providers integrate a wide range of theoretical perspectives into their practice, including Gestalt theory, attachment theory, and object relations theory (Horn, 2015; McCullough et. al, 2015).

In this model, nondirective interactions between client and horses, typically in an outdoor arena, are facilitated by the professional team who observe, comment on, and ask noninterpretive questions about the behaviors of the horses and the client. It is essential that the therapeutic team be familiar with the horses utilized in each session to immediately discern atypical horse reactions. The EAGALA therapeutic team utilizes an observational framework with the acronym SPUD'S to identify and track shifts, patterns, and unique moments in the behaviors of the horses, as well as discrepancies or incongruencies in client behaviors. The "'S" is a reminder to the professional team to be self-aware and vigilant for countertransference during sessions. A key component of the EAGALA model, the two-person team, increases the amount of information that is captured and processed during the session, including behaviors of both horses and clients, and provides an added level of safety for clients (Thomas & Lytle, 2016).

In the EAGALA model, the work occurs on the ground. Horses are deliberately left unencumbered so that they have autonomy and the freedom to act according to their natural instincts; to engage with or withdraw from the action and the clients. The unfolding events are then utilized as metaphors for the client's real-world life; however, it is the client who determines the meaning and the significance of what evolves in the arena (Thomas & Lytle, 2016).

In EAP, as in traditional forms of therapy, the client first participates in a clinical interview for diagnostic purposes, and together with the therapist develops a treatment plan. Treatment objectives are used to develop EAP activities. Exercises are designed to push clients out of their comfort zones so that they can discover new solutions and healthier ways of relating to others and getting their needs met. The goal of a session is not to complete the activity successfully so much as to learn from the experience (O'Brien, 2016).

Sessions may begin with the therapist and client talking about how he or she is feeling that day, followed by planning the day's activities. During the session, the therapist and equine specialist may pause the session to frame an observation, to ask the client to interpret the behavior of the horse, or to ask the client to reflect on his or her thoughts, feelings, or bodily sensations in the moment. After the session ends, the therapist, equine specialist, and client meet to process and reflect on what happened during the session. Connections are constantly drawn between what happened in the arena and what occurs in the client's daily life. During processing, the EAGALA team takes the equine experience and facilitates clients' reflection, discovery of meaning, and conscious application of new understandings to their everyday lives (EAGALA, 2009).

An introductory activity in EAP might be observation by the client, therapist, and equine specialist of the dynamics and interactions among the herd as they move freely around an enclosed space (Bachi et al., 2011). The EAGALA team encourages the client to describe and interpret the interactions observed. This offers opportunities for projection, opening a window into the client's internal world. The therapeutic team may

design a wide variety of exercises depending on the needs and treatment goals of the

client with props such as hula hoops, swimming tubes, buckets of grain, or other items.

Alternatively, some sessions are more unstructured. In all cases, the EAGALA team

follows the direction of the client and the horse, allowing sessions to unfold organically.

In the EAGALA model, the client-horse relationship is considered primary.

However, there is also a mental health professional and an equine professional interacting

therapeutically with the client. Essentially, client, horse, therapist, and equine specialist

form a diamond of relationships with the client at the top of the diamond, the horse at the

bottom, and the two professionals on either side. The client potentially forms a

relationship with the horse, the therapist, and the equine specialist. In addition, the

therapist and equine specialist model relationships with each other and with the horses.

The therapist and equine specialist provide emotional support, feedback, observations,

and noninterpretive questions to help the client interpret and relate what happens with the

horse in the arena to their internal and external reality. These human-animal and human-

human relationships may constitute an important part of what happens in equine-assisted

psychotherapy.

PATH, International Model

The Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship International (PATH,

Intl.) was founded in 1969 as the North American Riding for the Handicapped

Association (NARHA), with its name change occurring in 2011. From its inception, the

focus of this organization has been on horseback riding as physical and mental therapy

with activities ranging from vaulting to therapeutic carriage driving, with the goals of

improving motor skills, increasing strength and flexibility, improving communication and cognitive functioning, and building relationships and social skills. The individuals served by this organization include those challenged by paralysis, traumatic brain injury, multiple sclerosis, autism, Down's syndrome, and posttraumatic stress disorder. PATH, Intl. provides certification for instructors, facility accreditation, safety standards, and educational resources to its members and instructors. PATH, Intl. includes an equine-facilitated learning and mental health component, referred to as Equine-Facilitated Psychotherapy (EFP; PATH, Intl., 2019). Although emphasis is on mounted work and riding instruction, some PATH, Intl. professionals also utilize unmounted activities (Horn, 2015). The theoretical orientation most frequently utilized by PATH, Intl. therapists is cognitive behavioral therapy. Unlike the EAGALA model, there may be one-person teams in which the licensed mental health professional is also the equine specialist. In EFP, the horse is utilized as an adjunct who provides biofeedback in detecting and responding to the emotional states of the client. The therapeutic emphasis is on the therapist-client relationship. Although PATH, Intl. provides an instructor's manual, there are no well-defined therapeutic procedures (Horn, 2015).

Research on Therapeutic Effectiveness of EAP/EFP

In the research literature on equine-assisted psychotherapy, the terminology is often confusing. The acronyms EAP and EFP are frequently used as though they are interchangeable. Lentini and Knox (2015) noted that there must be clear operational definitions and terminology in order to effectively gather data. In the following sections, an attempt will be made to differentiate which model was utilized in the research

intervention, with EAP referring to the EAGALA model, and EFP indicating the PATH, Intl. model. As will be seen, there is evidence that both EAP and EFP are therapeutically effective.

This study recruited individuals who have experienced therapeutic interventions provided by licensed mental health professionals and equine specialists who are certified in the EAGALA model for two primary reasons. First, the EAGALA model focuses exclusively on mental health and outlines procedures that are based in psychotherapeutic principles in the EAGALA manual. These procedures are grounded in experiential, solution-focused, and person-centered principles. Second, the EAGALA model prioritizes the client-horse relationship and utilizes solely unmounted activities, which may make more accurate use of horses' unique abilities and characteristics, and contribute to the development of an authentic, egalitarian relationship (Horn, 2015; Thomas & Lytle, 2016).

Equine-Assisted Therapy With Children and Adolescents

Several recent studies found in the literature have investigated the effectiveness of equine-assisted interventions with children and adolescents who have experienced trauma. Lentini and Knox (2015) conducted a literature review of 47 studies published between 2008 and 2014 that examined the effects of equine-assisted interventions on the cognitive, social, emotional, and behavioral functioning of children and adolescents both with and without mental health diagnoses. The authors noted the proliferation of terms used in the literature for equine-assisted interventions and used the acronym EFP for all types of equine-assisted interventions for the sake of simplicity. Of 34 quantitative

studies reviewed, 18 were described as using both mounted and non-mounted activities with horses. Four studies specified using the EAGALA model; five studies were identified as using the PATH, Intl. model (Lentini & Knox, 2015). Of the 34 studies, all but three showed significant, positive effects.

The authors tabulated the type of research publication, population, type of intervention, and results. The overall results indicated decreased anxiety, depression, aggression and other externalizing problems, PTSD symptoms, and other social and behavioral issues, as well as increased self-esteem, positive emotion, empowerment, social skills and social interaction, quality of life, trust, and self-confidence, for a wide variety of presenting problems in children and adolescents (Lentini & Knox, 2015).

In the same study, the authors reviewed 13 qualitative studies of EFP/EAP with children and adolescents. The results included findings that equine-assisted interventions are metatheoretical, with Gestalt, brief, Adlerian, and reality theories most often underlying interventions. Some results indicated that EAP may effect change in less time due to experiential components. The authors concluded that while the empirical evidence provided preliminary support of use of equine-assisted interventions with children and youths, particularly at risk youth and those with autism spectrum disorder, there is a need for more consensus on terminology and protocols utilized by providers of EFP, as well as the need for more randomized, controlled studies with larger and more diverse samples to provide more generalize/able evidence of the efficacy of EFP/EAP (Lentini & Knox, 2015).

Balluerka et al. (2015) examined the impact of equine-assisted psychotherapy in a treatment group of 39 adolescents (ages 12-17) with trauma histories, aggression, poor attention, poor social skills, low motivation, depression, psychotic symptoms, and anxiety, and who were placed in a residential care facility. Twenty-four adolescents who were placed in a control group using matching criteria received individual and group therapy. For 12 weeks, the treatment group spent 2 nights per week at a nearby farm. Activities with the horses were unmounted, utilizing the EFP model. Each of the youth participated in 23 group therapy and 11 individual sessions during the intervention. Pre- and post-test measures were taken of both treatment and control groups using subscales of the Behavioral Assessment System for Children (Reynolds & Kamphaus, 1992); these were completed by the youth, care staff, and teachers at the residential facility. No significant differences between control and treatment groups were found. However, significant within-group differences were found between pre-and post-test results for the treatment group, including decreases in depression, psychotic symptoms, and aggression, and increases in self-esteem, attention and motivation, and social skills. Limitations of this study included a small sample size, short duration of treatment, and nonrandom assignment to treatment and control groups.

Another study looked at outcomes of Equine-Facilitated Psychotherapy (EFP) with 29 adolescents placed in a residential facility and who demonstrated antisocial, aggressive, and self-harm behaviors (Bachi et. al, 2011). Fourteen of the adolescents were nonrandomly assigned to a treatment group and 15 to a control group, with the treatment group participating in 14-26 weekly individual EFP therapy sessions, and the control

group receiving traditional forms of therapy. Questionnaires assessing self-image, self-control, trust, and general life satisfaction were administered to both groups before therapy began and again 7 months later. Interviews were held with the treatment group and their referring case managers after the post-intervention measurements were administered. The results showed no significant differences between the treatment and control groups; however, the data indicated within-group increases in trust, self-control, and general life-satisfaction among EFP treatment group participants. Qualitative interviews with treatment group members supported these quantitative trends. A 1-year follow-up with both groups revealed fewer police reports, improved school retention, and decreased use of illegal substances among the EFP treatment group. Although this study was limited by small sample size and nonrandom assignment to treatment and control groups, strengths included the length of treatment, follow-up one year later, and the inclusion of qualitative data.

McCullough et al. (2015) conducted a quasi-experimental repeated measures study examining the efficacy of EFP with 11 youth ages 10-18 who demonstrated symptoms of PTSD. These participants were a convenience sample derived from the first researcher's outpatient EFP program (McCullough et. al, 2015). The participants completed assessments measuring PTSD symptoms and the human-animal bond during the screening process, after 4 weeks of EFP, and after 8 weeks. Nine of the 11 participants experienced statistically significant decreases in PTSD symptoms between pre- and posttests (McCullough et. al, 2015). These same 11 participants demonstrated increased scores on human-animal bonding, indicating that EFP treatment effects may be

multimodal (McCullough et. al, 2015). This study was limited by the small convenience

sample, lack of a control group, and short duration of EFP intervention, as well as

potential bias by the primary researcher whose EFP clients participated in the study.

In a similar study, also utilizing a quasi-experimental, repeated measures design,

Kemp et al. (2013) examined the effects of EAP on symptoms of trauma, maladaptive

behavior, depression, and anxiety with 15 children and 15 adolescents who had

experienced sexual abuse. All of the children received weekly, in-clinic therapy for 6

weeks, and then participated in 9-10 weekly sessions (90 minutes duration) of EAP. The

youth completed assessments at intake (Time 1), following the in-clinic counseling (Time

2), and after the conclusion of EAP sessions (Time 3). The results demonstrated no

significant differences in results attributable to age, gender, or ethnicity, and decreases in

trauma symptoms, depression, anxiety, and maladaptive behaviors at both Time 2 and

Time 3, with significantly greater improvements occurring after completion of EAP as

compared to Time 2. Although this study also lacked a control group, the authors point

out the that the ethical imperative to provide services to at-risk youth make it challenging

for researchers to utilize a control group. The repeated measures design, however,

allowed for comparison between traditional interventions and EAP and indicated greater

efficacy for EAP.

Wake (2014) conducted a qualitative study to examine the therapeutic benefits of

EAP with at-risk adolescents. She conducted semistructured interviews with five

professional practitioners of EAP over the phone and in person. Themes that emerged

from the data analysis included: EAP is effective with adolescents because horses provide

immediate, nonjudgmental feedback; horses are neutral objects on which clients can focus; metaphorical learning is more palatable; and the experiential nature of EAP, as well as the natural setting, are exciting and motivating. These professionals also pointed out that the large size, strength, and independence of the horse require clients to overcome fear, build trust with the horse, and work out a way to earn the horse's collaboration. This can result in increased self-confidence and self-efficacy for the client, as well as more adaptive ways to achieve goals. The limitations of this study include the limited number of participants, as well as the fact that the participants were practitioners of EAP, and so may have biases in favor of this intervention. In addition, a major limitation of this study is the fact that it did not include the adolescents who participated in EAP.

Equine-Assisted Therapy With Adults

Nuremberg et. al (2014) conducted research examining the differences between EAP, animal-assisted therapy with canines, and social skills therapy among 90 adult participants who were inpatients hospitalized for aggressive behavior and/or a diagnosis of schizophrenia or schizoaffective disorder. The participants were randomly assigned to one of the three treatment groups. Staff incident reports were analyzed and compared prior to the study and 3 months after the study ended. The researchers found that participants in the EAP group demonstrated decreased aggressive behaviors while aggressive behaviors in the other two groups either increased or remained the same.

Several studies have found that EAP increases self-efficacy and decreases depression and feelings of helplessness and powerlessness among those who have

experienced trauma (Signal et. al, 2013). Whittlesey-Jerome (2014) conducted a mixed methods study of self-efficacy among 13 adult females (with a mean age of 43 years) who had experienced interpersonal violence. Seven women participated in EAP and six received treatment as usual in a comparison group. The duration of the study was 8 weeks. The researcher measured self-efficacy, depression, anxiety, and global functioning prior to and after the study; in addition, the participants kept journals about their experiences in treatment. Quantitative comparisons showed significant within-group improvements in all areas, while no significant differences were found between the EAP and comparison groups. However, qualitative data from the participant journals revealed notable differences between the groups. In the EAP group, the themes found indicated a strong emotional experience with the horses as well as increased empowerment, assertiveness, and mindfulness, and the women who participated in the EAP group had begun to take control of their lives. This study's limitations included small sample size, short duration of treatment, and nonrandom assignment of participants. A strength was the mixed methods methodology.

Although few studies on EAP have been conducted within the last 5 years, one current study found in the literature will be given particular attention here because, like this study, it sought to identify the mechanisms of change operating in EAP. Horn (2015) conducted a qualitative, phenomenological study with four professional providers of EAP and three adult clients who had participated in EAP in the study. All of the participants were female, Caucasian, and aged 35 to 63 years. The three client participants reported individual diagnoses of Bipolar Disorder, Depression, and posttraumatic stress disorder.

Semistructured phone interviews were conducted with the participants. For the client group, in response to questions concerning how the presence of the horse altered the therapeutic experience, categories included "openness," or an increased willingness and desire to be more open and to talk more with the therapist when in the presence of a horse, "trusts the horse more than human," and "physical engagement" or being able to have physical contact with the horse (Horn, 2015, p. 32-35). Clients reported a decrease in depressive symptoms, an increase in positive mood, decreased PTSD symptoms, increased ability to feel, increased social interaction, and improved physical health. Practitioner responses indicated several reasons why the horse is an effective therapeutic catalyst including experiential engagement, horses' mirroring of client emotions, horses' reactions to clients' incongruent internal and external states, and how the difference in size creates a holding environment between client and horse. Practitioners also reported that the presence of the horse decreases the time needed to effect therapeutic change for clients, and that horses are an additional tool for assessment. Limitations of this study include small sample size and limited diversity, as well as possible biases among the researcher and the participants. The inclusion of both client and practitioner groups allowed for a comparison of responses. However, the researcher did not address the question of whether the practitioners who participated were those who provided EAP to the client participants. The researcher recommended a follow-up qualitative study with a larger, more diverse sample to further explore the mechanisms of change at work in EAP.

Summary and Conclusions

Animal-assisted psychotherapy, although its roots lie in ancient times, is an innovative treatment modality that has shown increasing popularity and empirical support in recent years. The psychological and physiological benefits of human-animal interactions are well-documented. Among other animals, horses bring unique and potent characteristics to the psychotherapy process. Although a relatively new modality, research has demonstrated preliminary evidence of EAP's effectiveness in ameliorating emotional, cognitive, and behavioral symptoms for many difficult-to-engage clients, including veterans and children and adolescents who have experienced trauma. However, the existing literature clearly and unequivocally calls for more methodologically sound research to explore the mechanisms of change in EAP. In the current literature review, it became evident that most of the research thus far examines the use of EAP with children and adolescent populations who have experienced abuse or neglect. No studies examining the therapeutic relationships in EAP were discovered. In addition, although earlier studies were reportedly primarily qualitative or anecdotal in nature, the current literature review revealed that most current studies utilize quantitative methods, and uncovered the lack of current, methodologically rigorous qualitative studies.

Several theoretical and conceptual frameworks have been utilized to explain how and why EAP is effective. However, Bachi (2012) highlighted the lack of a unified theory for EAP, and its vital importance in providing consistency in protocols within the field. She pointed to the need for more rigorous, multimethod research to examine the human-horse bond and to explore other theories and the mechanisms of change involved in EAP

(Bachi, 2012). Only one study was found examining the mechanisms of change involved in EAP. This study had several limitations, including limited diversity and extremely small sample size. There remains a need for methodologically rigorous qualitative research to explore the mechanisms of change in EAP, specifically the relationships in EAP, and to provide directions for further research.

