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An Exploratory Mixed Methodology Study Into the Theoretical Foundation of Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy

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AN EXPLORATORY MIXED METHODOLOGY STUDY INTO THE
THEORETICAL FOUNDATION OF EQUINE-ASSISTED
PSYCHOTHERAPY

A Project
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Social Work

by
Bradford Tyler Dawson

June 2014

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ABSTRACT

Equine-assisted psychotherapy is emerging as a new alternative therapy method. As the field is new, there is limited amount of research looking at the current theoretical foundation being utilized in the therapeutic process. This study aims to explore the field of equine-assisted psychotherapy and its current theoretical foundation. The main question guiding this study was: What are the therapeutic theories and themes guiding the current practice of equine-assisted psychotherapy? The study consisted of six in-person qualitative interviews with current practitioners of equine-assisted psychotherapy. A short Likert-type scale was also used to quantitatively gather descriptive statistics about theories currently being used by these practitioners. The results of this study yielded interesting findings about the similarities between equine-assisted psychotherapy and traditional office therapy. The use of horses in therapy creates new dynamics to be addressed in the therapeutic process. The practitioners interviewed in this study agreed on many different aspects about the application of equine-assisted psychotherapy to clients displaying characteristics of trauma, anxiety, depression, and boundary issues, but also had dissenting opinions about other aspects of the practice. The generalist model of social work practice is utilized in the questionnaire. This method of questioning found that the use of the generalist model is applicable to the field of equine-assisted psychotherapy.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A big thank you to all of the practitioners that participated in this study and helped to make it a successful project. The reception by the members of the equine community undoubtedly made this project that much easier. The interviews that I gathered provided rich and extensive data to guide this project in a positive direction. Both the agreements, and the dissenting opinions, gave me a new insight about the work being done in equine-assisted psychotherapy. I had done my research, but the interviews that the practitioners provided gave me a new understanding of the true works of magic that members of the equine-assisted psychotherapy community perform in their daily work.

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Thank You All!

Sincerely,

Bradford T. Dawson

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iv
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION	
Introduction	1
Problem Statement	1
Purpose of the Study	6
Significance of the Project	7
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW	
Introduction	9
Animal-Assisted Therapy	9
Lack of Research in Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy	13
Client Populations	14
Benefits of Using a Horse	15
Therapeutic Environment	17
Promotion of Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy	18
Theories Guiding Conceptualization	21
Summary	24
CHAPTER THREE: METHODS	
Introduction	25
Study Design	25
Sampling	26

Data Collection and Instruments	27
Procedures	30
Protection of Human Subjects	31
Data Analysis	32
Summary	33
CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS	
Introduction	34
Presentation of the Findings	34
Qualitative	34
Quantitative	42
Summary	43
CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION	
Introduction	45
Discussion	45
Limitations	51
Recommendations for Social Work Practice, Policy and Research	52
Conclusion	53
APPENDIX A: INFORMED CONSENT	55
APPENDIX B: QUESTIONNAIRE	59
APPENDIX C: LIKERT-TYPE SCALE	63
APPENDIX D: DEBRIEFING STATEMENT	65
APPENDIX E: QUANTATITIVE TABLES	67

REFERENCES 72

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Introduction

Chapter one presents an introduction to this study of equine-assisted psychotherapy. The introduction presents the problem to be researched as well as clearly develops the purpose of the study. The final part of chapter one discusses the significance this study might have in the field of social work.

Problem Statement

Animal-assisted therapy is an old therapeutic practice that has been used for decades both with and without scientific evidence of efficacy. There are conflicting reports about when animal-assisted therapy began, but many point to the early 20th century. Some sources claim that animal-assisted therapy was being practiced as early as 1792 (Klontz, Bivens, Leinart, & Klontz, 2007; Mallon, 1992), however the use of animals during that time was coincidental as the animals were already present in the situation and not placed into the therapeutic environment for the purpose of affecting the therapeutic process (Levinson, 1965). It was not until the 1960's that animal use in the therapeutic process began to be formally studied (Benda, 2005). Boris Levinson is usually acknowledged as the father of animal-assisted therapy (Bachi, 2012; Geist, 2011; Mallon, 1992). Levinson (1965; 1978) noted that pets have been a part of

humans' lives since prehistoric times and became members of families in many areas. While Geist (2011) noted that a review of the literature on animal-assisted therapy showed a lack of a unified theoretical framework, most researchers found that animal-assisted therapy uses the tactile connection with the animal and that the animal often becomes an attachment figure in the life of a child or an adult (Levinson, 1978; 1984). The experience of bonding with the animal is the main use for having a companion animal (Levinson, 1978; 1984) in the therapeutic process, whether it be in the office or a companion animal placed in the client's home. In present-day society, animal-assisted therapy is used by many professionals (Burgon, 2011) as a professional and successful form of unconventional therapy.

While there is a large amount of research on animal-assisted therapy in general, there is much less research on equine-assisted learning and therapy (Burgon, 2011; Rothe, Vega, Torres, Soler, & Pazos, 2004). Equine-assisted therapy is an offshoot of animal-assisted therapy that is best known in present day society for its' roles in hippotherapy and physical therapy (Bachi, 2012; Chalmers & Dell, 2011; Karol, 2007; Yorke, Adams, & Coady, 2008).