Chapter 3: Methodology

The purpose of this study was to explore young adults' lived experience of therapeutic relationships in EAP. The specific methodology utilized in this study was transcendental phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994). In the first section of this chapter, I reiterate the research questions, explain and define the phenomenon investigated, explain the research methodology chosen for the study, and provide a rationale for this choice. Then I position myself within the research study, including my role as researcher, my relationship to the research participants, my personal biases with regard to the phenomenon of EAP, as well as any ethical issues and how I planned to address these and to practice reflexivity. In the methodology section, I describe the target group and participant selection methods and provide a rationale for these choices, including an estimated number of participants and how they were to be identified, contacted, and recruited. I provide an explanation of the interview protocol and its sources, describe data collection methods and duration, and explicate a data analysis plan. The methodology section concludes with a discussion of trustworthiness and ethical procedures. In the chapter summary, I undertake a retrospective view of this study.

Research Design and Rationale

Research Questions

RQ: What is the lived experience of the therapeutic relationship in young adults who participated in EAP?

SQ1: What is the essence and meaning of the relationship with the horse?

SQ2: What is the essence and meaning of the relationship with the therapist?

SQ3: What is the essence and meaning of the relationship with the equine

specialist?

Central Concepts/Phenomenon

The primary phenomenon of interest for this study was the lived experience of the

therapeutic relationships in EAP. A conceptual lens and a theoretical framework were

utilized to illuminate and explore this phenomenon.

Conceptual Lens: Person-Centered Theory

As described in Chapter 2, the conceptual lens that was used to aid in

understanding this phenomenon was P-CT. The concepts embodied in Rogers' (1957)

theory, termed the necessary and sufficient conditions which a therapeutic relationship

must provide to catalyze positive client change, are empathy, positive regard, and

genuineness. Empathy is defined as the ability to completely and sensitively enter into the

other person's world and to understand the client's feelings and expressions within his or

her frame of reference. Positive regard is conceptualized as acceptance, warmth, and

prizing or valuing the client exactly as he or she is. It also contains the idea of respect for

the client as a separate and unique person. Genuineness is defined as behaving in a

congruent manner, in which the therapist's attitudes and feelings are honestly and directly

conveyed to the client through verbal and nonverbal communication. These three

concepts were utilized to inform interview questions posed to the participants about their

experience of relationships with the horse, as well as with the therapist and equine

specialist, during their participation in EAP.

Theoretical framework: Self Psychology

Self psychology, the theoretical framework which was used to illuminate the relationships in EAP, is a psychoanalytic theory developed by Kohut (1971) and was described in Chapter 2 in detail. In this theory, selfobjects are persons, ideas, animals, things, or experiences that meet human psychological needs. These needs are encapsulated in three selfobject types or functions: mirroring, idealizing, and twinship. Mirroring selfobject functions provide affirmation and validation, and include calming, soothing, and reassuring responses. When mirroring selfobject needs are met, the person feels valued, vibrant, desireable, and competent. Idealizing selfobject functions provide an individual with something or someone to admire, respect, and look up to. Those providing this selfobject function are often seen as possessing qualities the individual lacks, such as strength, wisdom, beauty, or power. When idealizing selfobject needs are met, the recipient experiences calm, solace, and increased self-esteem. Finally, twinship selfobject functions provide a feeling of mutual understanding, of oneness and intimacy, and of sharing the same thoughts and feelings. In the effort to discover the essence of the horse-client, therapist-client, and equine-specialist-client relationships in EAP, these three concepts guided the interview questions asked of participants about each relationship.

Research Tradition: Phenomenological

Phenomenology as a philosophy, first articulated by Husserl (1977), is an epistemological approach to understanding human experience. According to Husserl, phenomenology is the study of what appears in consciousness and the science of

describing what one perceives, senses, and knows in one's immediate experience (Moutakas,1994). Phenomenology is based on the assumption that there is no objective reality, for perception of an object is dependent on a subject. In phenomenology, the scientist seeks to discover the meanings and essences in experience and distinguishes between the absolute reality of what an individual perceives in consciousness and the ideal reality which comes from prior experience, intuition, and self-reflection. Within the consciousness of any phenomenon are noemetic and noetic dimensions; the former refers to the spontaneous and immediate sensory perceptions and meanings associated with the experience of a phenomenon, the "what" of experience, while the noetic dimension, the "why" of experience, includes the psychological functions of thinking, feeling, reflecting, remembering, intuiting, and valuing (Moustakas, 1994).

Ultimately, the goal of transcendental phenomenology as a research method is to explore these noematic and noetic aspects of human experience in textural and structural descriptions of meanings and essences, and then to synthesize these into an account of the "universal essence" of the phenomenon being investigated (Moustakas, 1994). The methodology of transcendental phenomenology includes three primary processes: epoche, transcendental-phenomenological reduction, and imaginative variation. In epoche, the researcher attempts to set aside all prior knowledge and judgments to approach the phenomenon freshly, with a wide-open lens. The researcher brackets out all prior experiences with the phenomenon by including a written description in the research document. However, this process is cyclical; as the researcher encounters the experiences

of participants, his or her awareness of preconceptions and biases evolves. Thus, epoche must be an ongoing, reflective process (Smith et al., 2009).

Next, in transcendental-phenomenological reduction, the phenomenon is comprehensively described, with as much detail as possible, including sensory details, thoughts, feelings, and meanings, resulting in a textural description of what was experienced (Moustakas, 1994) Research participants, also called co-researchers, are the first to engage in this process as they recall and describe their experiences of the phenomenon during data collection. Later, during data analysis, the researcher engages in this process as individual accounts are synthesized.

Finally, imaginative variation is a process of searching for meanings, beliefs, intuition, judgments, and memories that provide the context and explanation for what was experienced, and constructing a structural description (Moustakas, 1994). Both participants and researcher engage in this process, first during data collection and continuing during data analysis.

Rationale for Phenomenological Tradition

The phenomenological approach was selected as the research methodology for this study because I sought to understand the lived experience of relationships for participants in EAP. This study included participants with diverse backgrounds who had all experienced the same phenomenon at different times and places in order to both elucidate their unique experiences of the phenomenon and to discover its universal essence. A case study approach was not chosen due to its focus on a unique individual or situation bounded by space and time. The focus of this study was understanding

participants' lived experiences of the phenomenon, rather than on telling a story about what happened before the participant (s) came to EAP, or what happened after they completed EAP, as would be the case in a narrative study. Similarly, an ethnographic study was ruled out since the focus of the study was not on exploring the culture of EAP facilitators or participants.

Therapeutic Context of the Study

The participants in the study had completed EAP using the EAGALA model within the past 2 years. As described in Chapter 2, the EAGALA model is a brief, client-directed, experiential model. The sessions typically occur weekly for 90 minutes. The number of sessions varies widely according to each client's treatment plan; however, EAP frequently consists of 12 to 16 sessions. The sessions are facilitated most often in an outdoor arena by a licensed mental health professional who has been certified in the EAGALA model, as well as an Equine Specialist who is also EAGALA certified. In the EAGALA model, most clients are outpatient and come to the arena once a week, after which they return home.

<div align="center">

Role of the Researcher (Epoche)

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I have a lifelong passion for horses. I began riding by the age of 3, and currently own seven Appaloosa horses. I participate in long distance trail rides in the mountains of Montana, Idaho, and Wyoming. I have experienced firsthand the therapeutic characteristics of horses in healing trauma as well as maintaining mental health. In addition, I believe that horses have a great deal to teach human beings about health, honesty, wholeness, and love. I have not experienced formal EAP. However, I attended a

professional certification training in EAP in January 2021. I conducted the study as a doctoral student with the goal of earning a PhD in Clinical Psychology. In the future, I plan to provide EAP to clients in a private practice.

These values, goals, and prior experiences may have influenced my expectations for, and outcomes of, the research in multiple ways. For example, it is possible that my own passion for horses influenced research participants in unforeseen ways. Another possibility is that my prior experiences with horses and my belief that horses provide positive, health-promoting benefits to participants influenced participant interview responses or colored my interpretations of participant responses and emergent themes. Thoughts, emotions, and actions taken or not taken were documented in a researcher journal in a cyclical process of reflexivity throughout the research period. This can afford readers the opportunity to judge for themselves the extent to which the researcher facilitated and illuminated the experiences and interpretations of participants, and the extent to which my own experiences, biases, and preconceptions impacted data collection, analysis, and conclusions.

Methodology

Participant Selection Logic

The target group for the study was individuals who had participated in EAP within the past 2 years, were between the ages of 18 and 25 years, and gave consent to participate in the study. Exclusion criteria for EAP clients was being outside of the age range of interest to the research or participation more than 2 years in the past. A nonprobabilistic, purposive sampling method was utilized with a heterogenous

population. The sample size necessary in order to answer the research questions adequately was investigated. The term data saturation has been used to define that point at which no new data or themes are obtained (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). However, this point varies depending on the type of methodological approach, the degree of homogeneity of the sample, the quality of the data, and the research questions and purpose (Guest et al., 2006). For a phenomenological study, Polkinghorne (1989) recommended a sample size of 5 to 12 individuals, as saturation is often attained at this point. Guest et al. (2006) analyzed the point at which they reached data saturation in their qualitative study of the perceptions and experiences of 60 African women and found that this point was reached after 12 interviews. Based on the above guidelines obtained from the methodological literature, this study sought to recruit and interview 12 participants.

I contacted the research leadership of the EAGALA via telephone and advised that I was planning to utilize the public database of certified EAP providers with the purpose of recruiting participants for the study. Once this permission was obtained, I planned to email EAP providers within a 600 mile radius of my home state of Montana (due to time and financial constraints involved in travelling to conduct face-to-face interviews). The recruitment packets contained an introductory letter to the EAP provider explaining the purpose of the study, outlining inclusion and exclusion criteria, and requesting assistance with participant recruitment. Providers were asked to refer clients who met the inclusion criteria and who indicated a willingness to participate. Alternatively, providers were asked to post a participant introductory letter in their office

waiting room or other space for self-referrals. A letter introducing the study to potential

participants was included in the recruitment packet.

Instrumentation

The study utilized a semistructured interview format consisting of questions

suggested by the literature review to investigate the lived experience of participants'

relationships in EAP. The questions were open-ended and broad to elicit information

about what participants had experienced in relationships in EAP (textural description),

and why they experienced these relationships in this way (structural description)

(Moustakas, 1994). The interview questions were derived from the conceptual lens of

person-centered theory and the theoretical framework of self psychology to gather the

information needed to understand participants' experience of relationships in EAP. In

addition, I utilized clarifying prompts to ensure accurate understanding and to encourage

participants to elaborate, such as "Tell me more about that" or "I want to be sure I

understand what you meant when you said…" The interview protocol can be referenced

in Appendix A.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

In the introductory letter, potential participants were asked to contact me via

telephone or email to discuss the purpose, procedures, risks and benefits of the study,

confidentiality protections, and procedures for exiting the study. Individuals who agreed

to participate were asked to respond "I consent" via email. I planned to conduct face-to-

face interviews with participants. These interviews were to be conducted in a location and

at a time convenient for participants. The duration of these interviews was expected be

between one and two hours. Only one face-to-face interview was planned at this time; however, follow-up telephone interviews were considered if needed to clarify responses or to verify that data analysis results accurate. All interviews were to be audio recorded using a small, handheld digital recorder. I planned to transcribe all interviews by hand. All audio recordings were stored in secure, locked location. Transcribed interviews utilized participant pseudonyms on a password protected flash drive and/or password protected documents.

A participant sample of 12 was the goal for this study to reach saturation and adequately answer the research questions. In the event that recruitment resulted in too few participants, more recruitment packets were planned to be mailed to additional providers within the 600 mile radius, or if necessary to more distant geographic locations.

Data Analysis Plan

The first step in data analysis in the study was to transcribe the audio recordings of all interviews. I planned to utilize member checking to ensure that the transcriptions are accurate by emailing summaries of transcripts to research participants to review before proceeding with data analysis. Next, I planned to read and reread the transcriptions and highlight "significant statements," or quotes from participants about how they experienced relationship in EAP. In a process Moustakas (1994) called "horizontalization", I would then compile a list of nonrepetitive, significant statements in which each statement was given equal weight. From these statements, I next would develop "clusters of meaning", grouping them into themes that were common across all of the interviews. I planned to utilize Nvivo, a qualitative data analysis software program,

to assist in this coding process. The next step would be to utilize the significant statements and themes to construct a description of *what* participants experienced in relationships in EAP (textural description) and *how* they experienced the relationships (structural description). Finally, I planned to synthesize the textural and structural descriptions of the participants' experiences of EAP into a composite description of the essence and meanings of the experience of therapeutic relationships in EAP.

Issues of Trustworthiness

In qualitative research, as in quantitative, vigorous methods to ensure and to test the trustworthiness of the research findings are essential. Validity and reliability in qualitative research have been operationalized in four criteria: Credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Shenton, 2004).

Credibility

In qualitative research, credibility corresponds to internal validity in quantitative methodology. It is the measure of how accurately the phenomenon under study has been captured. In this study, the credibility of the research findings was ensured by utilizing several methods, first suggested by Guba (1981), and later recommended by Shenton (2004). One method used to ensure accuracy was the utilization of well-established qualitative research methods: for this study, Moustakas' (1994) transcendental phenomenological methodology. The data collection instrument used in this study was developed from the literature review and included questions recommended by Moustakas and used in a prior study (Brown, 2007). Data analysis methods were drawn directly from Moustakas (1994). Participants were purposively recruited based on their experience of

EAP. There was a degree of heterogeneity among the participants from whom data was collected, including age and geographic location. This diversity provided opportunities for triangulation in the comparing and enriching descriptions of the experiences of EAP participants. The use of thick description, with as much detail as possible about the phenomenon of relationships experienced in EAP and the contexts surrounding this phenomenon were also used to ensure credibility.

During data collection activities, I utilized iterative questioning to verify responses and gather more details. Data analysis and results sections included examination and discussion of discrepant responses. In order to ensure honest and open communication, I worked to build rapport with research participants, and they were informed at the outset of their right to discontinue participation at any point without explanation.

Throughout the research process, I kept a journal in which to reflect and record decisions made, ideas, initial impressions of each interview and of participants' responses, emerging patterns and themes, and the ongoing iterative process of meaning making. In addition, I employed the strategy of member checking. After data collection, I asked participants to verify or correct a summary of themes or patterns that emerged. I sought participants' views (via email) of initial themes and descriptions, specifically asking them to comment on accuracy and any errors, distortions, or omissions. Finally, I examined the results of this study in the context of previous research findings from similar studies (Shenton, 2004).

Transferability

Transferability in qualitative research refers to how well research findings can be generalized to other participants or settings. For qualitative studies, generalizability is often difficult, and arguably antithetical to the in-depth and ideographic exploration of a phenomenon. Of particular importance to external validity is the explication of the boundaries of the study (Shenton, 2004). For this study, I provided information regarding inclusion and exclusion criteria for the study, target group and participant selection activities, the time period and geographic locations of data collection activities, and number and length of data collection activities. In addition, I recorded details about data collection settings and contexts in the researcher journal.

Dependability

Dependability is the equivalent of reliability in positivistic studies. This is the measure of whether or not the research can be replicated with similar participants, methods, and contexts, and obtain the same results (Shenton, 2004). As one strategy to ensure dependability, the research design and implementation and any deviations, as well as data collection activities, were carefully described and recorded and included in the methodology, data analysis, and results sections of the final report. In addition, I completed a field journal in which I recorded detailed notes of each step of the research process from the start of data collection to the final analysis and interpretation of results.

Confirmability

Confirmability refers to the objectivity of a research endeavor. One strategy that I utilized to increase objectivity, or at the least to identify subjectivity, was the researcher

journal in which I recorded an ongoing reflective commentary, as well as the epoche

section of this paper in which I detailed my biases and assumptions. I also employed

bracketing and provided an audit trail of the data collection and analysis phases of the

research study (Shenton, 2004).

Ethical Procedures

Prior to recruiting participants for this study and data collection, an application

was submitted and approved by the Walden University Institutional Review Board. The

approval number was 01-12-21-0348531. In order to gain access to participants, I

obtained verbal permission from EAGALA staff to utilize their database of EAP

providers. Recruitment packets mailed to providers included a letter of introduction for

the provider and for participants. These letters included information about me, the

purpose of the research, and what the research was about. I included an informed consent

form in the recruitment packets as well. This form explained the time commitment and

other expectations of participation, including an interview lasting 60-120 minutes and a

follow-up phone call or email communication for validation purposes. I informed

participants that they have the right to exit the study at any point without consequence.

The informed consent form described possible benefits and risks of participation, i.e., the

risk of strong emotional reactions. Participants were provided with the contact

information for a national crisis line in the event they experienced adverse emotional

reactions. I explained that there is no personal gain from participation; however,

participants would be helping to further knowledge about EAP.

Participants were informed of their right to confidentiality. They were informed that I would be the only individual to know their names, and I would be the only one to interview, transcribe, and analyze data. Participant demographic information was kept in a password protected flash drive. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym. A key associating the pseudonyms, names, and contact information was kept in a secure, locked or password-protected location. I informed participants that some personal details would be written about in the narrative utilizing the assigned pseudonym; however, care would be taken to omit any details that could be used for identification.

Summary

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore adults' lived experience of therapeutic relationships in EAP. Due to the need for detailed, rich information about EAP, a phenomenological methodological approach was chosen and a rationale provided. I utilized a database of EAP providers maintained by EAGALA to identify and recruit participants. Recruitment packets were mailed to EAP providers, and their assistance enlisted in recruitment of their current or former EAP clients. The recruitment packets included a letter of introduction to both EAP providers and potential participants, a demographic questionnaire for providers and participants, and an informed consent form.

A sample size of 12 participants was sought. I planned to conduct face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with participants. I planned to audio record and transcribe the interviews. Then, I planned to analyze the interviews utilizing phenomenological data analysis methods developed by Moustakas (1994). From the transcribed interviews,

significant statements, meaning clusters, and themes were developed. At the next level of analysis, I combined these themes into a textural and structural descriptions. Finally, at the most abstract level of analysis, I distilled these descriptions into a description of the meaning and essence of the phenomenon. As a way to "bracket out" my own personal biases, I kept a research journal recording my thoughts, expectations, assumptions, and emotions during data collection, analysis, and interpretation. In addition, I kept a field journal throughout the research process in which I recorded each decision and actions taken at each step in the research process.