Hippotherapy, an occupational therapy type utilizing equine movement (American Hippotherapy Association, 2010), and physical therapy are both based on having clients ride the horses and using the rhythm and feel of the horses stride to benefit the physical aspects of the human body. Using horses (equine) in psychotherapy is a new concept that is being explored (Bachi, 2013; Chalmers &

Dell, 2011; Vidrine, Owen-Smith, & Faulkner, 2002) as an emerging field of unconventional therapy. The Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship International (PATH International) defines equine-facilitated psychotherapy as “an interactive process in which a licensed mental health professional working with or as an appropriately credentialed equine professional, partners with suitable equine(s) to address psychotherapy goals set forth by the mental health professional and the client” (PATH Intl., 2013).

Further, the Equine-Assisted Growth and Learning Association (EAGALA) foundation clarifies,

The focus of EAP [Equine-assisted psychotherapy] is not riding or horsemanship. The focus of EAP involves setting up ground activities involving the horses, which will require the client or group to apply certain skills. Non-verbal communication, assertiveness, creative thinking and problem solving, leadership, work, taking responsibility, teamwork and relationships, confidence, and attitude are several examples of the tools utilized and developed by EAP. (EAGALA, 2014)

Equine-assisted psychotherapy has some overlap with the same theories as animal-assisted therapy, however the sheer size and uniqueness of a horse require different approaches to be taken with this animal. Equine-assisted psychotherapy has been shown to have many beneficial outcomes for clients in small case studies (Bachi, Terkel, & Teichman, 2012; Bizub, Joy, & Davidson, 2003; Chardonnens, 2009; Holmes, Goodwin, Redhead, & Goymour 2012;

Klontz et al., 2007; Schultz, Remick-Barlow, & Robbins, 2007). The use of equine-assisted psychotherapy has shown beneficial characteristics, but it is noted that the word assisted is part of the therapeutic modality because it is recommended that using equine-assisted psychotherapy not be the only form of therapy used for the client; instead there should be time with the horse as well as time in the office (Tyler, 1994).

This new area of exploration has led to an emerging field that has not yet developed clear standards. Throughout the equine therapeutic community, the therapy is known by multiple titles including equine-assisted therapy, equine-assisted learning, equine-assisted psychotherapy, equine-facilitated psychotherapy, equine-assisted activities, and Gestalt equine psychotherapy. Having so many different titles for the approach allows for practitioners to bring in their own styles and employ many different theories to the practice (Burgon, 2011). The field of equine-assisted psychotherapy can be thought of as metatheoretical as it does not have any one dominant psychotherapeutic system at the forefront (Karol, 2007). Allowing practitioners to apply their own theory and framework to the therapeutic model is beneficial in the beginning to determine the best approach, but as the field has grown in size and significance, it is time to begin standardizing the practice and delivery.

Not having a clear theoretical framework or theme leaves some to question the authenticity of equine-assisted psychotherapy as a legitimate field of practice. There is some overlap between animal-assisted therapy and equine-

facilitated therapy in terms of themes and theories, however they have not been fully explored by writers in the field. Many practitioners believe that the tactile stimulation between human and horse plays a major role in the therapeutic process. They also believe that there may be some significance to John Bowlby's attachment theory, as the human develops a bond with the horse during therapy. Some critics argue that using horses is not any different than using other animals in therapy, however the horse's large, muscular frame plays an important role that offers benefits other animals cannot (Karol, 2007; Kirby 2010).

Equine-assisted psychotherapy lacks an overarching psychotherapeutic theory or standardized framework that would allow for it to be applied in the best way by all practitioners. A large part of this lack of theory comes from the lack of research in the field (Bachi, 2012; Cody, Steiker, & Szymandera, 2011; Ewing, MacDonald, Taylor, & Bowers, 2007). Equine therapy was developed in the horse community itself and much of the fundraising has been aimed at building programs instead of doing psychological research (Cody et al., 2011). Equine-assisted psychotherapy has a base in experiential therapy; however there has not been enough exploration to fully develop an overarching theory for the therapy. Bachi (2012) found many different theories being applied to the therapeutic process including: cognitive behavioral therapy, experiential therapy, Gestalt therapy, and object relations theory. Lentini and Knox (2009) found

multiple perspectives being applied as well including Jungian, cognitive behavioral, behaviorist, Freudian, and psychodynamic models.

Equine-assisted psychotherapy would benefit greatly from the development of macro organizations and policies to govern the practice of its therapy (Bachi, 2012). The three major organizations that currently have a focus in equine-assisted psychotherapy are PATH International, EAGALA, and Equine-Facilitated Mental Health Association. In 2004, the Horses and Human Research Foundation opened with a mandate to fund research in equine-assisted activities and therapy (Bachi, 2012). The lack of formal organization by the equine therapy community and the lack of scientific research about it has left many social workers with a lack of knowledge about the therapeutic approach. This lack of information causes fewer social workers to refer at-risk youth to this alternative therapy method. More research that documents the efficacy of equine-assisted psychotherapy may also benefit the licensed clinical social workers, as it would give them an alternative field and avenue in which to explore and practice their psychotherapy.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore the current theoretical framework being utilized in the field of equine-assisted psychotherapy. There are many different titles for equine-assisted psychotherapy depending on the level of interaction between the horse and client. With more research these titles may

better define the appropriate amounts of time and types of interactions recommended between the horse and the client. This study is a qualitative study that focuses on personal interviews with current practitioners and researchers of equine-assisted psychotherapy. It is an exploratory study that might be used to help better understand the current theoretical framework in the practice of equine-assisted psychotherapy. Clarifying a more central theory and theme behind the current practice of equine-assisted psychotherapy will help to bring about a stronger base for future research and development of the practice. Standardization of the practice will allow for additional quantitative research to be developed and may help the field mature and gain wider respect. The field of equine-assisted psychotherapy has grown over the past decade and this study, along with continued research, will help develop a stronger research base as the field expands.

Significance of the Project

This study is needed in the field of social work in order to bring about research into an emerging and evolving field of alternative therapy. Social workers need to have a vast array of resources to offer their clients as no two clients ever have the same exact set of needs. Having well known practitioners of equine-assisted psychotherapy as a resource could give social workers another alternative psychotherapy option for those clients who struggle making progress in traditional office therapy. For licensed clinical social workers, equine-

assisted psychotherapy might become a new avenue of therapy with increased availability of training and certification. Some clients seem to need something that will provide that extra push through different therapeutic walls. Using a horse may just be the push that will open up a new avenue for the client.

In regards to social work's generalist intervention model, this study looked into the engagement, assessment, planning, intervention implementation, evaluation, termination, and follow-up steps.

This study relates to child welfare as many children in the child welfare system are often court-ordered to complete some type of psychotherapeutic counseling. Alternative and unconventional models of therapy are often best suited for children as they do not require the child to sit alone with an adult in a stale office space. The inclusion of a novel stimulus (animal) and an outdoor natural setting often allows the client the opportunity to open up in new way. This practice may also allow children a hands-on learning experience of new life skills and emotional skills.

The overall purpose and significance of this project was to explore the current theoretical framework and to better understand the theoretical foundation of equine-assisted psychotherapy. Future research will need to dig deeper into and develop a stronger theoretical base for equine-assisted psychotherapy. The main question this study answered was: What are the therapeutic theories and themes guiding the current practice of equine-assisted psychotherapy?

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Chapter two of this research project explores the majority of existing literature about equine-assisted psychotherapy. The literature review is broken into subsections to better analyze all literature as it pertains to the problem statement, problem focus, and significance of this study. The literature is reviewed for any possible existing theoretical backing or existing themes in the field.

Animal-Assisted Therapy

Throughout the literature, credit is given to the practice of animal-assisted therapy as the founding practice for using any type of animal in the therapeutic process, however there is some conflict about when the practice actually began. Some experts believe that animal-assisted therapy was being practiced as early as 1792 (Klontz et al., 2007; Mallon, 1992), however Levinson (1965) claims that the use of animals during that time was all coincidental and the practice had no scientific proof behind it. Levinson is considered to be the founding father of animal-assisted therapy (Bachi, 2012; Geist, 2011; Mallon, 1992) as he was the first person to undertake any type of research on the topic.

In one of Levinson's first studies (1965) he focused on the use of household pets in the psychotherapeutic treatment of children with behavior disorders. He found that using a household pet, such as a dog, allowed for a distraction in the child's world that often broke through the child's inability to exhibit their thoughts. Levinson found that the animal often became the bridge between a withdrawn child and the therapist as the child was often more comfortable initially when there was a loving pet in the room. He claimed that the love and acceptance that household pets show to their owners and family members could be used as a metaphor to demonstrate the love and acceptance others can show towards children, no matter their physical, mental, or emotional backgrounds (Levinson, 1965).

Levinson (1978) also conducted a study on the personality development of humans when they interact with pets. He noted that there are drawings depicting humans having pets as early as the prehistoric times. He believes, as do many, that the way one treats his/her animals often parallels the way he/she treats other people. Levinson noted that household pets often provide a meaning to children and will allow children to feel accepted by something in the house. The children can use their bond with animals to build self-esteem and self-confidence if they are able to teach animals to be obedient and loyal. Animals cannot communicate through words with the child, so animals must teach the child empathy in order to understand the animal's feelings based on the nonverbal communication. Levinson keyed in on love being a necessary part of human growth that may be

possible for animals to provide to those who do not receive it from adults.

However, he noted that there is a lack of psychological research into the animal-human relationships (Levinson, 1978).

Six years later, Levinson (1984) took on the task of studying the human-companion animal relationship. He found that animals could be used as part of psychotherapy, as the sole therapist, as a catalyst for change, or as a way for people to get back in touch with nature and their unconscious. Levinson found that touch and attachment became exceedingly apparent when a companion animal was placed into a person's life. The attachment the human and animal formed was biological, while the companionship they displayed was psychological. Levinson concluded that the separation anxiety and the need for tactile comfort that people often display could often be addressed by an animal companion.

In more recent research, Mallon (1992) found similar results to Levinson when doing a thorough review of the literature. Mallon found that the research, while often limited in quantitative studies, does show benefits to animal-assisted therapy. Animals often play important roles in socializing children and provide safe avenues for children to express themselves as animals cannot talk, and therefore cannot tell anyone else about the children's feelings or statements they make (Mallon, 1992). Another review of the literature comes to a somewhat conflicting conclusion when Geist (2011) claims that animal-assisted therapy lacks a uniform theoretical framework. Geist agreed that animals may reduce the

negative reactions to stress and distress, but it is through many different theories that animals will be able to help. The final conclusion of her article focused on the fact that there are many different mental disorders amongst children, so it is important to use many different theories in developing therapies appropriate to different types of problems.