Issues of trustworthiness were addressed through multiple strategies, including reflexivity; rich, thick description; member checking, and leaving an audit trail. Ethical concerns and participants well-being were protected through a process including approval from the Walden University Institutional Review Board, informed consent, and protection of confidentiality utilizing pseudonyms and storage of files containing PHI in password protected devices.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore adults' lived experience of therapeutic relationships in EAP. I sought to answer the question, "What is the lived experience of therapeutic relationships in adults who participated in EAP?" Specifically, I queried, "What is the essence and meaning of the relationships with the horse, the therapist, and the equine specialist?"

In Chapter 4, I first describe the setting in which the study was carried out. Then I briefly outline participant demographics. Next, I discuss in detail the data collection procedures, including a discussion of unusual circumstances I encountered and variations in data collection procedures from what was planned. This is followed by a careful delineation of steps in data analysis and resulting horizons and themes, utilizing participants' words to illustrate. Next, I describe implementation of strategies I utilized to ensure trustworthiness, including any adaptations of strategies stated in Chapter 3. And finally, I present the results of the study using direct quotes from research participants, with figures to illustrate findings, followed by a summary of answers to the research questions.

Setting

The COVID-19 pandemic began 1 year prior to the inception of data collection efforts in January of 2021. Interviews were conducted remotely rather than face-to-face as a result of social distancing guidelines and IRB directives. Participants were in their homes versus a conference room or other public meeting place during these interviews. It is unclear whether or how these factors may have influenced participants, the data that

was provided, or participants' experiences in the study. Similarly, it is difficult to determine whether or how virtual interviews versus face-to-face interviews may have influenced my interpretation of results.

Demographics

Four adults who had participated in EAP took part in the study. All participants were female and White. Ages ranged from 23-38 years of age. At the time of the study, participants resided in four states located in four regions: southern, eastern, western, and midwestern. Presenting issues of participants included depression, anxiety, substance abuse, suicidal ideation and attempts, trauma, bipolar disorder, and relationship distress. Length of time of participation in EAP ranged from 3 months to 5 years.

Data Collection

I began data collection efforts in January 2021 after receiving IRB approval. I used the public database on EAGALA's website (www.eagala.org) to randomly select EAP providers. I emailed recruitment packets containing the practitioner invitational letter and the participant invitational letter, which explained the study and provided my contact information, to more than 275 EAP providers in all 50 of the United States, as well as Canada, South America, South Africa, Europe, Australia, Israel, and New Zealand. I followed up with a second email to each of these providers, if no response was received within 2 weeks. I then followed up the second email with phone calls to providers within the United States. I also emailed recruitment packets to EAGALA networking coordinators listed on a public database on EAGALA's website. All EAP

providers contacted were asked to forward the participant invitational letter to current or former (within past 2 years) clients meeting the inclusion criteria.

In addition, after receiving IRB approval for a change in procedures, I emailed 13 professional contacts met at an EAGALA fundamentals training I attended in January 2021. Finally, I used social media in data collection efforts, creating an invitational page on Facebook.

As stated in Chapter 3, the target number of participants sought for the study was 12. Several unusual circumstances were encountered during data collection that may have impacted the number of participants recruited to the study and resulted in changes to data collection procedures. The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in challenges in data collection. The plan was to conduct face-to-face interviews with participants within a 600-mile radius of my location. Social distancing mandates and IRB directives required that interviews instead be conducted remotely. Instead of recruiting participants within a 600-mile radius, I emailed more than 400 recruitment packets all over the United States and to several other countries and continents. In addition, after several months of data collection efforts, I had received responses from many EAP providers indicating that COVID-19 had resulted in many EAP providers closing down as telehealth therapy sessions became the norm and in-person sessions were prohibited in many states. Some EAP providers were slowly resuming in-person sessions with clients and horses. Due to this unforeseen barrier to recruitment, an expansion of data collection methods, to include professional contacts and social media, was requested and approved by the IRB.

It also became clear that the proposed age range of 18-25 was a barrier. Many providers reported that they worked with older and younger clients but did not have clients within the specified age range. Accordingly, a request to expand the age range to 18-40 was submitted and approved by the IRB.

Another unforeseen barrier to data collection was internal changes in leadership in EAGALA which began in the fall of 2020 and continued during data collection efforts. I became aware of these changes when data collection began in January 2021. These organizational conflicts may have resulted in reluctance on the part of some providers to forward the research invitation to their clients.

Seven individuals contacted me by email to express an interest in participating in the research study. All seven lived in the United States and had been forwarded the research invitation by their current or former EAP provider. Three of the individuals, two males ages 62 and 72 and one female aged 46, were excluded due to being outside the age range for the study. I emailed the other four potential participants the IRB approved informed consent, asking them to review it and respond with any questions or the words "I consent" if they agreed to participate. All four responded that they agreed to participate. I then worked with each participant to schedule a convenient date and time for the interview. The virtual interviews were conducted between May and October 2021. All seven EAP clients who contacted me were sent a $10 Starbucks e-gift card.

I interviewed the four participants utilizing a semistructured interview protocol (Appendix A). The interviews were conducted via video conferencing with Zoom. Participants were each interviewed one time in their own homes, while I was in my home

or office in Western Montana. One participant, Kasey, was interviewed utilizing audio only due to technological difficulty, a slow internet speed that would not allow for video. The interviews ranged from 90-120 minutes in duration. All interviews were audio recorded utilizing Zoom cloud recording. The recordings were sent to an online transcription service, Rev.com, because of the prohibitive time investment required to transcribe the interviews by hand.

Data Analysis

I listened to each audio recorded interview several times. After the audio recorded interviews were transcribed, I read and reread the transcripts and summarized each interview. I then emailed the summaries to each of the four participants and asked for feedback regarding the accuracy of the summaries. One participant, Kasey, responded with the word "Wow" and a statement that the summary of her interview had been a powerful reminder of her experiences in EAP.

Phenomenological Reduction

The purpose of phenomenological reduction is to distill the essences of a phenomenon. First, I carefully read each transcript line by line, and highlighted significant statements from participants utilizing Nvivo. In a process Moustakas (1994) called "horizontalization", these relevant statements from each interview were coded into categories, and new ones were created, in an emergent process. For each significant statement, I asked myself, "What is the participant talking about? What does it mean?"

These categories, or invariant constituents (Moustakas, 1994), corresponded to the interview questions asked of participants about their lived experiences of therapeutic

relationships in EAP. I utilized Nvivo's framework matrix function to help me visualize the relationships between the invariant constituents, and to cluster them into themes. As part of a reflexive process, I wrote thoughts, musings, and annotations in my research journal. I began to notice that participant quotes often fit into more than one category, and that some of the categories were broader than others. It occurred to me that some of these, for example, *relationship with the horse,* were actually themes across all four interviews. In addition, I recognized that the theme *relationship with the horse*, for example, contained several aspects, such as the invariant constituents feeling understood, being real, and feeling accepted. Some of these invariant constituents were present in more than one theme. I eliminated invariant constituents that were repetitive or redundant. After all four interviews were coded, I had identified 10 themes and 46 invariant constituents. Table 1 presents the themes and invariant constituents which resulted from the data analysis process.

Table 1

Themes and Invariant Constituents

Themes	Invariant Constituents
Previous experiences	Horses Experiences in therapy/treatment
When I started	Age Referral source
Presenting issues	Depression Anxiety Bipolar Disorder Suicide ideation/ attempt Relationship issues Substance abuse
Relationship with the horse	Feeling understood Feeling accepted Feeling comforted Feeling safe Feeling valued Being real Feeling oneness Admiration Loss of relationship
Relationship with the therapist	Feeling understood Feeling accepted Feeling safe Feeling comforted Feeling empowered Being real Admiration
Relationship with the equine specialist	Feeling accepted Feeling understood Feeling safe
EAP activities	Walking/Movement Grooming Natural setting Exercises Observing Talking to horses/therapist
Lessons	Boundaries/Assertiveness Grounding Emotion regulation Congruence Internal locus of control
Benefits	Self-esteem Self-confidence Self-awareness Reclaiming and transforming
Discrepancies	Feeling frustration Feeling fear

Themes, Invariant Constituents, and Textural Descriptions

To illustrate the themes and invariant constituents, I constructed a textural description of the experience for each individual participant; the "what" of the lived experience of therapeutic relationships in EAP (Moustakas, 1994). This step in phenomenological reduction was a process of immersion, returning again and again to the sensory perceptions, feelings, thoughts, and meanings each participant reported experiencing. The textural descriptions of each participant, including supporting participant quotes, are presented below within the framework of the corresponding themes and invariant constituents. Pseudonyms have been used in place of participant names to protect the confidentiality of participants.

EAP Activities

The first theme relates to participants' experiences of the settings and activities in which the therapeutic relationships unfolded. The sessions occurred primarily out of doors, in an arena or pasture, and occasionally in a round pen or barn. Participants traveled to facilities in more rural locations surrounding a metropolitan area. The horses were at liberty to move about according to their own inclination within the enclosure. Frequently, the interactions were unstructured and nondirective. This theme includes the invariant constituents *walking/movement, grooming, natural setting, observing, exercises,* and *talking to horses/therapist.*

Kasey reported she spent most of her time with the horses, talking with them, brushing them, and observing them. Afterwards, the therapy team would ask her to interpret her observations of the horses' behaviors.

Pretty much every day that I went in I would brush them, and I would go and talk

with them. It was just peaceful for me, like I got more out of just watching them. I

was mostly with the horses, and then I would come back and I would ask them

like 'What was that about?' They're like, 'What do you think that was about?' It

was a lot of them just asking me what my interpretation of it was.

Most of the participants experienced the natural setting as grounding. For

example, Georgia recalled being in the barn, with its earthy smells of horses, hay, and

manure, and calm and quiet environment.

And I would say that it grounded me, where I might've been feeling like really

anxious or disappointed in myself or something, and then I was able to go out

there and process it and then feel a heck of a lot better before I came home and

then I didn't bring it home with me. So by the time I got home, I was happy.

Three of the four participants mentioned physical movement, such as walking

around in the arena with the horses. For example, Danika said that the first thing she did

at the start of each session was to walk with the horses around the arena. Similarly,

Brianna described frequently feeling "frozen" when she arrived and then walking with a

horse:

Gypsy would walk and I would follow a few steps. And he'd walk again, and

we'd walk a few steps. He wanted me to walk off my feelings or my emotions or

the tension I was feeling because he just kept on walking a few steps…and I just

kept following him and following him.

The participants all mentioned talking to the horses as well as to the human therapy team. Georgia described talking to the horses while grooming them.

> It was just being with the horses and grooming them…they were always very calm and very quiet and they just stood there and they would let you groom them and then you could talk to them.

Most often, discussions with the therapy team occurred after interactions with the horses, while still outside. Danika said that sometimes she would sit and talk to the therapist with the horses present as well, which made her feel more comfortable.

> Sometimes I've actually just sat and had good conversations with her and they've just been next to us. Not even much interaction with them but they've been there. And it's been able to, oh, okay, I'm comfortable in this situation. Or if I am getting anxious, I'll start brushing them.

Sometimes the horses and their behaviors became metaphors for the people and situations in their lives, and interpreting their interactions became a vehicle for insight into the roles and interpersonal dynamics in relationships. These insights often acted as a catalyst for emotional processing, as described by Georgia.

> It's funny how the horses, all of a sudden became people, the family members and things like that…And I think through the horses that day, when I identified the horses as different people in my family and how I felt, I started crying. I don't even know where the emotion came from…It was just all of a sudden I was falling and was like, 'that horse is this person, that horse is this person, and this is what's happening and it's not okay'.

At times the therapy team would ask the participants to complete a particular exercise with the horses in the arena, utilizing metaphors to draw parallels to the participants' lives. Danika described one such exercise:

There's a bin and there was pool noodles in it and some hats and just some random odds and ends. And she told me to take them and spread them out on my own through the arena. I had the bin and I was just tossing them in random places. Both of the horses followed me, walked the same time. And then she said, "Okay, now pick one of them". I think I picked Clover and I walked, she said, "It's going to feel silly and there's no wrong answers". But she said, "Walk over to each thing, each pool noodle and give that part of your anxiety and name like this one's anger. And then tell Clover "why this one is anger"? and she then went and stood off to the side. At first I did feel kind of silly. I was like, "this is a hat". Trying to think of what does this mean? So then I'm like, "okay, this hat", putting it on your head. I'm like, "this is when I'm scared and anxious and I just want to hide away". And then I was like, "this red pool noodle is when I'm mad because it's anger". Talking to each one and then went back to her and then she said, "Okay, now I want you to take him again. Don't say anything, but walk him over to each one and see what his reaction to that it is". And we went over to each one. And the red pool noodle, my anger, he stepped on it and then kicked it. I was like, "There's no way he know", am I just reading into these signs? And each thing that I went to, like one of my sad one, he put his head on my shoulder and I didn't even have to

say anything. It was so strange. And obviously a lot of it was my perception too,

but I really believe that he listened and then that's what he did…It blew my mind.

Danika went on to describe how the therapist then allowed her to interpret what the

horse's behaviors meant and how it applied to her life.

In summary, most of the participants spoke of the natural, outdoor setting being

grounding and calming. They all highlighted the time spent with just the horses, walking

with them, grooming them, observing them, and talking to them as impactful activities.

All except for one of the participants described the use of metaphors relating the horses

and activities in the arena to situations and people in their lives as helpful in gaining

insight. Even when talking with the human therapy team, the horses were often present

and facilitated the discussion.

Relationship with the Horse

In the second theme, participants shared their experiences of the therapeutic

relationship with the horses. While speaking about their experiences, all of the

participants demonstrated emotions including happiness, sadness**,** excitement, wonder,

and grief through their facial expressions, gestures, and tone of voice. Two of the

participants had tears in their eyes at some points during the interview while talking about

the horses. Horizonal to this theme are nine invariant constituents: *feeling understood,*

feeilng accepted, feeling comforted, feeling safe, feeling valued, being real, feeling

oneness, admiration, and loss of relationship.

Feeling Understood. All four participants described feeling understood by the

horses. They believed that the horses perceived unspoken thoughts and emotions.

Brianna described occasions when she had something on her mind that she was not

expressing. One of the horses, Gypsy, would pace back and forth and her therapist,

observing this, would ask her if there was something she needed to talk about. "And I

wasn't going to say anything, but he was able to show that something's going on. He

would not stop pacing until I got what it was off my chest."

All of the participants stated that they often were either unaware of their own

thoughts and emotions or not expressing them. The horses sensed and responded to this

incongruence immediately and authentically, sometimes by moving away or putting their

ears back. Brianna often arrived for her session with emotions roiling, like a

thunderstorm brewing internally.

Sometimes if I was thinking all kinds of negative thoughts and my mind was

spiraling, some of them would move away from me and keep on moving away

and I wondered why…I would get upset because I thought they didn't like

me…my therapist helped me to see that they are responding to what is going on in

my head.

After increasing participants' self-awareness and expression of these hidden

emotions, the horses demonstrated understanding and empathy. Georgia remembered one

such incident as the calm after a storm.

And then after I had cried and then I stopped and I just over to the round pen

fence and put my arms up and watched them…they were just eating the hay, and

then Denver and Zephyr just walked over to the side of the pen and let me pet

them and they were all calm…And then I talk to them and then I pet them, and then everything's fine. It's like it's operating on my mind.

For all of the participants, the experience of feeling understood without the effort of having to use words was a tremendous relief. Brianna recalled,

I thought it was comforting that they could understand how I was feeling. I don't even have to say it. They just know it without me saying anything. Because with people, you have to say how you're feeling, but with horses, they can just feel it.

Similarly, Kasey expressed relief that she didn't have to explain herself.

But with them, I didn't have to explain anything, they didn't ask me any questions, they didn't have any solutions, they were just there and I think that is what a lot of people forget to do… For the first time I just felt like I could just be present.

Danika compared some prior experiences in traditional therapy with her experience of feeling understood by the horses in EAP.

Instead of being in that situation, with my anxiety and my ADHD and the trauma, it's just too much to be there in a closed room, you feel uncomfortable and they're not trying to pressure you, but you feel pressured and how do you feel? And I don't know what I'm feeling right now. That's why I'm here. You tell me how I feel and it leaves a bad taste in your mouth. That's just why I never stuck with any sort of therapy.

In contrast, she said that the horses understood how she felt before she or the therapist realized it. Frequently, she arrived at sessions feeling anxious, frustrated, and unable to focus.

> I just sit there and hang out and pet them and just take that moment in..because sometimes that's all I need…just to hang out with them and decompress. And they'll pick up a lot of time on my anxiety. If we are talking about something and I start to feel a little anxious. They will pick up on it before she does and they'll move me. They'll start walking somewhere else. And then she's like, "Okay, I guess you don't want to talk about that right now". They don't want you to talk about that. So, cause I guess they'll just start feeling what I'm feeling about whatever subject. And they're just like, "Nope, she doesn't want to do that". I'm so amazed at how.

Beyond understanding, the horses demonstrated empathy. Brianna described a miniature horse, Winnifred, who would put her nose on the area where she was feeling tension.

> She knows how to be very comforting to me. And she'll put her nose…if I'm feeling down, she'll put her nose on my chest… it sounds silly, but to me it was like she was feeling empathy.

Feeling Accepted. Perhaps even more profound than feeling understood, all four participants described the stunning impact of feeling accepted by the horses. For example, Kasey recalled that she felt the horses accepted her from the very beginning,

and because of this, she felt permitted to acknowledge, experience, and express her emotions.

I didn't have to explain anything to them, and they were just there. It was like they could feel my energy and they didn't mind it, which is something that I struggled with for a long time. I'm very used to not being able to express my emotions…I always felt like if I ever expressed anything I was feeling, people would judge me and push me aside…people would yell at me or make me feel like I shouldn't be feeling this way.. but when I was with them I could just be, I could sit, I could cry and…it was just peaceful…it taught me that it's okay to feel the things that you feel.

Danika described how the horses'unconditional acceptance helped her to feel less alone.

I have a lot to say to them. I've had full on conversations and they're just there…And then when you're with these animals, they don't judge you…Most of the time they're just, they don't judge, they love you for who you are…They're just like, 'Oh, you're feeling anxious. Here let me come bonk you with my nose'…And when I'm talking to these horses I'm like, 'Okay, I'm not so alone'. Not everyone's against me or judging me or watching, waiting for me to fail. It really puts a different perspective on it…It's very nice just to not be feeling so alone.

Like Kasey, Georgia experienced the horses' calm acceptance as liberating. She could express her emotions openly and honestly.

I could cry, I could break down, I could scream, I could yell, I could do whatever I wanted to do. And they were still going to be there. They weren't going to yell at me. They weren't going to tell me I was wrong. They weren't going to tell me that I was stupid for making the decisions I was making or for being in the relationship I was in or anything like that. They were just going to let me be…

In the preceding section, the participants described how the horses sensed and responded to unexpressed emotions and thoughts. When participants acknowledged and expressed these emotions honestly and congruently, the horses remained calm and showed little reaction. For instance, Danika described how the horses' calm acceptance helped her to regulate her own emotions.

They don't respond to anything. I mean they do, but if I was to have a meltdown, like a panic attack…they just don't respond to that. They literally are just like, 'I am going to eat this hay. You can keep melting down or keep getting mad because you can't move me. But I am not going to have a response'…I mean, I wasn't having a full on meltdown, but they were feeling my thoughts. Like you are angry. Like I was a child. We're going to let you go ahead and have this fit. Throw your fit and when you're done, come and talk to me when you're being more reasonable.

Feeling Comforted. All four participants described the experience of physical touch with the horses as healing and comforting. They highlighted the actions of petting the horses, grooming them, and being touched by the horses as meaningful moments.

This physical closeness, together with feeling understood and accepted, led to an emotional closeness and intimacy. Brianna noted,

> Winnifred will just come over to me and just have her face really close to my face or put her head on my shoulder and just hang out with me and just be…it's very comforting how sweet she was....physical touch means more to me.

For Kasy, there was a tremendous sense of relief that came from literally leaning on the horses.

> And I would go up to them and I was able to put my arms on their backs and just rest my forehead on them, and they would stay there and it's almost a relief to not have to hold my arms up myself.

Physical contact with the horses acted as a catalyst for the expression and processing of emotion. Kasey recalled a time when she was petting Jericho, and she suddenly began to sob.

> And he like leaned into me. And then I put my arms on his back again and just leaned on him, and he just kept leaning more and more into me…it was very comforting, for sure.

In addition to the comfort of physical touch, Danika described her belief that the horses tried to feed her and nurture her emotionally. She felt that the horses attuned to her and selflessly provided what she needed at any given moment.

> One of them gives me hay every time I come, he brings it over to me. I don't know why. He brings it to me in his mouth. I guess I need some hay. It's almost like they shift their mood or behaviors to how I'm feeling…I go there and they're

there for me. It's the 100%. They're there just for my needs. I'm not going there to feed them or anything. They're there anyway…You are feeling sad this week. We're going to be silly and do silly things and make you laugh. If I'm feeling I had a bad week and I just need more quiet, then they'll bring me more hay or they'll nudge on me. Or if I'm trying to focus more on the activity that we're doing or something to work on my anxiety, then they make me focus more. They kind of lead me to that, you know?

Feeling Safe. For all of the participants, the experience of feeling accepted, understood, and comforted culminated in a feeling of emotional and physical safety. For example, Georgia felt safe enough to debrief with the horses about mistakes she had made during a challenging day.

And if I had a particularly bad day or if I messed up during a counseling session and I was frustrated with myself, things like that, I would go out there and just talk to them about it. And they would neigh, they would nuzzle me. It's a very safe space and they created a safe space for me to go and to have that outlet without feeling like I'm going to have somebody else judging me for what I just did that day or what I screwed up on or whatever…And I think they're my safe space now.

Kasey described a time when two of the horses sandwiched her between them as they stood facing opposite directions.

So I think maybe they were…maybe they thought that I was a little vulnerable, so they wanted to protect me in their instinctual way. I don't know, but that's how I felt…I felt very safe.

Feeling Valued. The horses were most often free to move around at will within an enclosure. All four participants remarked that when the horses chose to be near them, they believed it was because the horses liked them. This led to feeling valued for all of the participants. For example, Georgia recalled,

I'd go out in the pasture and they would just come up to you, come around you and show you, like they have all this space. They could just take off running from you, they could go do whatever they wanted and they come up and they just surround you and they nuzzle you and let you pet them while they're chewing the grass…It's so good and it's so calming. And again, it provides just that safe space, that sense of worth, because I think animals much more than people know if people are good and if people are kind and if people are doing what they're supposed to do. And I think when animals love you, then that's showing that you're doing what you're supposed to do.

Kasey remembered that when she would arrive at the arena, one of the horses, Pepper, would come over to her and greet her, and just hang out next to her,

Kind of like, 'Okay, well, this is my person', that's what it felt like…like I made an actual connection with him…they accept me, they remember me, and they like me.

At first, Danika felt that the horses were indifferent to her because they just continued to eat when she would arrive. After some time getting to know her, however, the horses greeted her when she drove up for her sessions, and she felt that they were happy to see her. Both horses, Chico and Clover, followed her when she walked in the arena without being on a lead. It made her feel warm inside, like she was someone special to them.

> When I go to the horses, just them running up to my car or when I get to the gate just makes everything so much better and I feel so much better…And that they both want to always be in the arena with me. They make me feel special…or sometimes, I'll just walk off to do whatever for the exercise and they will both come with me. That makes me feel special. My energy must be good…all the horses think I'm very special.

> **Being Real.** Horses do not dissemble as human beings often do. Two participants talked about the impact of the horses' honest and genuine behaviors. Kasey remembered that Pepper was always dirty because he like to roll in the mud, and every time she came for a session, she would brush the dirt out. And his just being real, just being himself, helped her to have the confidence to just be herself, without worrying about what others thought.

Danika described how, through nonverbal communication, one of the horses offered her honest feedback and helped her to clarify her thoughts.

> So I was taking Clover for our daily walk and I was just expressing to him through my week about some silly things that were bothering me like fighting

with this boyfriend and whatever. And then I was like, "Well, what do you think about that?" Like literally, I was like, "What do you think I should do?", like I would talk to a person. And he just stopped and looked at me, and not that he was being judgy, he was being very honest. The look on his face was like, "Really? You're going to let that bother you." I'm not even kidding. He literally was just like. And I was like, okay, we're going to continue with our walk and we're not going to talk about that anymore. He was very honest. And they're always very honest.

Feeling Oneness. Three participants reported feeling a sense of twinship, or oneness, with the horses. Georgia, for instance, felt that one mare, Caramel, was more responsive to her and identified with her because she was at the bottom of the herd's social hierarchy.

I think she's the one who picks up the most or reacts the most when I'm feeling sad or down. And I think because she's at the bottom, I think sometimes she's feeling sad and down...And so I kind of feel that with her where if you're sad and stuff, she's like, "Me too," like she gets it, you know. She'll neigh or something to get my attention, and then I'll go over and she'll just put her head down and let me pet her. So it's like she's the one who picks up on sadness…It's almost like she grabs my attention and says, 'Hey, come here. Let me give you some attention because you're not feeling good today.'

For Brianna, this feeling of oneness consisted of recognizing that she and the horses had similar needs and wants at times, such as when it was an extremely hot day and the horses moved into the barn, and she also felt relief from the heat.

Danika described a feeling of oneness that came from both needing the horse and being needed. She is a veterinary technician, and Clover had a cut on his foot that had become infected. The therapist had been working with a vet in treating the cut with antibiotics.

> I was relying on them. It was just a day I was relying on the horse very much. It was a hard week and I think I cried the entire session and it was one of the ones where I just hung out with the horses, but it was like, he literally just brought me his hoof…I was just like, oh I have this ointment in my car… I went and I just cleaned it for him and I put the ointment on him and then I gave it to her…And then by the next week it was completely healed…and he came up to me and the first thing he did was like put his hoof back out at me and I was like, look at it. It looks so much better. Like I felt very at one I needed him so much and he was like, I need you too.

The experience of the horse needing her as much as she needed him and being able to help him was a bonding experience.

Admiration. All of the participants expressed feeling admiration for some of the qualities the horses possessed, together with the wish to be more like them. For example, Brianna admired the strength and gentleness of the horses and worked to develop a balance of those qualities in herself. Similarly, Kasey admired the strength of the horses.

She also admired the compassion that Jericho, a retired racehorse who had been worked hard on the track, showed toward her during their sessions. Danika noted that she would like to be as calm and centered as the horses.

Loss of Relationship. Two of the participants spoke of how the loss of relationship with the horses affected them. Brianna described how one of the horses with whom she felt closest, Spirit, became ill and had to be euthanized. She was emotionally devastated. She spent a session saying goodbye to her, brushing her and putting conditioner on her mane.

> At one point, I just started crying with her. And she was really calm with me. I was worried that I was going to upset her because I was upset…but she was just standing with me the whole time…it was horribly hard for me to actually step away from her completely. And I knew I'd never see her again when I did that. That was extremely hard, and it was hard for me to see her empty stall…I still get sad about it sometimes.

Although Danika was still doing weekly sessions at the time of the interview, she described how even a brief interruption in sessions upset her.

> When the therapist was out of town for the two weeks…and I didn't get to go see the horses, I was so depressed and sad like because I look forward to it that much. So, and I just was like, wow, they really have a big impact. So just mainly stressing the importance of that.

To summarize this theme, all four participants said that from the moment they arrived, the horses understood their thoughts and emotions, and they described a

tremendous sense of relief at being understood without having to use words. More than just understanding, the participants all stated that the horses demonstated empathy for them. The horses' understanding helped them to become more self-aware and congruent. All four also felt that the horses accepted them unconditionally, no matter what they brought to a session, and that this calm acceptance encouraged them to express themselves honestly and openly. All of the participants felt comforted by physical touch from the horses. These experiences of being understood, accepted, and comforted, shared by all of the participants, led to feeling physically and emotionally safe with the horses. They described first spending time with the horses before talking with the therapist, and all four described feeling an increased sense of safety while talking with the therapist when the horses were nearby. When the horses came to greet them and chose to stay close to them, the participants all expressed feeling special and valued. In addition, two of the participants stated that the horses' genuine, honest behaviors helped them to be more true to themselves as well as providing clarity. The feeling of oneness, or twinship, was described by three participants, who talked about having the same wants and needs as the horses and of a reciprocity of needing one another. The participants felt admiration and a desire to be like the horses. Finally, two of the participants described the emotional impact of the loss of the relationship with the horses as devastating and upsetting.

Relationship with Therapist

In this third theme, participants shared their experiences of the relationship with the EAP therapist. The therapist was present during sessions with the horses, often standing on the sideline, observing the horses' behavior and checking in with participants

regarding their experiences, and processing afterwards. This theme encompasses seven invariant constituents *feeling understood, feeling accepted, feeling comforted, feeling safe, feeling empowered, being real,* and *admiration.*

Feeling Understood. All four participants described feeling understood by the therapist. Like the horses, the therapist at times could pick up on emotions and unspoken thoughts, by reading nonverbal language. For example, Kasey recalled feeling that the therapist (and equine specialist) understood her without her having to say much, and allowed her the freedom to make sense of things in her own way.

> So I think that they picked up on some things that I didn't really have to say out loud, but I guess from just my social cues or my responses to some things…I felt they understood that I lived a life where everybody else was telling me how I feel and what I should do…so they let me just be me, and process the things in a way that makes me more secure myself, rather than finding validation through somebody else. They made me validate myself.

Similarly, Danika noted that her therapist often could read her emotions without her having to say anything.

> And I got out of my car one day, maybe my hair was just crazy because my hair reflects how I'm feeling. I swear. But she was like, you had a bad week. And I was like, yes, it was a rough week. She's like, all right. Well you just go ahead and if you want to work on an activity, we can. But if you don't, you just want to be with the horses and take that in. I'm cool with that too. She already knew just by looking at me. So that's kind of cool.

Brianna remembered that her therapist, too, could tell what she was feeling without words, and that she also demonstrated empathy for how she was feeling.

> She has a lot of empathy for me, I can tell it from her face and she has learned over time, she can read what's going on with me too. She'll point it out to me. She can even tell if I might want to say something, but I'm not saying it. So she can also tell that too. And I think other times, my therapist would ask me if I'm feeling really sad about something that happened, she'll share that emotion with me and she'll feel that she's sad about that there or disappointed that happened or even angry that someone did something like that to me. Shown that as well, like when I'm angry, she'll be angry as well. And that validates it for me.

Feeling Accepted. The four participants all recalled feeling unconditionally accepted by the therapist. Brianna reflected that initially she feared negative evaluation and rejection by the therapist, but trust eventually replaced fear.

> When I tell her about my past and it's something that's happened to me, I'll be convinced that she's not going to want to be around me, or she's going to say horrible things about me, then she proves me wrong over and over again that she's understanding…What I thought was going to happen didn't happen. She didn't see me any differently.

Her therapist's unconditional acceptance helped her to feel safe enough to continue to share and process more of her trauma.

> And it helped me to open up to her after seeing so that she's safe and that she's still going to treat me the same, after I said the part about the thing that had

happened. One thing that she did, I think part of me would think that she would

have this disgusted look with me or something and she never did that. And she

just would show sadness over, and she reminds me of my thoughts were coming

from or she would understand that what happened to me wasn't my fault and it

was all on the person who did it to me. So she's able to show compassion and not

disgust… so lots of empathy. And so I talked to her about something that

happened to me and then she would start crying a little bit, not crying crying, but

there'd be a few tears or something so that showed me too that she really cared a

lot and had a lot of empathy for me.

Kasey felt accepted by the therapist and equine specialist, as well. At their first

meeting, she recalled,

I was a wreck. I had been crying all morning, I had been crying for the last two

days, I show up, I look a mess and they didn't say anything. I apologized…and

they're like, no, it's fine, it's okay.

She never felt judged by them. They told her, "You're coming into this arena, the horses

don't care what you came from, but they just care who you are now, right now».

Georgia experienced her therapist's acceptance as validating and normalizing.

She had her, her ways of just making it so I was able to talk and I felt safe and I

felt calm. She would make me feel like what I was feeling was normal, was okay.

To be able to have that space where she was like, "No, it's okay. You don't have to

be strong all the time. And if you pretend like you're strong all the time, what

happens? You end up with panic attacks, you end up with those feelings of

anxiety and all of that." So she really gave me that safe space to say, "It's okay to not be okay. It's okay to feel what you're feeling and you have every reason to be feeling what you're feeling."

Similarly, Danika recalled that her therapist's calm acceptance, like that of the horses, provided an anchor and safe harbor in the storm that is her life, and helped her to calm her own emotions.

There have been times where I've shown up a little late and then we've gone over into her next hour, which would be her own personal time just to cover for me. And again, I'm running, I'm like, I'm so sorry. I'm texting her madly. Like I'm doing voice texts and it's not even English because I'm so anxious… And I got there and she came out with her coffee. Like, what's up? You ready? She's like her horses no reaction. She's like, okay, you be that hot mess. I'm just over here with my coffee and we're going to let you be.

Feeling Comforted. In the relationships with the horses all of the participants expressed feeling comforted, in particular due to physical touch with the horses. One participant, Brianna, reported feeling comforted by physical touch from her therapist. She reported that after demonstrating understanding and acceptance, her therapist would hug her, and this was very comforting to her.

One time I went in and I told her some memories that I had about my past, they were really hard. And she hugged me afterwards and that felt really reassuring to me and it showed that she cares about me a lot and values me. And she knew hugs were... I really like hugs, so she would hug me more and I definitely like it.

Feeling Safe. All of the participants talked about feeling safe with their therapists. Feeling safe was entwined with feeling understood, feeling accepted, and feeling comforted. The horses were always nearby when the participants talked with the therapist. Brianna said about her therapist, "She's probably the person that I've felt the safest with in my whole life".

Kasey also felt safe with her therapist (and equine specialist). She said, "They're like, 'We're in no position to judge you. This is a safe space.' I always felt very safe there". When she was ready to talk, she noted «they listened to me, and they let me be heard and cared for".

Similarly, Georgia and Danika expressed feeling safe while talking with their therapists. Georgia said,

> I was just saying that she kept it very much the power was in my hands. She was going to call me out, but at the same time, in a very safe way, in a safe space. And she didn't push me before I was ready to be pushed on anything.

This feeling of safety generated trust, and enabled them to open up and honestly process thoughts and feelings.

Being Real. Three participants talked about experiencing their therapists as being real. Georgia experienced genuineness as well as directness from her therapist.

> Seeing how honest she was about her own stuff and how honest she was just with calling me out, like, "You don't like it. Okay. What are we going to do?" Just being that honest, that open, that not afraid to ask those questions. She was very, "Let's address it right now. Why hide from it? Why bury that?"

Her therapist related to her as to an equal, without the professional distancing that can maintain power imbalances.

> I mean when I would open up and talk about what was going on, she'd be like, "That sucks." "That's shitty." And just her being able to use the real language with me just made us feel equals. We were on equal playing field…She was grooming a horse while I was grooming a horse. So we were talking and we were equals. It really took the pressure off of the therapeutic relationship for me, where everything seemed much more natural… there's not all that pressure. It's just kind of like a natural flow of conversation when things come out and process them without feeling like you're under a microscope kind of, I guess.