There are numerous studies supporting the use of household pets in animal- assisted therapy, but there is also some research regarding other types of animals, including farm animals. Levinson (1971) conducted a survey of institutionalized children and their institutions about the use of farm animals in their programs. Almost half of the schools that responded said that they had farm animals in their programs and that this part of their programs provided a positive and helpful relationship between the children and the animals. A more recent study used a mixed methodological approach to survey the children in a farm program and use qualitative interviews with the staff at the Green Chimneys treatment program (Mallon, 1994). Mallon found that children used the farm animals in the same way they would use a therapist, talking to the animals and knowing the conversation was confidential, visiting the animals when they felt sad, and gaining confidence through nurturing and caring for another living thing. Through the surveys, Mallon found that the children felt happy or excited when visiting the farm and 67% of children felt better after visiting the farm. The qualitative interviews with the staff backed up the data gathered from the children

as the staff would corroborate the benefits the children were feeling based on conversations they have had with the children about their experience.

As animal-assisted therapy continues to be a positive alternative therapy approach, it is important to document that both old research and new research have noted the use of equine in the therapy as well. Mallon (1994) found that 49% of the children in her survey responded that riding horses was their favorite farm activity.

Levinson (1971) stated:

There were some interesting comments on how the farm programs were conducted: Our best animal program is the one using horses. Each of the 20 boys is assigned a colt to care for, train, etc. When the horses are old enough, the boys ride them. No one but the boy assigned does anything with or to his horse (p. 477).

Lack of Research in Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy

Many authors state that there is a lack of existing research or quantitative studies done to make equine-assisted psychotherapy an evidence-based practice (Bachi, 2012; Chalmers & Dell, 2011; Cody et al., 2011; Ewing et al., 2007). Many of the studies that have been conducted also lack generalizability due to their lack of sample size, with many being individual case studies of existing clients (Bachi, 2012). Bachi, as well as Chalmers and Dell (2011) also noted that a lot of the research in using horses focused on the physiological

benefits instead of the psychological benefits. Cody et al. (2011) noted that one major reason that equine-assisted psychotherapy lacks a solid foundation is due to it being developed by the horse community. The therapy method was developed by the horse trainers more than the mental health professionals; therefore the fundraising that takes place is aimed at building and improving the programs more than the research into the psychological benefits. This overt lack of research has left sporadic and often independent reports that don't really build on each other (Cody et al., 2011).

Client Populations

Equine-assisted psychotherapy is an emerging field which has not fully explored exactly which disorders and what aged clientele it will work best with. Many of the research studies have been conducted with children that suffer from different mental disorders. Bachi (2012) stated that practitioners using equine-assisted psychotherapy do so with multiple populations and therefore must use different models to fulfill the needs of each individual. One issue that comes with using equine-assisted psychotherapy is the use of a horse and the outdoor environment. Clients must be prescreened to determine if this type of therapy will be an option due to health concerns, safety concerns, and emotional concerns (Cody et al., 2011; Karol, 2007). Karol noted that equine-assisted psychotherapy may be especially beneficial for children because placing a child

on top of a horse may make them feel taller than the adults in their lives for the first time. They may also feel a sense of sharing of the horse's power.

While many studies focus on the use of equine-assisted psychotherapy with children, some studies have been conducted with an adult population. Bachi (2013) looked at the use of equine-facilitated programs within the prison population. She found that this type of therapy also is useful with adults in prison in similar ways because it is therapy among the natural environment. Bizub et al.(2003) also conducted a study that focused on adults with long histories of psychiatric disabilities in order to determine if the therapy was appropriate for that population as well.

Lentini and Knox (2009) focused less on the appropriate age group to be studied and more on the different disorders that equine therapy could be applied to. They found that the use of equine-assisted therapy may apply to patients with delinquency issues, eating disorders, trauma, attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, anxiety, and/or oppositional defiant disorder. Cody et al. (2011) also found that equine therapy is a positive intervention for those people struggling with substance abuse.

Benefits of Using a Horse

There are many benefits of using an animal in psychotherapy, but there are also many benefits that only a horse may present. Human-animal relationship attachment theory has been around since the beginning of animal-

assisted therapy and it continues to carry over into equine-assisted psychotherapy as well (Bachi, 2013). The human-animal relationship cannot be developed without a calm and well trained animal which is a necessary component of using a therapy horse in equine-assisted psychotherapy (Bachi, 2013; Rothe et al., 2004; Yorke et al., 2008).

Horses are remarkable animals that are full of power and grace, while still displaying vulnerabilities and emotions (Karol, 2007). A horse is less likely to engage with a person than a dog or other house animal therefore allowing for clients to prepare themselves for intimate contact with another living being and without connections before clients are ready (Karol, 2007). One reason horses display their vulnerability is because they are prey animals. As a prey animal, horses are very acute to their inner feelings and can easily sense and react to a client's internal incongruity, forcing the client to deal with their inner feelings before the horse will calm down to a normal state (Burgon, 2011; Karol, 2007; Kirby, 2010; Siporin, 2012; Tyler, 1994). This heightened state that horses have allows for them to give accurate and unbiased feedback at all times of the interaction with a client, whether it be when first approaching the animal or during the riding of the horse (Klontz et al., 2007). While horses may be at a heightened state of attention, the sheer size of a horse automatically puts a client in a higher state of alertness as the client seeks to protect himself or herself by setting boundaries with the horse (Kirby, 2011).