Brianna noted that her therapist would be honest with her about her feelings regarding her choices, and this only affirmed her feeling that her therapist cared about her.

> She would sometimes talk about her frustration about maybe if with me... it was not... I have trouble with this sometimes but she was explaining to me how her frustrations were because she cares about me and I wasn't doing something that she wants that would be best for me. Or she would share that "It's hard for me to hear," is still what she shared with that with me. Also, if it was hard for her to hear is still show me that she did care about me a lot because she wants what's best for me and I wasn't doing what was best for me.

Danika noted that her therapist was honest and genuine, and used self disclosure to help build rapport and trust with her. Her approach was relaxed and nondirective.

You don't feel like you're being interrogated so much. She's very laid back herself and she's like, "Okay, if you don't want to do that, I'm just going to go over here and continue my daily chores". You can go do whatever you want…She's just very relaxed… I relate to her so much because she shared with me a little bit about her own social anxiety.

Her therapist demonstrated attunement and humor. One day Danika came running out of her car with only one shoe on.

I'm running here because I'm late. But let me go back to my car and get my shoe. She's just like, okay, you just told me 10 emotions in 30 seconds. So, I'm going to take my shoe off and we're going to redo this, go back to your car, bring your shoe back and we'll put our shoes on together and we'll start over. And I was like, oh, thank God.

Feeling Empowered. Three of the participants described feeling empowered, both in the therapy process and in their lives. Georgia stated that the control and direction of the therapy was left in her hands. The therapist let her know that she believed in her ability to figure things out on her own.

She would give you prompts to help you process what you were seeing out there and work through it…And she would be like, "What do you think that's about?" So it was very much they didn't let her own interpretations influence how I was seeing things and were just there to make sure that there was a safe environment… I could figure this out, I had the tools already to figure it out and maybe I just needed the horses to help push me there… And then when I started

crying and that, she just gave me my space and let me do it and let me process it. And she offered that processing time afterwards.

Kasey recalled that the therapist and equine specialist respected her choice to leave AA and affirmed her capacity to make her own decisions and to be in control of her own life. When she shared with them about her relationship with her boyfriend and asked them when she should stop waiting, they simply helped her to clarify the possible outcomes of waiting.

Again just putting the ball back in my court, not telling me what to do, not thinking they know the answers, they were just letting me figure it out on my own…it's up to me to make the decision.

The therapist often told her, "You're pretty logical, you can think things through. You don't need anybody else to tell you anything, you can do this".

Similarly, Danika felt in control of the therapy sessions. The therapist observed her process and stayed out of the way, following her lead.

She doesn't judge me when I talk to the horses instead of her, because she's like, if you don't want to talk to me, I'll go about my day, but I'm here. And it's very, very casual. It's kind of like, letting me be in control…we're going to meet your needs, whatever you need, don't want me here or... And she'll sometimes step back on her own. She'll just realize the connection that I'm having or the moment that I'm experiencing. I'm not even realizing it. And before I know it she's over off to the side. Just letting me experience the moment.

When the therapist allowed her to doctor the horse's foot, Danika felt respected and validated.

Admiration. Two of the participants spoke of admiration for their therapists and wanting to be more like them. For example, Brianna admired her therapist's loyalty and persistence in sticking with her and not giving up on her.

> I admire that she's stayed with me this whole time even if I get frustrated with her or I'm never mean to her, but different things that I might just keep on being stubborn or maybe a little bit of hard time or me not listening to her or something like that. And she still stays with me. And it's been really cool.

In addition, Brianna admired her therapist's work ethic and the fact that she had been through her own trauma and done the hard work of healing.

> And maybe just how hard she's worked to get her business and just the things she's been through, and how hard she's worked towards healing and how hard she's worked at healing before she can help other people.

Danika stated that she admired the therapist's calm centeredness and wanted to be more like her.

In this third theme, participants described their relationship with the therapist. As with the relationship with the horse, participants said that they felt understood by the therapist, sometimes without verbal communication, and that the therapist demonstrated empathy. They experienced this understanding and empathy as validating. The experinced of acceptance by the therapist was highlighted by all of the participants, and this acceptance led to feeling safe, validated, and more calm. Only one of the participants,

Brianna, reported feeling comforted by her therapist. As with the horses, physical touch in the form of hugs from her therapist was comforting to her. All of the participants felt safe with the therapist. This sense of safety enabled them to trust and to be honest. There were three participants who spoke of the therapist being genuine and real through using humor, self disclosure, and being direct. Three of the participants spoke of feeling empowered by the therapist. This stemmed from the therapist allowing them space, respecting their autonomy and capacity to solve problems and make good decisions, and following their lead during sessions. Finally, two of the participants noted that the admired their therapists for their persistence, loyalty, hard work, and calm centeredness. It is interesting to note that several of the invariant constituents within this theme are identical to those within the previous theme, relationship with the horse. However, the current theme did not include the invariant constituents *feeling valued, feeling oneness*, and *loss of relationship*, but contained one new invariant constituent, *feeling empowered*.

Relationship with Equine Specialist

This theme, regarding participants' experiences of relationship with the equine specialist, was much less developed than the previous themes of relationship with the horses and relationship with the therapist. For two of the four participants, it seems clear that the this theme included the invariant constituents *feeling understood, feeling accepted,* and *feeling safe.*

One of the participants, Danika, stated that there was not an equine specialist present during her therapy sessions. Another participant, Georgia, said that the equine

specialist was present during sessions, but that she did not have much interaction with

her.

> So we didn't have a lot of interaction other than being introduced to the equine
>
> specialist. There wasn't a lot there because they were there just to watch the
>
> horse's behavior, make sure the horses were behaving safely. I mean, there's
>
> always that level of risk, but they could pick up if a horse was getting really angry
>
> or something and was putting the ears back or something like that where
>
> somebody could be unsafe.

Georgia added that the equine specialist observed the horses to detect unusual responses

that might be important and would share those observations with the therapist or

sometimes ask the participant what they thought was happening.

> So really for them, they were just there to make sure it was safe and to say, "What
>
> do you think is going on there?" If the horses were being different, they would be
>
> like, "What do you think that's about?" But that's really what they would do, is
>
> just to try to give you prompts to help you process what you were seeing out there
>
> and work through it.

> For the other two particpants, Brianna and Kasey, the equine specialists were

present during the therapy sessions with the therapist, and took a more active role.

Brianna described her relationship with the equine specialist as "really close». She said

that she felt accepted and understood by the equine specialist.

> I would always talk to her about the same things I talked to my therapist about,
>
> but I'd go into some of the stuff with my equine specialist as well that were hard

for me to talk about. And having her not reject me as well and to still accept me

after what I said and being understanding of what I talked about even.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, when the EAP sessions were suspended, Brianna

continued to have virtual sessions with her therapist, and she said that she talked to the

equine specialist on the phone once a week as well. The equine specialist sent her

photographs of the horses.

Kasey often used the pronoun "they" during the interview, referring to both the

therapist and equine specialist, when describing her relationship with them. I have

indicated this above by putting equine specialist in parentheses.

Although this theme was less supported than the previous two themes, two of the

four participants expressed feeling understood, feeling accepted, and feeling safe in the

relationship with the equine specialist. One participant did not have a relationship with

the equine specialist as there was none present. And one participant said that the equine

specialist was present but there was not alot of interaction; the role of the equine

specialist was to ensure safety.

Lessons

In the fifth theme, participants described the lessons they learned through their

interactions with the horses, therapist, and equine specialist. This theme included 5

invariant constituents: *boundaries/assertiveness, grounding, emotion regulation,*

congruence, and internal locus of control.

Boundaries/Assertiveness. Three of the participants said that they learned how to

become more assertive and to set boundaries with the horses and then were able to

transfer these skills to relationships outside of the arena. Brianna described an incident in which she struggled with setting a boundary with a horse. She wanted to bring a horse named Sugar, who was at the bottom of the equine hierarchy, into her world in the arena but another more dominant horse kept forcing her way in, and she had to push her out over and over again, feeling more and more frustrated. She associated this horse with her mother, who was "not always kind…my mom was abusive". With the help of her therapist, she was able to successfully balance assertiveness with gentleness and the horse stayed away. With another horse, whose behavior included putting her ears back and tossing her head,

> I learned to say no…I put my hand up to make her see she couldn't be that way…I would be kind, but let her know that she can't treat me that way…so I got to enjoy the time with her and build a connection with her.

> She was able to apply these lessons to interactions with people in her life. "So it helped me to see that bringing boundaries with other people…being kind actually gets you further and it helps getting my point across as well".

> Kasey described a time when a horse set a boundary with her. She was brushing a horse a little too hard, he whipped his head around to her with his ears back to show her that he was uncomfortable. She said that this was her first lesson in boundaries, and it "kind of showed me like that it's okay to ask for what you want and what you need. It's okay. Just be truthful with yourself and with other people.»

She felt that the horses taught her many lessons. Another lesson was how to be more independent. She would watch the horses grazing in the pasture, taking care of themselves.

So it taught me a lot about like interpersonal relationships. To get the most respect out of people, you don't have to be there all the time. You don't have to be clingy, you don't. I don't have to be asking for attention, I can just be. I can be myself, I can go walk around the arena, pick up some dandelions and hang out with the flowers, look at butterflies, and then eventually they come over to me and I think that was a really important lesson that I needed to learn for my personal life.

Georgia noted that the assertive way a younger female horse, Zephyr, resisted the male horse's attempts to dominate her helped her to identify her own passive and enabling behaviors and to resurrect her own power and make changes in her life.

Zephyr was fighting back and she was pushing back. And I think that was the moment for me, where I was like, I need to be her. Right? I used to be her, where'd I go? So it was really her who made me break down that day because she was like, 'I'm not giving in. This isn't going to happen to me. You're not going to put me through this. You're not going to control me.' I was just like, I need that. I need to have that fire back…After that day with those horses, I was like, okay, enough is enough. And I need to change my behavior because I'm going home and just skirting around his behavior instead of being like, "No, this isn't okay. We can't do this anymore." And so it got me to the point where I was like, okay, I

can go in there. I can say this and whatever happens, it's going to happen. We're

going to be just fine regardless.

Through her experiences of therapeutic relationships with the horses and the therapist,

she became more self aware, congruent, and assertive.

Where before, I would've been a people pleaser…I would've let things just go and

I would've dealt with it and carried it. Right? Now I'll go, "That's not okay. And I

didn't like what..." If there's a problem that I need to address, I'm going to be like,

"I'm not okay with this." Regardless if it's my home relationships, things with

kids, things at other work places, at school. It makes it so I can be much more

congruent with myself and be much more authentic because again, I'm not just

floating through, like, everything's fine or letting people mistreat me, like I would

have in the past. I'm much more apt to be like, "You know what? I didn't like how

that went and I didn't like how that felt. So I need to make a change now." So it

forces me to go from, internalizing it, to reflecting on it, to figuring it out and to

make actionable steps to make sure that I'm continuing to live the life that I want

to live.

Grounding. Two participants described how the horses helped to ground them in

the present moment. Georgia described going to the barn to spend time with the horses

when she felt triggered by something that had occurred in her field placement.

So if I'm experiencing like meeting with a client and there's something that

triggers something from my childhood or anything like that, I go to the barn. I go

to the smells of the hay, and usually it's after the session and I'll take like that 15

minutes and just close your eyes… Before that I used to go to like the woods and the creek and things like that, but now it's the barn. I think of the smell and I think of the touch the horses and they are now my safe place to go even when I'm not around them. I go there.

Kasey stated that being with and observing the horses was grounding and taught her how to be present in the moment. "I had a really bad habit of only looking at my life in the future, and never thinking about what I'm actually doing right now". She watched the horses in the pasture grazing, moving around to find better grass, and continuing to eat calmly when it started to rain.

> You can take a minute to rest, to nourish and to do whatever you want to do. It doesn't matter what anyone else says or does, all that matters is what you're doing and how that makes you feel…When I start to get overwhelmed or I start to think too much in the future, I just think of them eating…what I needed to do and what they helped me to do was ground myself, stop looking at the future, stop looking at the past, and just look at what I need to do right now…maybe just eat a bunch of grass and just hang out…Maybe that is what I have to do…like yesterday it started to pour and I had to go to the grocery store…as I was walking to the store I just stood there and just let the rain hit me, and just slow down and just be grateful that it is raining.

Emotion Regulation. One participant, Danika, described the ways in which the horses and the therapist helped her to regulate her emotions more effectively. On one

occasion she was trying to get one of the horses to move, but he refused to move. He

simply ignored her and continued eating.

> That was very frustrating for me because I was like, come on horse and then
>
> trying to make it move. And the more frustrated I got, the harder they resisted
>
> me. But when I took a breath and calmed down and I got confident about like,
>
> "Come, we're going to go." Then they come with me.

It was a reminder that calm, assertive, confident behavior elicits better responses from

others.

> She perseverated in emotions of anger and anxiety and suffered from high blood

pressure. She felt that the horses showed her how to better manage her emotions by

acknowledging them, experiencing them, and letting go.

> Focus on the important stuff. It isn't that your feelings, are not valid, but you don't
>
> need to be spending so much energy here… recognize it, feel the feelings and
>
> move on is what I've been trying to learn… I feel like he's saying just you can be
>
> angry, feel that anger, and then just let it go.

She said that letting go was the lesson she has been working that has been the most

difficult.

> It literally just like, because of my anxiety and overthinking and then I get,
>
> everything's a catastrophe and end of the world…And I still to have moments of
>
> like, oh, I'm so annoyed. And then I'm like, eh, well. Just like when we did the
>
> noodle exercise and we got to the anger and he just kicks the noodle. And I was
>
> like, "You're right. Because the more I sit in my anger, the more I'm putting more

energy into nothing. There's no point. There's nothing that's going to change it. I can only change how I feel about it. And so I'm only making myself miserable. You're right. Let's just move on and keep walking forward." That's how I took it, I just went on with my day. It's not the end of the world. I need to stop catastrophizing my life.

She had spent many years in traditional therapy in the past and knew and had tried many coping strategies. She felt that these did not work for her, almost as if they were cliches.

One of the first things that we ever did was, she's like, "Take a deep breath." And I'm like, "Like I have never heard that before." Not trying to sound like an ass but, of course I know take a deep breath. But my problem is I've heard it so many times and I know all the things. That when I'm in one of my spins or anxiety attack or everything's taking over, I literally know, this part of my brain is not firing to this part of your brain and now I'm being ridiculous and overreacting, which just causes me to be more upset at myself and just make the whole matters worse.

Her therapist pointed out something that she did not know about how anxiety affects the body. This led to her experiencing increased respect for and trust in her therapist, as well as increasing her sense of control over her own body and emotions.

I actually did not know this, she told me when you're anxious, physically what happens to your body, like your eyes will cross, that's why you drop things all the time. And I was like, "Oh my gosh, I thought it was just me being a klutz." And so one day I was anxious, running late for work, lost my keys like I do every day,

and I was like, okay, stop, take a breath… And then it was like, there are my keys,

there is this. And it was so bizarre. I used to always just be like, it's just me. I have

bad luck. And everything happens to me. And when she's like, just take a breath.

But once she explained that to me, I was like, oh my gosh, I had no idea that, that

was what your body does. So yes, I do need to take a breath and calm my senses

down, my anxiety, so my body will stop having all this adrenaline and make me

do all these crazy things.

Congruence. Three of the participants talked about how the horses assisted them

in learning the importance of congruence in interpersonal relationships. They described

how the horses and the therapist helped them to first become aware of their unconscious

or unexpressed emotions, and then to express them. Brianna described how the horses

immediately sensed and reacted to incongruent affect and emotion. She stated she learned

«to express them and not just keep on pushing them down».

For Kasey, the horses taught her to "be truthful with yourself and other people".

Georgia's experiences with the horses had a profound impact on her self-

awareness and congruence.

I was going through life like everything was fine when inside it wasn't, and I think

the horses could sense that and could pick up on that and it made them like a little

bit like hyper, because Zephyr would always get a little squirrely and stuff when I

would go in there and I'd try to pet her and she'd get all antsy and throw her head.

So that was definitely noticeable to me where I think for me their way to call me

out and say that I wasn't being congruent with how I was really feeling inside that

what I was presenting to the outside world wasn't what was going on inside. And I

think that they could pick up on that, so they weren't comfortable with trusting

because I think they could tell that something wasn't adding up there.

The horses' authentic and in vivo responses made her aware of her unconscious emotions
and thoughts as well as unhealthy patterns in her life.

But yeah, the horses were able to call me out on what I was holding inside…they

can always tell when someone's not presenting themselves as what they're saying

on the outside, isn't what's really going on in the inside. So it's almost like they

were acting out what I needed them to act out, and then as soon as I got the

emotions out, they calmed right down and came over…And it's almost like they

find a way to make me okay. I feel like they're telling me, like, "You're lying right

now. You're not okay."

Internal Locus of Control. One participant, Kasey, said that when the horses
responded to unacknowledged emotion or incongruence by moving away from her, it
helped her to become more aware of her emotions and to make more accurate attributions
for the horses' behavior. Her locus of control became more internal.

Say for example, if I'm being anxious or I'm scared or I'm angry, that's the reason

that I put with them walking away. It wasn't just me, it's not just me thinking, 'Oh,

they don't like me.' It's like, 'No. You need to chill out, and it's not that they don't

like you, it's just that your energy is crap and if you want to be more attractive or

more relatable to people or to even the animals, you got to chill out…There is

something going on with me that is causing these things to happen and if I can

take a step back and look at the bigger picture, and my role in it, then that's how I can heal and how I can fix things…If I create peace within myself, then the things around me will start to become more peaceful.

Through their relationship and interactions with the horses and the therapist, all of the participants stated that they had learned some important lessons. Three of the participants spoke of how interacting with the horses helped them to learn how to set more healthy boundaries in their relationships, how to balance assertiveness with gentleness, and how to take care of one's own needs. For two of the participants, spending time with the horses taught them how to be present and grounded in the moment. One participant, Danika, said that the horses and the therapist helped her to regulate her emotions by taking a breath, acknowledging and experiencing her emotions, and then letting them go. Three of the participants noted that the horses helped them to become more self aware and congruent in their relationships. And lastly, one participant described how the horses and therapy team helped her to feel more in control over her life through developing an internal locus of control.

Benefits

All of the participants described the benefits resulting from the relationships with the therapist and the horses. They all demonstrated strong emotions when describing these outcomes and the changes in their lives. The invariant constituents *self confidence, self awareness, self esteem,* and *reclaiming and transforming* are included in this theme.

Self Confidence. All of the participants reported increases in self confidence that resulted from their relationships and interactions with the horses. For example, Kasey

recalled an incident when she went up to a horse that was laying down and rubbed his belly. He remained where he was. Later she learned that this took a great deal of trust. For her, this moment of just doing what felt right and receiving a positive response strengthened her confidence in her own intuition and judgment.

Self Awareness. All four participants described how the horses authentic and invivo responses to their unconscious or unexpressed thoughts and feelings helped them to become more self aware. Many examples of this have been provided in previous themes.

Self Esteem. Three of the participants reported increases in self esteem resulting from interactions and relationships with the horses and therapist. For example, Brianna remembered feeling that she is worth something because Winnifred wanted to be close to her.

> I guess I could say that, I think I would say that it made me feel like I was worth something and that I was actually not some horrible person since she wouldn't be by me or spend time with me and seem so relaxed by me. If I was garbage like I used to think I am, the horses wouldn't be around me or hang out with me if I was that way.

Similarly, for Danika, the fact that the horses wanted to be with her increased her self esteem. "And these horses want to hang out with me. I'm cool." She also described how the therapist helped to normalize her anxiety and increase her self esteem.

> She's helped me realize some of the things that I think about myself, cause we're working on self talk and self worth too. Some of the things I tell myself… Like

why can't you pull yourself together? Like it's not all that bad to be in an emergency situation at my job, my anxiety and the fact that I can be so quick and I can do a thousand things at one time. Its actually a benefit. I have anxiety…but I was letting my anxiety define me. Having anxiety is not a bad thing. That's your fight or flight, right? Like that's normal.

Reclaiming and Transforming. All four participants described experiencing positive changes in their lives. For example, Georgia noted that the relationships with the horses and the therapist were redemptive.

I fully attribute them to me being where I am today, because I think I was in kind of a darker place. I think I probably had some depression and stuff going on then because I couldn't get a grasp on what I needed to do…But that's where I was in life and they really helped me to get through that. So I will love those horses till the day I die.They saved me. They gave me my power back. That's the only way I can explain it, is they gave me my power back. They gave me my voice back.

Danika also said that her relationships with the horsess and the therapist changed her life for the better.

I think it's really helping make my life better, change my life, changing my life. I'm reacting to things…It's amazing how your mind frame can change everything. And I have bad days. I do have bad days and I relapse. And then there's sometimes where I'm just stubborn, I'm like, I'm going to feel like this anyways. But for the majority of the part, I think I'm doing better at this point. It's the best thing ever in my life.

Kasey stated that the horses and the therapy team helped her to get to a place where she could think rationally, and then she was able to go and get diagnosed and start taking prescribed medication to help her to manage her mental health.

> They were the first ones in my entire mental breakdown to say 'Okay. You need help, and we are here to help'. I think that they gave me the chance, the opportunity to get better. I don't think I would have been able to do anything that I did without them, so I owe them a lot…I think, I feel like they saved my life.

All four of the participants reported benefits to their lives resulting from their experiences in EAP. These benefits included increased self confidence, self awareness, and self esteem. Danika stated that her life had changed for the better and that it was the best thing in her life. Georgia said that the horses helped her to reclaim her power and her voice. Georgia and Kasey said that the horses saved them.

Discrepancies

There were few discrepancies in the experiences the four participants reported with regard to their relationships and interactions with the horses, therapist, and equine specialist. However, three participants recalled some experiences that were outliers from the other experiences. The invariant constituents in this theme were *feeling fear* and *feeling frustrated.*

Feeling Fear. Three of the participants described some incidents in their interactions with the horses or the therapy team when they felt afraid. For example, Kasey had been searching online for a ranch where she could just hang out with horses.

On the first day, however, the therapy team asked her to create a metaphorical

representation of her world in the arena. She experienced a panic attack.

> Well, so my first day that I went, they had brought out alot of toys and they asked
> me to like put toys down or anything in the arena to describe how I see my life
> right then. And I pretty much had a panic attack. And I was like, 'I can't do that.
> That's not something I can do.' I was just not in a place where I thought my life
> was going to be life, and they didn't push it, they just accepted it. Throughout the
> rest of the sessions they didn't ask me to do any of that, which I was grateful for
> because that just felt a little strange to me.

Brianna indicated some apprehension and vigilance regarding potentially

aggressive behavior from the horses.

> I think you also have to watch horses, to make sure you keep yourself safe. I think
> with her, I wouldn't have to watch her as much because she's such a calm horse
> and she never would just all the sudden bite me or just get ... She's never tried to
> bite me. She's never put her ears back at me or anything like that.

Similarly, Danika felt nervous intitialy because she had not been around horses

much, and "they are so large…they can literally waltz all over you".

Feeling Frustrated. Two of the participants described feeling frustrated. Danika

initially experienced frustration when the horses seemed indifferent to her; they just

continued eating their hay. She also described an incident when she was trying to get a

horse to move and became increasingly frustrated when the horse would not budge.

Trying to get a horse to move when they don't want to, that was one of the hardest. She's like, "Go ahead. They will move. You have to make them move." And I'm like, pulling on the reins, my feet are sliding out from under them. And she's like, "Oh no. They'll move." And I'm like, "I don't understand. They will not move." And then she comes over and just barely and they go. And I'm like, "I don't understand. They will not do that for me." But getting a horse to move when they don't want to is very hard, so. I don't know, to me it was hard. But because I was getting more frustrated like, come on and I didn't understand. I was like, this girl is crazy. This horse is not going to come with me. He doesn't want to come with me. But he eventually did when I calmed down, so.

Brianna also described an incident when she became frustrated while trying to keep a horse out of the arena where she was working with another horse.

So Echo kept coming in over and over and over again. And I kept pushing her out and pushing her out. And I was getting so frustrated. But then at one point, this went on for a while. And she just kind of kept coming back in. So at one point after I pushed her out, I petted her on her head and just told her that ... I told her I just wanted to spend time with Hope right now. And after I did that she stopped trying to come back in.

The discrepant experiences reported by two participants were feeling fear and feeling frustration. These experiences, while discrepant from their other experiences, are a normal part of trying a new and challenging activity such as interacting with horses. Both participants, Danika and Brianna, worked through these emotions and were able to

successfully accomplish their goals while also learning to better regulate their own emotions and to become more calm, assertive, and confident.

This section has presented the themes, invariant constituents, and textural descriptions of the participants. I have included the common responses of participants that illustrate and embody the essences of the experience of therapeutic relationships with the horse, the therapist, and the equine specialist. In the next section, I provide the individual structural descriptions of the phenomenon. Using imaginative variation, I have identified the structural themes, "the underlying and precipitating factors that account for what is being experienced…the 'how' that speaks to the conditions that illuminate the 'what' of experience» (Moustakas, 1994, p. 98). Imaginative variation aims to elicit the meanings of an experience. Three of the themes identified in the phenomenological reduction phase and located in Table 1, *previous experiences, when I started,* and *presenting issues,* are structural themes. The textural descriptions presented in this section will be integrated with the individual structural descriptions which follow to form the composite description of the meanings and essences of the experience of the group as a whole. The composite descriptions will be presented in the Results section as the conclusion of the data analysis.

Individual Structural Descriptions

Structural Description for Participant 1: Brianna

Her experience of the therapeutic relationships in EAP was influenced by the structural themes of previous experiences, when she started EAP, presenting issues, relation to self, relations with others, and bodily and mental health concerns.

She was 23 years old at the time of the interview and had been participating in EAP since she was 17. She grew up with an abusive mother. "A lot of it was just focused on my mom because a lot of my life I had to work around making her happy to make me safer. This developmental trauma resulted in lack of trust in others, a fragmented and disorganized self, and a pervasive sense of being unsafe. She tried to anticipate and meet the wants and needs of others in order to feel safe. She did not know how to set boundaries or express her own needs and wants. Frequently, she became emotionally dysregulated when interacting with others. She felt isolated and alone, and longed for physical and emotional closeness.

Much of the time she lacked self-awareness of her own emotions, thoughts, or desires. When she was aware of these, she did not express them congruently for fear of rejection or retaliation. She felt that others did not like her. She felt worthless and unloveable.

Her body expressed the thoughts and feelings she stuffed down through tension in her chest and stomach.

Her mother sought out EAP for her when she was 17 and a senior in high school because she suffered from depression and anxiety. She also experienced suicidal ideation. She liked horses and had taken lessons when she was 11 or 12.

The experience of therapeutic relationships in EAP meant that she did not have to live in fear that if she did not always make others happy, she would suffer. It meant that her own needs and wants were valid and important. It meant that she was worthwhile, that she was not alone, and that others found happiness in being near her. It meant that

she was not the things that had happened to her, that she was not bad, and that she was

not to blame for the abuse and neglect. For Brianna, the experience of the therapeutic

relationships in EAP was reparative. These relationships healed the wounds and filled in

the gaps the relationship with her mother left. She experienced comfort, acceptance,

understanding, and intimacy. She began to integrate her identity. Perhaps for the first

time, she experienced a sense of safety. She ventured to trust in these relationships and

beings that were trustworthy. Perhaps there were others in the world who could also be

trusted.

Structural Description for Participant 2: Kasey

The structural themes that underlie and illuminate Kasey's experience of

therapeutic relationships in EAP are expressed in her previous experiences, when she

started EAP, presenting issues, her relation to time, her relation to self, her relations with

others, bodily and mental health concerns, and causality.

Kasey was 26 years old. Before coming to EAP, Kasey attempted to commit

suicide. For her, the future didn't exist. Hopes and dreams were dead. "I didn't really see

a future…I was not in a place where I thought life was going to be life». The present was

a vacuum; there were no moments of calm, peace, or enjoyment. Her present consisted of

the past being repeated over and over in an unending cycle of suffering and self

destruction from which the only escape was death. "I tried to die because I didn't think

anything was going to get better".

Causality was external; she felt rudderless, at the mercy of the whims of others

and the tides of fate. When she was in AA, the staff told her that she was not in control of

her own life.

She carried tension in her shoulders, and was often extremely tense, shaking—in survival mode. She was physically and emotionally "a wreck…I had been crying all morning, I had been crying for the last two days…I looked a mess". For years prior to coming to EAP, she had been living with undiagnosed bipolar disorder.

Self in Relation to Others equaled invalidation. She felt voiceless and powerless to express her own needs and wants for fear of others' ridicule, rejection, or punishment. She was constrained by worries about what other people would think of her. She constantly tried to anticipate and meet the needs of others, desperate for their approval and acceptance. Other people told her what she thought and felt and what to do.

Even in treatment she was invalidated. Following her suicide attempt, she was dismissed from the hospital

> after one day because they said I'm just a cutter who is a drunk. And as they were
>
> walking me out, they told me to be careful because there are veins there, and I felt
>
> so betrayed and alone…I was asking for help, and they basically told me to go
>
> fuck myself.

She felt a failure at living and at dying, and unworthy of help or compassion. She crashed her car in another attempt to be seen and heard.

She had lost her Self.

For Kasey, the experience of therapeutic relationships in EAP meant that death no longer seemed the only solution to life. She rediscovered the present. She realized that she had a future. The past was only that, the past. She could experience peace and

enjoyment in each moment. It was okay to just be. She could have a life. She could take

care of her own needs and wants and express her emotions honestly and others would

understand, accept and respect her. She was in control of much in her life, and she could

manage her mental illness. She was worthwhile and valued. She was capable of making

good decisions in her life. She could reclaim her identity. She could transform her

indentity.

Structural Description for Participant 3: Georgia

There are several structural themes that underlie and account for the what of

Georgia's experience of the therapeutic relationships in EAP. These are previous

experiences, when she started EAP, presenting issues, relation to self, relation to others,

and relation to work.

Georgia was 38 years old. She participated in EAP both as a field placement

student two days a week and as a client. She hoped to become a equine-assisted therapist

herself. She had quit her full-time job to go back to school, but still worked part-time

while taking classes online and taking care of six children. With regard to her relation to

work, she believed that women could both have a career and be a fulltime mother and

homemaker.

> Moms just do it. We get it done… The women in my family were women who
> worked and took care of the kids and you just did it. You got it done. You didn't
> complain about it. And being somebody who growing up, I was told, "What are
> you crying about? Don't cry."

She inherited an ethic of stoicism and tenacity, of keeping your head down and

soldiering onward.

I always thought, "I've got to be strong. I've got to hold it together. I have all these

kids in this life and I have so much responsibility and I just need to be that rock,

that person.

In her relations with others, she felt that she should be an unfailing source of

strength, and that her own needs and problems should be kept locked up. She feared

being seen as weak or defective. This had resulted in deterioration of her own mental

health, but she had not sought out therapy.

I'm very much somebody who, throughout the majority of my life, I was always a

great listener, but I held all my own stuff inside. And so as I got into my 30s and

stuff that started to impact me and I had a couple panic attacks… If I would've

been staring at somebody straight in the face at that moment in my life, I wouldn't

have wanted to cry in front of them. I wouldn't have wanted to have all that out

and have them judge me. I was worried that I would get blamed for someone

else's behavior. Why are you in that situation? Like I put myself there, like I chose

to have that happen in my life. No, I didn't.

For her to acknowledge that problems existed, even to herself, felt like an

admission of failure on her part, because she was supposed to take care of everyone. She

was supposed to be superwoman.

Her earlier experiences with horses helped her to build self-confidence and

resilience. She was able to experience a reciprocal relationship of trust with the horses in

an environment that felt safe. These experiences helped her to survive.

I didn't have a great home life, so they were really an escape for me. So even when I was younger, I felt like they were a safe haven for me. And it was very sad for me when I had to stop my lessons. I was just riding, I was getting away. It gave me a sense of freedom and belonging. And that the horses trusted me enough to ride them and I trusted them enough. I remember as sometimes when we went, we would do the equestrian, the jumping, and then I remember being in the barn and going over jumps with my arms out and just using my legs on horse to be able to go over the jumps. To have to line your body up and kind of become one with the horse in that way was always really special to me that I was able to do that. I did fall off a few times, but and the horse trusting me, I mean, like, "You're going to get up?" And I get up, get back on and it kind of helped me build that resilience to, Yeah. Okay. You fell off. Don't let it knock your confidence. Get back up and keep going."

For Georgia, the experience of therapeutic relationships in EAP meant that it was okay to cry. It was okay and important to be honest and congruent with herself and others. It was okay to not be the strong one all of the time. She reclaimed her power and her voice. She reclaimed her resilience and self confidence. She could allow others to help her. They saved her life.

Structural Description for Participant 4: Danika

The structural themes underlying Danika's experience of the therapeutic relationships with the horse and the therapist are previous experiences, when she started EAP, presenting issues, relation to self, relation to others, and relation to work.

Danika was 35 years old. She was in mental health hold before she began EAP due to anxiety and anger issues.

> Because what I'm famous for and my anxiety comes out as anger a lot and I will just build and build and build and build and I try and then one little thing, like I'll drop my pen and my whole world ends. And then I'm very angry and the way that I express it, when I'm that angry is almost like this is how I ended up like on the 72 hour hold, I'm very like, I'll punch like a wall or not to a person mainly to myself. I wasn't trying to kill myself or anything, but I can be self harmful and now I've broken my hand because I punched a wall because of my frustrations.

During the mental health hold, she was not free to leave and felt a loss of control and freedom.

> But it kind of has been lighted on me as a negative. But I just, you come out, you're very vulnerable and you feel like, cause you get hauled away, taken to the emergency room. You get locked up. I mean, really? It is, it sounds awful. It's not really that awful. But in reality that those are the steps that happen. You get taken to the hospital, you have to be there, you get put in a different ward, treated different, right? I mean, because you have to cause it's a legal thing. But you get into this facility where everyone it's so regimented because everyone is, here's medication time and this, and in my head, I'm like, I feel like I'm in jail a little bit.

After her release, she felt exposed, vulnerable, judged, as if everyone were walking on eggshells around her, waiting for her to break down again.

But, then you get out, and then everyone's, they don't mean to, but they are like, you're noticing everyone being more cautious. And then I'm just like treating me different. Don't treat me different. And they do anyways. And that just frustrates me more so in that kind of you feel, so I always feel like, oh my gosh, it's my anxiety. Everyone's worried. I'm going to break down.

Following her release, her psychiatrist referred her to EAP because her medications were not enough and she had been through several different therapists over the past 15 years. She had had no prior experience with horses. She had been participating in EAP for approximately five months and was still a participant.

Danika's relation to self was informed by her perception that others judged her negatively, as well as a self image that was dominated by her struggles with anxiety.

Because my anxiety it's like slighted at me a little negative, but they are helping me realize and remembering it's not, my anxiety is not me. I was letting my anxiety define me, but it just that's my personality.

Her relation to others had been tumultous, fraught with conflict. She tended to hold on to anger and frustration until they exploded. Her ability to form close relationships to others was hindered by her perception that everyone was watching her, judging her, waiting for her to fail. She rescued animals with handicaps and had six dogs, twenty cats, and a rat at the time of the interview. She described caring for the animals, and their reciprocal caring for her, as a form of emotional support that human beings had failed to provide.

Danika worked as a veterinary techinician. She described her work as "my life" and described it as both extremely stressful and immensely rewarding. In her work, the animals depended upon her for their care with mostly a one-way flow of giving from her to the animals in her care. With her pets at home, she described it as a two-way, reciprocal flow of care. In EAP, it was impactful for her that the flow of giving was unidirectional, from the horses to her.