Horses are one of the few domesticated animals (Rothe et al., 2004) in the United States of America, making them easier for humans to develop relationships with. This domestication process has allowed for a more intimate relationship to be formed between human and horse and often allows for a psychological connection as well as the physiological connection. The physiological connection often turns into a psychological connection, however, as the process of grooming and tacking up a horse in preparation for riding allows for the intimate tactile connection where the horse and rider trust each other completely (Bizub et al., 2003). Throughout this process the rider and horse are experiencing many different connections. The preverbal, nonverbal, and verbal processes in the relationship show a sense of empathy and communication between the human and the horse (Karol, 2007; Siporin, 2012; Vidrine et al., 2002).

Therapeutic Environment

The therapeutic environment presented in equine-assisted psychotherapy is much different than traditional office therapy. Equine-assisted psychotherapy often takes place outdoors in the natural environment of the horse. The client or clients, often children, must go to the animal's natural habitat instead of being able to stay in the comfort of their usual environment. This is the first change the child must deal with and learn to accept the unknowns of their environment before they can even begin the therapeutic process with the mental health

professional and the horse (Bizub et al., 2003; Ewing et al., 2007; Rothe et al., 2004). The fact that the horse and farm setting provide a level of unpredictability provides one of the first levels of therapy for the children entering into this unconventional alternative therapy (Vidrine et al., 2002).

Promotion of Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy

Equine-assisted psychotherapy has been shown to be effective through many qualitative studies, however the quantitative evidence is lagging behind (Klontz et al., 2007; Mallon, 1992; Vidrine et al., 2002). This, however, does not diminish the positive benefits that have been noted in the use of equine-assisted psychotherapy. Equine-assisted psychotherapy is similar to other animal-assisted therapies, and also has similarities with other outdoor alternative therapies that have been adopted in social work due to the noted benefits of being outside in the natural environment (Burgon, 2011). Burgon conducted a qualitative study of seven youth, aged 11 to 16, who were classified as at-risk in a foster care equine program. Due to placement movements and child welfare system problems, only three of the youth were able to complete the entire process. Of these three youth they all determined that the trust and cooperation they must gain with the horse was similar to that which they must gain with other people in their everyday lives.

Many studies that have been conducted on the benefits of equine-assisted psychotherapy focus on personal trait qualities within the youth participating in

the study. The main traits that are focused on in a study by Holmes et al.(2012) consist of self-esteem, self-confidence, and anxiety. Holmes et al. found in their study of 10 adolescent males and one adolescent female a significant drop in anxiety, however it failed to show any significant self-esteem gains. Yorke et al. (2008) studied six participants based on similar trait qualities. Their results showed that the pre-existing relationship the clients had with horses significantly impacted the clients' improvement from their former trauma state.

A study of 14 adolescents within a group residence using equine-assisted psychotherapy was compared to a control group of 15 adolescents in the same residence who did not receive the same therapy approach (Bachi et al., 2012). The authors examined the potential impact the equine therapy would have on general life satisfaction, self-image, trust, and self-control. They found a positive trend in all four of the research areas for the treatment group when compared to the control group.

In another study, significant reductions in psychological distress and improvements in psychological well-being were noted immediately after equine-assisted psychotherapy as well as after a six month follow up with 31 participants (Klontz et al., 2007). The authors found the horses served as facilitators and metaphors for the clients to further explore their past experiences which were causing their psychological anguish. The participants reported feeling more alive in the present, less focused on the past resentments, less fearful of the future, and more independent and self-reliant (Klontz et al., 2007). The authors did note

that their results may not be completely accurate due to a lack of a control group, as many other studies struggle with as well.

Schultz et al. (2007) conducted one of the only studies focusing directly on the mental health scores of children in equine-assisted psychotherapy. The study was conducted over an 18-month period in which 63 children were administered approximately 19 sessions of equine-assisted psychotherapy. The authors assigned each child a Global Assessment of Functioning (GAF) scale score for pre-treatment and post-treatment to compare the differences. All children that participated in the study showed statistically significant improvement in their GAF score. The authors also found a direct positive correlation between the amount of increase in the GAF score and the number of sessions the child participated in. The children with a history of physical abuse showed the most improvement when compared to those children without a history of abuse or neglect. The study showed that equine-assisted therapy works well in a short-term study, but the research would need to be continued for a lengthier period of time to determine the long-term effects of equine-assisted therapy.