For Danika, the experience of the therapeutic relationships in EAP helped her to realize that she was a person who had anxiety, but that anxiety did not define her, nor was it all bad. Anxiety was normal and even enhanced performance at times. She could control her anxiety instead of being controlled by it. She was not alone, and not everyone was waiting for her to fail. Others could understand her and accept her as she was, as someone who was worthwhile and special. She did not have to serve others in order to deserve being cared for; she was worthwhile and others could love her without expecting anything in return. She could feel her emotions, acknowledge them, and let them go. She could change her reactions to events in her life and thus change her life. She was no longer imprisoned, she was free to live a life of her choosing.

In summary, all of the participants were female and White. Their ages ranged from 23-38, a difference of 15 years. One was self-referred, one was referred by her mother, one by her psychiatrist, and one was a field placement student in a setting that provided EAP. All of the participants suffered from mental health issues that caused significant distress. Two had experienced suicidal ideation, and two had been admitted to inpatient psychiatric treatment. One participant had survived two suicide attempts. At

least one of the participants had experienced developmental trauma as a result of abuse or neglect by a primary caregiver.

Most of the participants were either unaware of or felt unable to express some of their emotions, as well as their own needs and wants. They had received familial or societal messages that it was either not acceptable or not safe to express emotions. One participant felt that she had to anticipate her mother's needs in order to keep her happy and herself «safer», another that she should avoid expressing her thoughts and emotions in order to escape ridicule, anger, and rejection. Another participant felt that she had to be strong and that to admit any negative emotion such as anxiety or depression was a sign of weakness and failure. The fourth participant kept her anxiety pent up until it exploded into anger. All of the participants shared the experiences of being invalidated, negatively evaluated, and disempowered.

For one participant, the experience of therapeutic relationships in EAP led to the discovery that she had a present and a future. She could have a life. For all of the participants, it meant that their own needs and wants were valid and important. They could develop a healthy identity, take care of their own needs, and set boundaries with others. They could express emotions honestly and others would understand, accept and respect them. They were worthwhile and valued. They were capable of making good decisions, solving problems, and managing their mental health challenges. It was okay to just be present and enjoy the moments of their lives. Others could find happiness in being near them. They were not alone, nor was everyone watching and waiting for them to fail. There were others in the world who could be trusted. It was okay to allow others to help.

It was okay to acknowledge one's emotions, experience and express them, and then let them go. It was okay and important to be honest and congruent in relationships with other people. It meant that they could transform themselves and their lives. They were strong. They were free.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

In Chapter 3, I proposed several strategies to ensure the reliability and validity of this qualitative study through the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Shenton, 2004). For the most part, I was able to implement the proposed strategies successfully, as detailed below.

Credibility

I utilized Moustakas' (1994) transcendental phenomenological methodology during data collection and analysis. The interview protocol I used consisted of open-ended questions based on Moustakas' suggested questions for phenomenological research and on the literature review. Instead of the 12 participants I planned to interview in order to reach data saturation, I was only able to recruit four participants due to unforeseen circumstances, detailed earlier in this chapter. However, each of the participants I recruited had experienced the phenomenon of therapeutic relationships in EAP and provided detailed and nuanced data. The participants were all female and White; however, diversity in ages and in the geographic locations where they lived provided some heterogeneity. I worked to build rapport with participants prior to beginning each interview in order to obtain as much cooperation, openness, and detail as possible. In addition, I used member checking to ensure the accuracy of the data collected (Shenton,

2004). I sent each participant a summary of the interview and asked them to either

confirm or correct any errors. All of the participants verified the summaries were an

accurate representation of their experiences. In the discussion of results, I utilized thick,

rich description utilizing participant quotes liberally in order to convey their experiences

as accurately as possible. And finally, I recorded impressions, thoughts, decisions, and

ideas in a research journal to enable others to follow the research story.

Transferability

As I stated in Chapter 3, transferability in a qualitative study is the equivalent of

external validity in quantitative research. In order to increase transferability of this study,

I clearly delineated the boundaries of the study (Shenton, 2004). I provided information

regarding inclusion and exclusion criteria for the study, target group and participant

selection activities and participant demographics, the time period and geographic

locations of data collection activities, and number and length of data collection activities.

In addition, I have included details about data collection settings and contexts in this

paper.

Dependability

To increase dependability, all data collection and data analysis processes were

carefully described and recorded in the data analysis and results sections of this chapter)

(Shenton, 2004). In addition, I compiled a field journal in which I recorded detailed notes

of each step of the research process from the start of data collection to the final analysis

and interpretation of results.

Confirmability

Although it is arguably true that purely objective research does not exist, the identification and explication of subjectivity is a goal of qualitative research. One strategy that I utilized to maximize objectivity was the researcher journal in which I recorded an ongoing reflective commentary. In addition, I described my biases, assumptions, and preconceptions in the epoche section of this paper. During data collection and analysis, I employed bracketing and engaged in a process of reflexivity (Moustakas, 1994; Shenton, 2004).

Results

This study attempted to answer the questions "What is the essence and meaning of the therapeutic relationships with the horse, the therapist, and the equine specialist?" More generally, the researcher asked, "What is the lived experience of the therapeutic relationships of adults who participated in EAP?" The composite textural and structural descriptions, which refer to the textural and structural themes of the group as a whole and are based on the individual textural and structural descriptions provided previously in this chapter, will be used to answer these questions. I will address the first three questions and conclude with the overarching research question.

What is the Essence and Meaning of the Relationship with the Horse?

To arrive at a synthesis of the textural and structural descriptions, I utilized Moustakas' (1994) modification of van Kaam (1959,1966). This was an evocative, powerful experience. It entailed an exhaustive process of imaginative and reflective study of participants' experience of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). What follows is my

synthesis of the research participants' lived experience, the essence and meaning of the phenomenon of the relationship with the horse.

> Being in the relationship with the horse is like entering a calm, warm, fragrant meadow after a raging storm of hail and howling wind from which there seemed to be no shelter or escape. In this meadow, horses peacefully eat the green grass. They greet one as a longtime friend, coming to welcome you home. The horses understand and respond even to emotions that one has not expressed or realized. One feels a tremendous relief at being understood without having to use words. One feels accepted unconditionally by the horses, no matter what emotions are brewing inside, no matter where you have been, what you look like, what mistakes you have made. One understands that it is okay to acknowledge one's emotions, experience and express them, and then let them go. It is okay to be yourself. You finally believe that you are not garbage, that you are not the bad things that have happened to you, that you are not your diagnosis. When the horses choose to stay close to you, you feel special and valued. You feel worthy of love.

> The horses offer physical touch. They nicker or nudge one with their nose or rest their head on one's shoulder. They are willing to bear one's burdens for awhile. Feelings, long dammed, can be released, along with tensions stored in the body. The horses allow you to pet them or brush them. They position their bodies to protect you. They bring you to what you need at that moment, whether it is to cry or to laugh or to gain clarity or solve a problem. They offer comfort. They act out

the problem. They challenge you at times to help you grow stronger and more

confident.

There is a feeling of oneness, or twinship, that comes from experiencing the same

wants and needs as the horses and of a reciprocity of needing one another. You

admire the horses' strength and compassion, their calm presence.

There is a sense of peace, of belonging, of just being present in the moment, in a

nurturing cocoon. As if the world and time are suspended. There is freedom to

just be, to feel the rain, to listen to the horses chewing grass, to pick dandelions.

Loneliness and alienation melt away along with fear and distrust. You feel

emotionally and physically safe, perhaps for the first time. Safe enough to talk

about the trauma and the pain. Safe enough to engage with another human. Safe

enough to reenter the world.

What is the Essence and Meaning of the Relationship with the Therapist?

As above, I utilized Moustakas' modified van Kaam method of phenomenological

data analysis to synthesize the essence and meaning of the participants' experience of the

relationship with the therapist. The following is what emerged from imaginative variation

and is my reflection of the essence and meaning of the phenomenon.

One enters the relationship with the therapist feeling safe. This is predicated on

the sense of safety provided by the horses. The horses stay nearby to augment and

support this feeling of comfort. The therapist knows the horses, trusts their

judgment, and follows their lead. Feeling safe, one is able to trust enough to share

openly and honestly with the therapist. One can verbalize the pain and trauma and

trust that whatever emotions come out are okay. One feels that the therapist understands in part because she shows emotions such as sadness or anger while listening to your story. At other times, she seems to read your facial expressions and body language and know what you are thinking or feeling because she cares enough to really listen and be present. One feels validated.

No matter how many horribly hard things you tell her, things at first you feared would cause her to reject you, she still accepts you and doesn't treat you any differently. She still likes you. Because she knows you need physical touch, she offers it in the form of hugs, and you feel comforted. You feel that you are worthwhile and special.

You admire the therapist's authenticity, loyalty, hard work, and calm centeredness, and want to be more like her.

The therapist shares personal information about her own struggles. She brushes the horses with you and talks with you like an equal. She uses profanity sometimes. When you arrive late for a session and come stumbling out of your car with only one shoe on, she takes her own shoe off and then you put your shoes on together. She tells you that she is feeling frustrated with you at times when you are slipping back into old patterns of thinking, feeling, and behaving.

When you arrive for a session, the therapist asks what you would like to do. She gives you space to experience what needs to happen. The therapist respects that you are the expert on your own life. She asks you what you think, and never tells you what to do. She helps to clarify your thoughts. She shows you her belief that

you are capable of making decisions and solving the problems in your life by not offering you solutions or advice. You feel empowered. You feel that you are capable to manage your mental health. You believe that you can control your own life. You can create a life of your own choosing.

**What is the Essence and Meaning of the Relationship with the Equine Specialist?**

The relationship with the equine specialist seemed more peripheral. Two of the four participants expressed feeling understood, accepted, and safe in the relationship with the equine specialist. One participant often referred to the equine specialist and therapist as "they", indicating that they were present as a team, working in tandem. One participant did not have a relationship with the equine specialist as there was none present. And one participant said that the equine specialist was present but there was not alot of interaction; the role of the equine specialist was to ensure safety.

What was the Lived Experience of the Therapeutic Relationships in Adults who Participated in EAP?

It is clear that there were three invariant constituents common to the lived experience of the relationship with the horse, the therapist, and the eequine specialist: feeling understood, feeling accepted, and feeling safe. The relationship with the horse was built on the foundation of feeling understood, feeling accepted, feeling comforted, and feeling valued. This relationship culminated in feeling safe (Figure 1). The relationship with the therapist (Figure 2) developed from feeling safe with the horse; participants could then trust the therapist enough to verbally process issues. Feeling understood, feeling accepted, feeling comforted, and feeling empowered then followed.

Figure 1

Relationship With the Horse

Understood
Accepted
Comforted
Valued
Safe
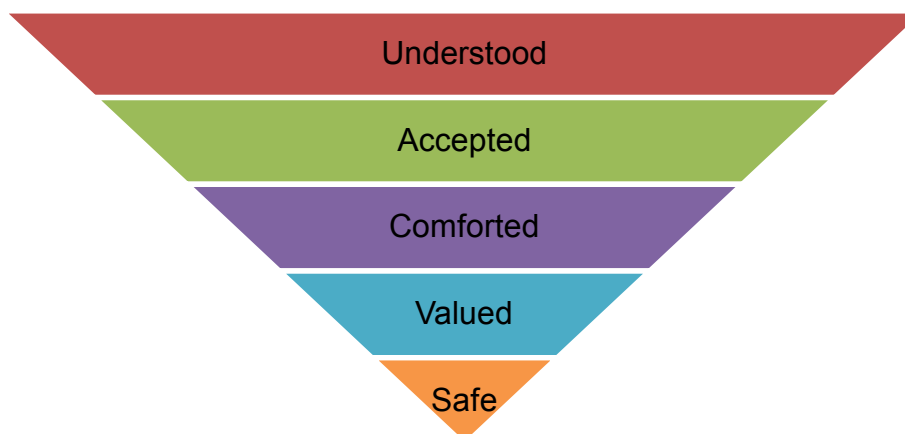
Figure 2

Relationship With the Therapist

Safe
Understood
Accepted
Comforted
Empowered
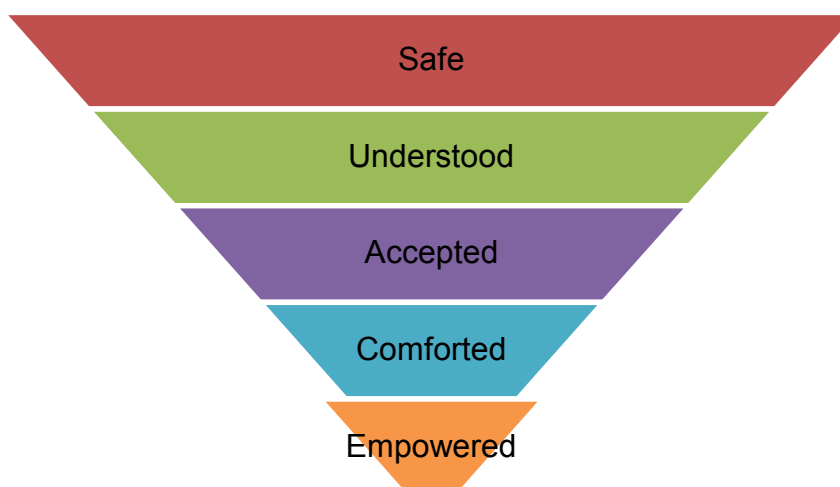
The relationship with the equine specialist was not as present. The equine specialist's role was more backstage, ensuring and augmenting the feeling of safety with the horse and the therapist. There was more disparity between the participants' experience of this relationship.

In addition to the three therapeutic relationships, four other textural themes described other dimensions of the lived experience of therapeutic relationships during data analysis. These were *EAP activities, Lessons, Benefits, and Discrepancies.*

The natural, outdoor setting was grounding and calming. The time spent with just the horses, walking with them, grooming them, observing them, and talking to them were described as the most impactful activities. All except for one of the participants described the use of metaphors relating the horses and activities in the arena to situations and people in their lives as helpful in gaining insight. Even when talking with the human therapy team, the horses were often present and facilitated the discussion.

Interacting with the horses helped participants to learn how to set more healthy boundaries in their relationships, how to balance assertiveness with gentleness, and how to take care of one's own needs. Spending time with the horses taught them how to be present and grounded in the moment. One participant, Danika, said that the horses and the therapist helped her to regulate her emotions by taking a breath, acknowledging and experiencing her emotions, and then letting them go. The horses helped them to become more self aware and congruent in their relationships. And lastly, one participant described how the horses and therapy team helped her to feel more in control over her life through developing an internal locus of control.

The discrepant experiences reported by two participants were feeling fear and feeling frustration. These experiences, while discrepant from their other experiences, are a normal part of trying a new and challenging activity such as interacting with horses. Both participants, Danika and Brianna, worked through these emotions and were able to

successfully accomplish their goals while also learning to better regulate their own

emotions and to become more calm, assertive, and confident.

All four of the participants reported benefits to their lives resulting from their

experiences in EAP. These benefits included increased self confidence, self awareness,

and self esteem. Danika stated that her life had changed for the better and that it was the

best thing in her life. Georgia said that the horses helped her to reclaim her power and her

voice. Georgia and Kasey said that the horses saved them.

Summary

Chapter 4 reviewed the research questions and detailed the data collection and

analysis procedures. Analysis of the interview data generated themes, invariant

constituents, individual textural and structural descriptions of participants, and composite

textural-structural descriptions, which represented the lived experiences and perceptions

of the participants as a group relevant to the research questions of the study.

In this chapter, I have presented the results of the study obtained from interviews

with four female participants in EAP. All of the participants described experiencing

feeling understood, feeling accepted, feeling comforted, feeling valued, and feeling safe

in the therapeutic relationship with the horses. With regard to the relationship with the

therapist, participants described feeling safe, feeling understood, feeling accepted, feeling

comforted, and feeling empowered. The relationship with the equine specialist, while

more peripheral, also included feeling safe, feeling understood, and feeling accepted. The

entire lived experience of the therapeutic relationships in EAP included experiencing the

natural setting as grounding and learning lessons including being more present in the

moment and more assertive, congruent, emotionally regulated, and developing an internal locus of control. Benefits described by participants included increased self confidence, self awareness, and self esteem. Finally, one participant described the experience as the best thing in her life. Two said that the experience saved their lives. One stated that the experience redeemed her power and her voice.

Chapter 5 will provide a discussion of the findings within the context of the research questions, the existing literature, and the theoretical frameworks for the study. In addition, Chapter 5 will discuss limitations of the study and offer recommendations for future research.

Chapter 5: Discussion

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the lived experience of the therapeutic relationships in adults who participated in EAP. A phenomenological approach was chosen for the study to develop a deep, rich understanding of the lived experience of therapeutic relationships in EAP. Four EAP participants were interviewed via video conferencing utilizing a semistructured interview protocol. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed using an online transcription service. I relied on Moustakas' (1994) modified Van Kaam method of phenomenological data analysis to analyze the data.

The primary research question I asked was "What is the lived experience of the therapeutic relationships in adults who participated in EAP?" The lived experience included feeling grounded and calmed by the outdoor setting, the importance of just spending unstructured time in relationship with the horses, and the role of metaphor in transferring insights to life outside the arena. Another aspect of the lived experience was the lessons participants learned including being more assertive, congruent, emotionally regulated, and acquiring an internal locus of control. A third aspect of the lived experience involved benefits accruing to participants including increased self-esteem, self-confidence, self-awareness, and experiences of redemption and transformation.