Throughout the literature different individual traits have been focused on, however a few studies took the time to also focus on possible benefits of using equine-assisted psychotherapy in a group model. Cody et al. (2011) concluded that the therapy is effective in a group therapy setting because it requires children to not only focus on their relationships with the horses, but also to develop peer bonding and team building as they work together to train and

groom the horses. Vidrine et al.(2002) completed a study of therapeutic vaulting in a group therapy setting. The authors found that the children participating in the Horse Time children's groups benefited the most from the mounted portion of the therapy. The children felt more predictability and security in their own worlds as the horse would react to their movements and provide them that secure feeling. The horse provides the children a silent witness to their emotional changes and gives them the healing benefit of a quiet approval through the horses behaviors and eye contact. Through the group setting the children not only had the benefit of bonding with their horse, but they also had the peer bonding for help getting on the horse and tacking the horse for appropriate vaulting activities. The male children were often seen showing affection to their horses that was never seen before in their human relationships. The therapists were able to tie many of the activities, such as grooming and cleaning the horse, into metaphors that related directly to the children's lives and their everyday activities. The authors' final note was that equine-assisted psychotherapy has convincing testimonials, however the lack of quantitative evidence is continuing to limit its acceptance by mainstream culture.

Theories Guiding Conceptualization

The purpose of this study was to identify theories that are being utilized in equine-assisted therapy. That is to say, there are numerous theories being used without any true knowledge of which one is working the best and why. There is

some overlap in theoretical perspective between animal-assisted therapy and equine-assisted psychotherapy due to equine-assisted psychotherapy being a subcategory of animal-assisted therapy. Karol (2007) suggests that equine-assisted psychotherapy is metatheoretical. More specifically, there is not one base theoretical perspective for the field. Instead, there is a semi structure developed for clinicians to apply many different chosen theories to the practice. She believes that there are six major themes that play a part in the psychotherapeutic work including: the existential experience, the relationship between human and horse, the therapeutic relationship with the therapist, the nonverbal communication with the horse, the tactile experiences of comfort, touch, and rhythm, and the use of metaphors to compare the experiences with the horse to the current life settings of the client (Karol, 2007).

There are no current unified standards for using animal-assisted psychotherapy (Bachi, 2012). Many studies focus solely on the human-horse bond as the theoretical foundation, or they explore other theories such as experiential therapy, Gestalt therapy, cognitive behavioral therapy, or object relations theory (Bachi, 2012). Siporin (2012) wrote something similar when she discussed the fact that throughout the literature there is no clear theoretical foundations for equine or other animal-assisted psychotherapies.

Klontz et al. (2007) believe that the guiding theory for equine-assisted psychotherapy lies in the experiential factors and the Gestalt approach that can be applied in the therapeutic encounter. Kirby (2010) wrote an entire article on

the newly evolved Gestalt Equine Psychotherapy. The therapy came out of a merging between Gestalt therapy and the field of equine-assisted psychotherapy. The Gestalt Equine Psychotherapy camp believes their approach is the best due to inclusion of self-awareness, contact, and relationships in Gestalt therapy. The merging of the two fields to create Gestalt Equine Psychotherapy had a basis in contact theory, phenomenology, field theory, change theory, and the use of therapy as an experiment as well as a relationship building experience.

Some themes that emerge in the literature regarding equine-assisted psychotherapy may help lead to a more solid theoretical framework for the practice of the therapy. Self-esteem, self-confidence, mastering skills, empathy, and the ability to have positive communication are all themes that can be found throughout the literature (Burgon, 2011). Attachment theory and the human-animal-therapist relationship are two major theoretical themes that are mentioned throughout the literature as well. Many other themes and theories exist, however the literature continues to go in different directions as very few studies choose to build upon the theoretical framework of a study before it.

Karol (2007) seems to have the best grasp on the present day field of equine-assisted psychotherapy when she calls it metatheoretical. Many authors in the literature mention attachment theory and experiential theory traits in their studies, however they fail to define them as the theoretical backing they are using in their practice. This study will attempt to remove some of the metatheoretical framework from equine-assisted therapy and describe the way in

which theories currently being used may help guide the future practice of equine-assisted psychotherapy. Attachment theory, experiential theory, tactile stimulation theory, and Gestalt therapy will be the basic guides behind some of this study's questions and ideas.

Summary

The literature review in chapter two focused in on the development of equine-assisted psychotherapy from animal-assisted therapy. Through this development, equine-assisted psychotherapy has grown into an eclectic field that requires further research. The literature has shown a current lack of research into the field of equine-assisted therapy. This lack of research, combined with a lack of theoretical foundation has led the field to continue pushing for further psychological research.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

Introduction

This chapter describes the design of this study on equine-assisted psychotherapy. The sample size, composition, and selection process are discussed in detail as well. This study requires data collection instruments that are targeted at practitioners of equine-assisted psychotherapy. The chapter also includes a discussion about the procedures of collecting data and ultimately how the data was analyzed to produce a set of results. The informed consent and the process of protecting the human subjects is also discussed.

Study Design

This study was designed to explore the current theoretical framework and to better understand the theoretical foundation and themes of equine-assisted psychotherapy. A mixed-method approach was taken to try and obtain the best information from the sample participants. The study was exploratory in nature as there is no clear-cut theoretical framework currently in place for equine-assisted psychotherapy. The study consisted of a semi-structured interview between the researcher and the practitioner consisting of approximately 20 questions, depending on the number of follow-up questions needed. A Likert-type scale was also used to determine the amount a practitioner incorporates certain

theories into their equine-assisted psychotherapeutic approach. Both the interview questions and the Likert-type scale were developed by the researcher, therefore there has been no pre-testing done to confirm the validity of the questions or scale being used.

The main question to be answered by this study is: What are the therapeutic theories and themes guiding the current practice of equine-assisted psychotherapy?

Sampling

The sample for this study contains practitioners of equine-assisted psychotherapy. The best sample would be practitioners of equine-assisted psychotherapy nationwide in order to account for the different styles that may be used based on demographics and rural versus city areas; however the sample for this study was on a smaller scale and made up of current certified practitioners in Southern California. The practitioners were drawn from an Internet search of equine-assisted psychotherapy providers and a database of practitioners on the Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association (EAGALA) website. The sample was then narrowed down to providers in Southern California in order to provide a convenience sample for this limited time frame study. The participants were located in the areas of Redlands, Silverado, the Santa Monica mountains, and Huntington Beach. Five of the interviews took place on the ranches at which each participant worked and one interview took

place at an equestrian center in the heart of a city. The limited number of practitioners of equine-assisted psychotherapy in the area caused the sample size to be six practitioners.

Data Collection and Instruments

All of the data for this study was collected using semi-structured interviews and a Likert-type scale (see Appendix B and Appendix C) listing multiple theories that might be used by a practitioner in their therapy model. The interviews were all face-to-face interviews. There were approximately 20 questions developed by the researcher to determine what type of theories and themes the practitioner uses in their equine-assisted psychotherapy. The questions were ordered in hopes of allowing the practitioner the opportunity to answer open-ended questions based on their own experiences and in their own words. Follow-up questions were used if the participant failed to include any theory based foundation in their answers.

The semi-structured interview questions were developed along the guidelines of the generalist model of social work practice. The generalist model consists of a seven-step approach including engagement, assessment, planning, intervention implementation, evaluation, termination, and follow-up (Ebear, Csiernik, & Bechard, 2008; Miller, Tice, & Hall, 2008). This model was used as the basis for the questions because it is consistent with a person-in-environment approach and assumes that human service professionals play many roles when

working with their clients (Miller et al., 2008). Equine-assisted psychotherapy is a form of therapy that requires many different roles to be played; therefore the generalist model was seen to be a good foundational model upon which to base the questionnaire.

The questionnaire began with basic demographic questions to gather the age and gender of each participant, as well as the amount of time they have been working or studying the field of psychotherapy in general. The next group of questions dealt with the engagement phase of equine-assisted psychotherapy. Questions were asked to determine how long the participant had been practicing equine-assisted psychotherapy, what terminology they used for the field of psychotherapy with horses, how they introduce a client to the idea of participating in therapy with a horse, and lastly, how the practitioner finds the use of horses helpful in engaging clients in the therapeutic practice. After discussing the engagement portion of the process, questions followed in regards to building an assessment of the client. These questions focused on what kind of clients the practitioners work with in terms of demographic and diagnosis information, as well as what kinds of clients the participants felt were not appropriate for equine-assisted psychotherapy. Part of the assessment process deals with assessing a client's current mental state, therefore a question was asked in regards to what the client's initial interaction with a horse tells the practitioner about the client. The planning phase of the questionnaire focused on questions dealing with the unique issues that must be considered when planning equine portions of therapy.

A base question was asked to find out how the practitioners use horses in the therapeutic process. To fully understand the planning process a question was asked to determine the typical goals the practitioners have in using horses in therapy and how they formulated those goals. After planning sessions for a client, the practitioners focus on implementing the intervention. This section's main question asked the participants what they felt the use of horses added to the therapeutic process. The secondary questions in the intervention section asked the participants how working in equine-assisted psychotherapy had influenced their overall approach to therapy, if they were still practicing office therapy, and asked if the participants incorporated other therapeutic modalities in the process or if they stuck solely to equine assisted meetings or methods alone. After determining the way in which the participants utilized horses in the intervention, evaluation methods were discussed to better understand how practitioners are researching their own practice. The participants were first asked what their major results usually consisted of after using equine-assisted psychotherapy with a client. They were then asked what diagnoses have they seen equine-assisted psychotherapy be the most effective with. Lastly, the evaluation phase deals with outcomes, so the participants were asked how they measure their outcomes within their own practice. After working with a client for a period of time, practitioners of equine-assisted psychotherapy are faced with the termination process as in other fields of psychotherapy. Practitioners were asked how they determine it is the right time to terminate with the client and how

they feel that the process of termination differs from office therapy based on using a horse or horses in the therapeutic process. The final step in the generalist model deals with follow-up measures. The participants were asked one simple question about any follow-up measures they utilized to determine the effectiveness of equine-assisted psychotherapy.

The questionnaire for the interviews and the Likert-type scale were both developed by the researcher because there are currently no known questionnaires or surveys that have been developed and tested for validity and reliability. Both the questionnaire and Likert-type scale being used in this study were prepared in hopes of finding trends related to specific theories being used in equine-assisted psychotherapy.

Procedures

Initial contact was made with the practitioners via a telephone call regarding the study. They were asked if they were interested in being a participant in a formal semi-structured interview at a later date. After the preliminary list of participants was made, appointments were scheduled to meet the practitioners at the place of their choice in order to conduct formal face-to-face semi-structured interviews. There was no time limit on the interview as the expectation was for the practitioner to answer the open ended questions with as much detail as possible. The participants were provided a copy of the questionnaire at the time of the interview and also read the questions during the

interview. The researcher provided follow-up questions in any area that the participant did not provide enough specific details to answer the question in a measurable way. The Likert-type scale was administered at the end of the interview asking the participants to select how much they use particular theories in their equine-assisted psychotherapy based on a one to five scale.