To intensively examine the therapeutic relationship, I examined the essence and meaning of the relationship with each of the three therapeutic agents: the horse, the therapist, and the equine specialist. The universal essence and meaning of the relationship with the horse included feeling understood, feeling accepted, feeling comforted, feeling

valued, and culminated with feeling safe. It became evident that the relationship with the therapist was built upon this feeling of safety with the horse. The universal essence and meaning of the relationship with the therapist included feeling safe, feeling understood, feeling accepted, feeling comforted, and culminated with feeling empowered. The essence and meaning of the relationship with the equine specialist contained feeling safe, understood, and accepted as well, for two of the participants. This relationship appeared to take place more behind the scenes. In addition, there was more discrepancy in the experiences of participants in this relationship.

Interpretation of the Findings

Comparisons with Peer-Reviewed Literature

Previous researchers, as described in Chapter 2, have documented evidence of EAP's effectiveness in ameliorating emotional, cognitive, and behavioral symptoms for many difficult-to-engage clients. The results from this study confirmed these findings. For example, participants in this study reported that EAP resulted in decreased anxiety, anger, and depression (Balluerka et al., 2015; Dietz et al.,2012; Lentini & Knox, 2015). Current findings also confirmed previous evidence that participation in EAP resulted in increased self-esteem, self-awareness, self-confidence, and emotion regulation (Brandt, 2004; Lentini & Knox, 2015; Nimer & Lundahl, 2007).

In the current study, the finding that the horse's ability to accurately detect and reflect emotions resulted in increased self-awareness and congruence also confirmed previous findings (Johansen et. al, 2014). Similarly, the present study confirmed previous findings that EAP resulted in increased client empowerment and mindfulness (Lentini &

Knox, 2015; Whittlesey-Jerome, 2014). In a qualitative study with five EAP practitioners, Wake (2014) discovered several themes, including (a) horses provide immediate, nonjudgmental feedback and are neutral objects on which to focus, (b) metaphorical learning can be more comfortable, and (c) that the experiential nature of EAP and the natural setting improve motivation and offer excitement to participants. The themes emerging from the interviews with EAP participants in this study echoed all the above.

This study confirmed earlier findings that the presence of horses in therapy facilitated the development of safety and security for clients and helped build rapport in the relationship with their therapist (Bachi & Parish-Plass, 2017; Balluerka et al., 2015; Fine, 2015; Horn, 2015). Furthermore, findings from the current study indicated that the feeling of safety with the horse was foundational to feeling safe enough to engage with their therapist, thus extending the knowledge in this area.

A review of the literature published since I completed my literature review in 2019 revealed a few current relevant studies with findings consistent with earlier studies. For example, one qualitative study looked at the experiences of incarcerated males who participated in EAP, and found improvements in emotion regulation, communication, and self-confidence (Robinson-Edward et al., 2019). In a program evaluation of EAP with 13 children and 21 adolescents, the results were mixed but indicated overall improvements in emotion regulation, attention, and social skills and decreases in anxiety, anger, bullying, depression, and hyperactivity (Harvey et al., 2020).

In the previous literature review, no studies examining the therapeutic relationships in EAP were discovered. However, one current study was discovered that explored how communication processes, both human-human and human-horse, operate in EAP relationships to build resilience in adolescents with mental health diagnoses who have experienced adverse childhood experiences (ACEs; Craig et al., 2020). The adolescents in the study described feeling accepted even when they experienced negative emotions, understood, and at times challenged by the horses. They also described feeling more self-aware and congruent, empowered, goal-oriented, able to trust, and self-confident. "Grooming the horse while talking about experiences of being bullied at school allowed the young women to respond to feelings of not being cared for by caring for the horse," creating space for transformation and self-efficacy (Craig et al., 2020, p. 412). The findings of this study, which focused on processes of communication in therapeutic relationships, are also confirmed by the current study.

Finally, this study extended knowledge of therapeutic relationships in EAP by exploring the lived experience of these relationships. No other study was found specifically examining the horizons of these relationships. Understanding the relationships in EAP is vital to the development of best practices and improved outcomes for participants.

Relevance of the Conceptual Lens and Theoretical Framework

Rogers' (1957) P-CT defined the necessary and sufficient conditions for change and growth to occur in a traditional therapeutic encounter: empathy, unconditional positive regard, and genuineness. No previous research was found investigating these

relational conditions in animal-assisted therapy. In the current study, P-CT was utilized as a conceptual lens for understanding the therapeutic relationships (client-horse, client-therapist, and client-equine specialist) in EAP, and informed the interview questions asked of participants and data analysis.

The themes emerging from participants' accounts in this study included relationships with the horse, the therapist, and the equine specialist. The invariant constituents within the theme of relationship with the horse included feeling understood, feeling accepted, and being real. Participants described their experiences of feeling understood by the horses, as well as the experience of empathy. They also described their profound experience of feeling unconditionally accepted. In addition, they described the horses' genuine and honest behaviors. The theme of relationship with the therapist also included these three necessary and sufficient conditions. For two of the participants, the equine specialists also provided two of these conditions, unconditional positive regard and empathy. Unequivocally, the results of this study indicated that the horses, as well as the human therapists, provided empathy, unconditional positive regard, and genuineness.

Additionally, the findings from this study indicate that the provision of these conditions by the horses was prerequisite to the experience of safety with the horses. And, remarkably, this foundation of feeling safe with the horses afforded the participants the security to experience safety with their human therapists and, ultimately, to be able to again experience empathy, unconditional positive regard, and genuineness from their therapists.

Self psychology was utilized as the theoretical framework for this study. In self psychology, there are three types of selfobject functions as defined by Kohut (1971): (a) mirroring selfobjects, which offer a person the experience of feeling valued and treasured through empathic attunement, affirmation, validation, and "recognition of the self in its grandness, goodness, and wholeness"; (b) idealizable selfobjects, which restore ideals, balance, solace, and calm by providing something or someone to identify with, look up to, or admire for their goodness, strength, calmness, or wisdom; and (c) twinship selfobjects, which create a feeling of intimacy, oneness, and communion with another being by offering "the experience of essential likeness of another's self" (Silverstein, 1999; Wolf, 1988, p. 55). No previous studies were found examining the therapeutic relationships in animal-assisted therapy utilizing the theoretical framework of self psychology.

In the current study, self psychology and the possibility that animals serve as selfobjects for clients in EAP formed the theoretical framework. This theory informed the questions asked of participants and was utilized in interpretation and analysis of results.

The theme arising from participant reports of their experiences of the therapeutic relationship with the horses in EAP included the invariant constituents feeling understood, feeling accepted, feeling comforted, feeling valued, and feeling safe, all of which appear to fulfill the selfobject function of mirroring. All four participants endorsed these experiences. In addition, all four participants expressed admiration for the qualities the horses possessed, such as calmness, strength, and compassion, indicating that the horses were fulfilling the idealizing selfobject function for them. Three participants

expressed a feeling of oneness, or twinship with the horses. Finally, two participants described a feeling of loss and distress when faced with the termination of the relationship with the horse, another indication that the horses were indeed functioning as selfobjects.

Regarding the relationship with their therapist, all four participants described feeling safe, validated, understood, and accepted by their therapists, thus indicating that the therapists were fulfilling the mirroring selfobject function for them. Two of the participants described feelings of admiration for qualities the therapist possessed, thus indicating that the therapists were meeting their selfobject need for idealization. The selfobject function of twinship, as embodied in the invariant constituent of feeling oneness, seemed more elusive in the therapist relationship, with only one participant expressing a feeling of oneness with her therapist, who also experienced anxiety.

The relationship with the equine specialist, as indicated by the responses of two participants, appeared to provide the selfobject function of mirroring, as embodied by participant experiences of feeling understood, accepted, and safe.

In conclusion, the findings of this study support the tenet that horses in EAP fulfull the selfobject functions of mirroring, idealization, and twinship. In addition, therapists in EAP acted as mirroring and idealizing selfobjects. Finally, equine specialists appear to act as mirroring selfobjects in EAP. These findings significantly extend the knowledge of the therapeutic relationships in EAP and suggest exciting possibilities for animal-assisted therapy.

Limitations of The Study

In this phenomenological study, the goal was to create an ideographic, detailed exploration of the phenomenon of therapeutic relationships in EAP. A target group of 12, purposively selected based on their common experience of participation in EAP, was intended. However, due to unforeseen circumstances described in Chapter 4, only 4 participants were interviewed. This small target group constituted a significant limitation in terms of potential transferability. Heterogeneity among the participants from whom data was collected in terms of age and geographic location may have provided opportunities for triangulation in the comparing and enriching descriptions of the experiences of EAP participants, and may have increased transferability (Shenton, 2004). Interviews were in depth. Thus, thick, rich description was utilized, and discrepant information was included in data analysis. In addition, data collection and analysis processes were clearly described. Results were transparently presented including direct quotes. I provided information regarding inclusion and exclusion criteria for the study, participant selection activities, the time period and geographic locations of data collection activities, and number and length of data collection activities. Finally, I recorded details about data collection settings and contexts in the researcher journal.

As one strategy to ensure dependability, the research design and implementation and any deviations, as well as data collection activities, were carefully described and recorded and included in the methodology, data analysis, and results sections of the final report. In addition, dependability was increased by keeping field notes to leave an audit

trail that may be used in the data collection and analysis process. Researcher bias was addressed by utilizing ongoing époché, reflexivity, and keeping a research journal.

Recommendations

A significant limitation of the current study was that there were only four participants. This limited transferability and possibly prevented saturation. In addition, only two participants in the young adult age range were recruited. Future research should include other phenomenological projects focused on the therapeutic relationships in EAP, with at least 12 participants and a specific focus on young adults ages 18-25.

Building on a strength of this study, further qualitative research projects might include case studies of EAP participants, therapists, and equine specialists, including field observations, participant journal entries, and possibly videography. This will provide more rich detail as well as increased triangulation. Mixed methods studies are also recommended, with qualitative interviews of participants about their experience of therapeutic relationships in EAP, as well as repeated measures of relational dimensions administered prior to, during, and after an EAP intervention. Finally, the current study revealed that the therapeutic relationship with the horse led to a feeling of safety, which appeared to create the foundation for the development of the relationship with the therapist. It would be useful to quantitatively examine the temporal development of safety and trust in the EAP therapeutic relationships. Finally, the findings of this study might be utilized to create an instrument measuring safety, acceptance, understanding, and empowerment in EAP therapeutic relationships, which could then be piloted in further research.

Implications

Positive Social Change

This study explored the lived experience of therapeutic relationships in EAP, thus contributing to scientific knowledge of this alternative therapeutic modality. As it did for the participants in the current study, EAP has the potential to create positive change in the lives of individuals suffering from depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, and other challenges in psychosocial functioning, and for whom traditional psychotherapy may be ineffective. Many of these individuals belong to treatment-resistant, difficult-to-reach groups, including veterans, at-risk youth, young adults, and children who have experienced trauma (Wake, 2014; Walker & Baird, 2019). The findings of this study may encourage increased utilization of EAP to contribute to reduced suffering and improved functioning in the lives of these individuals and their families. In addition, studies such as this as well as those that quantitatively demonstrate the efficacy of EAP may justify increased insurance coverage of this modality. Finally, by improving interventions to difficult-to-treat populations such as veterans, inmates, and young adults, societal costs in outpatient mental health, medical treatment and hospitalizations, inpatient treatment, correctional facilities, and welfare and unemployment systems may be reduced.

This study can aid in the development of best practices to aid providers of EAP. As a follow up to this study, I plan to develop a presentation to offer at professional certification trainings of EAP providers and at the annual EAGALA conference, as well as other certification entities including ARCH and PATH, International. In order to increase the availability of EAP so that clients may benefit from it, it is imperative that

other mental health providers become aware of its potential benefits, refer more clients to EAP, and seek out this training for themselves. I intend to offer presentations about EAP, including the findings from this study to local mental health professionals as well as possibly online through PESI or other providers of ongoing education. Finally, my goal is to publish an article in a scholarly journal specializing in experiential or animal-assisted therapy.

Theoretical Implications

This study was the first to examine the therapeutic relationships in EAP using the conceptual framework of P-CT, which was developed to describe human therapeutic relationships (Rogers, 1957). The finding from this study that the horses in EAP provided the necessary and sufficient conditions of unconditional positive regard, empathy, and genuineness is potentially ground-breaking. Furthermore, the findings indicated that the therapeutic relationship with the horse was foundational to the therapeutic relationship with the human therapist, making it possible for clients to experience empathy, unconditional positive regard, and genuineness in this therapeutic relationship as well. Further research should be conducted studying the therapeutic relationships in EAP and with other animal-assisted therapies using this framework.

Brown (2007) found that animal companions fulfilled the selfobject needs of their owners. However, no previous study has examined the therapeutic relationships in animal-assisted therapy using self psychology as a theoretical framework. Selfobject needs continue throughout the lifespan for healthy psychological functioning (Kohut, 1971). When selfobject needs are not met, particularly in childhood, psychopathology

results (Kohut, 1971; Wolf, 1988). It has been proposed that human therapists meet selfobject needs of clients and that this contributes to improved mental health symptoms (Silverstein, 1999). The current study discovered that the horses in EAP did indeed provide participants with the selfobject functions of mirroring, idealizing, and twinship. This discovery has tremendous implications for animal-assisted therapy in general and EAP specifically.

Conclusion

For many individuals, traditional psychotherapeutic approaches are ineffective. Young adults often do not seek out therapy or terminate prematurely due to a lack of engagement and therapeutic rapport with human therapists, yet they have the highest levels of mental health challenges. There is an urgent need to develop and improve alternative therapeutic approaches to reach young adults and other difficult-to-treat populations. The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experience of the therapeutic relationships in young adults who participated in EAP. In this study, four adults ages 23-38 with significant mental health challenges participated in semistructured interviews regarding their experiences. All of the participants described feeling understood, accepted, comforted, and valued in the relationship with the horse, culminating in a feeling of safety. This foundation of safety, in turn, helped the participants to feel safe with the human therapists and facilitated the development of this therapeutic relationship which also afforded feeling understood, accepted, and comforted. The participants described the positive benefits in their lives resulting from these relationships, including decreased anxiety, depression, and anger and increased self-

confidence, self-awareness, and self-esteem. They reported being more grounded, congruent, assertive, and empowered. They said that these relationships restored their power and their voices. They said that these relationships saved their lives.

This study made two ground-breaking discoveries. First, I found that the horses provided empathy, positive regard, and genuineness, the three necessary and sufficient conditions for change that Rogers (1957) identified in human therapeutic relationships, to participants in EAP. They did this instinctively and naturally, using nonverbal communication. The horses made it possible for participants to feel safe enough to engage in a relationship with a human therapist and to experience empathy, positive regard, and genuineness in that relationship. The second amazing discovery was that the horses, as well as the human therapists, met the selfobject (Kohut, 1971) needs of mirroring, twinship, and idealizing for the participants. Although further studies are needed to provide confirmation, these findings have tremendous significance for animal-assisted therapy and for the treatment of young adults and other difficult-to-treat populations.

In conclusion, it is clear that the horses in EAP were able to reach and heal clients whom human therapists had failed. These magnificent beings have a great deal to teach we humans about love, courage, honesty, healing, and how to live a balanced life. If we let them, horses have the power to heal us.

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Appendix A: Interview Guide

Before we talk about your experience of EAP, lets begin with telling me about how you came to participate. What was going on that drew you to this type of experience?

Now, I would like you to take a few minutes to recall and focus on your experience of EAP. Try to remember moments of particular awareness and impact. Take your time, and let me know when you are ready to begin.

I would like you first of all to recall your experience of EAP in a broad sense, with a panoramic lens.

1. Tell me in as much detail as you can about your experience in EAP. What stood out for you the most?
2. Tell me about your most memorable experience-what happened?
3. Tell me about the horses?
4. What were the most intense feelings you experienced?
5. What bodily changes or states were you aware of?
6. What else stood out for you?
7. How did the experience of EAP affect you?
8. How did the experience affect others in your life?
9. What changes do you associate with the experience of EAP? (Moustakas, 1994)

Thank you for sharing your experience with me. Now I would like to shift our focus to a close-up view of the relationships you experienced in EAP. First, I would like you to recall your relationship with the horse. Then I will ask you to think about your relationship with the therapist and the equine specialist.

Empathy

1. Tell me about your relationship with the horse? Can you give me an example to help me understand your relationship with the horse? What did this relationship mean to you?
1. Was there a time when you felt that the horse was able to sense deeper emotions? Tell me more about that.
   a. How did that make you feel?
   b. What did that experience mean to you?
2. What did you think the horse was feeling?

Positive Regard

1. Was there a time when you felt that the horse liked and accepted you for who you are, without judging or criticizing you? Tell me more about that.
   a. How did that make you feel?

    b. What did that experience mean to you?

Genuineness

1. One thing about horses is that they never lie. In your interactions with the horse, was there a time when the horse seemed to act in a way that was honest and real? Can you tell me more about that?
    a. How did that make you feel?
    b.   How did it affect your thoughts or behavior?
    c. What did that experience mean to you?

Mirroring

1. Was there a time when you felt that the horse calmed or reassured you? What was that like?
    a.   How did that make you feel?
    b. What did that experience mean to you?

Idealizing

1. Were there qualities the horse possessed that you admired or wish you possessed? If so, what were they?
2. Did you feel or imagine you could be similar to the horse? How or in what ways?
3. Were there ways in which it seemed the horse helped you to become more like that which you aspire to be? Tell me more about that.

Twinship

1. Was therea time when you felt a sense of oneness or belonging with the horse?
    a. What was that like?
    b. What happened?
    c. How did that sense of oneness cause you to feel?
2. Was there a time when you felt that you and the horse shared the same feelings, thoughts, or needs? What was that like for you?
3. How would you describe your relationship with the horse?
    a. What qualities did you like best about the horse?
    b. What qualities did you like least? (Brown, 2007)

- If you have had other relationships with horses, how was this relationship different or similar?
- What was it like for you when EAP and your relationship with the horse ended?

- Have you had other relationships in your life in which you had a similar kind of connection? If so, could you tell me more about that?
- In what ways has the relationship with the horse impacted your life today?
- Is there anything else that you would like to add?