The time period goal of this study was to make contact and develop a potential list of participants over two weeks. Upon completion of this preliminary list, it was expected that the interviews would be scheduled and conducted over the following eight to ten weeks. The interviews took between 30 to 90 minutes. Upon completing each interview, the interviews were transcribed the following day in order to have prompt access to the data. Once all interviews were conducted, themes were identified and the data was coded for analysis over a two to three day period. An analysis of the data was conducted and conclusions were drawn from the data over a three day period. Overall this research period was approximately 14 weeks.

Protection of Human Subjects

This study was conducted based on a promise of confidentiality to the participants. As the study required face-to-face interviews, there was no way to provide anonymity to the practitioners. Each participant was provided with a written consent form (see Appendix A) as well as a copy of the confidentiality form that was signed by the participant and researcher. The participants were

also asked to sign a release form to have the interviews tape-recorded for research purposes. The transcription of each interview contained no identifying markers and referred to each participant as the practitioner or the proper pronouns. Each participant was also provided the option to receive a copy of the study if they wished to view the results that are concluded (Appendix D).

Data Analysis

Data analysis for this project took place in two separate ways in order to accommodate both the interview questions and the Likert-type scale. The semi-structured interviews were conducted using a voice recorder and note taking in order to begin developing potential themes. After the interviews were completed, the recordings were transcribed into typed computer documents. Content analysis was used to analyze the data collected in these interviews. The interview data was analyzed to find potential themes and patterns in the answers. These themes and patterns were coded in order to make data analysis of all of the interviews easier. The coded information was broken into categories and then analyzed for patterns or themes that emerged between categories or discrepancies in information from one category to the next. Upon coding and determining the prominent themes, the data was ordered based on significance to the study and put into a hard copy document for future discussion.

The Likert-type scale was analyzed using descriptive statistics in the SPSS data analysis software. The scale consists of 14 potential theories or

therapy types all with a one to five scale of importance to that practitioner's therapy method. The data was analyzed to determine which theories or therapy types have the most prominent role within current practice of equine-assisted psychotherapy.

Upon completion of analyzing both sets of data, the information gathered was compared and contrasted to determine the most prominent themes and theories in current equine-assisted psychotherapy.

Summary

This chapter provided a summary analysis of how this research project was conducted, how the data was collected, and ultimately how the data was analyzed in order to draw conclusions. The mixed method study design was described in order to provide a better understanding of the intent of this qualitative exploratory study.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

Introduction

This chapter presents the direct findings of this study. The quantitative data obtained through the Likert-type scale questionnaire is presented in descriptive statistical tables. The qualitative interview data is presented based on themes, commonalities, and differences that presented themselves during the analysis of the transcribed interviews.

Presentation of the Findings

The data was collected in two ways: first through qualitative or open-ended questions, where responses were collected through interviews with the participants and also through quantitative, or measurable, data, where responses were given through a Likert-type scale.

Qualitative

Research into equine-assisted psychotherapy continues to grow and increase the field as a whole. Many themes emerged through the six exploratory qualitative interviews that were conducted in this study. Six certified practitioners of equine-assisted psychotherapy were interviewed with all six being females and ranging in age from 28 to 56. The participants ranged in experience in equine-assisted psychotherapy from four years to fourteen years. However, the majority

of participants had over 20 years of experience practicing psychotherapy in a more general sense, with only one participant having only ten years of experience practicing general psychotherapy.

The engagement step in the generalist model was the first step addressed in the interviews. One of the first areas of concern that was discovered in the literature review dealt with the different names for the art of using horses in therapy. All six participants stated they used the term equine-assisted psychotherapy (EAP) as their name for the field of work they are in. All participants are also certified in equine assisted growth and learning but use that term more as a model than a definition of their field of work.

The first step a practitioner must take is introducing the client to the horse and using the horse to engage the client in the therapeutic process. The participants discussed the way a horse can help a person distance themselves from their problems and look at them from a different perspective. Participant #2 explained,

I think that it's a distancing thing. So people, it's easier for people to talk about something away from themselves rather than themselves or their close relatives or whoever they are dealing with. So it helps them see, to talk about it in a way that doesn't feel as close. Less personal.

(Participant 2, personal communication, February, 2014)

The assessment phase of the therapeutic process takes place in all modalities, but there are some differences in equine-assisted psychotherapy as

horses are involved in the process. Blended with the assessment phase is the planning phase. Therapists focus on assessing clients and the situation to develop their plan, but their plan must continue to change as their assessment changes session to session. One of the areas that developed during this study dealt with the use of horses in therapy and what that changed, for the better or worse, in the therapeutic process. The first time a client meets his or her therapist can be seen an important moment in the therapeutic process, but there was some disagreement amongst the practitioners' answers when addressing what a clients' initial interaction with a horse tells them about the client. Four of the six participants stated that that initial moment told them so much about how the client was that day. Participant #6 said, "the first five minutes of therapy usually tells the whole story" (Participant 6, personal communication, February, 2014). The other two participants made statements that the first interaction does not tell you about where the person is and a therapist should not pass judgment on a client based on that first encounter. Participant #4 mentioned focusing on the work of Wilfred Bion and his idea of going into each session with "no mind" and mentally being back at the beginning as if this was a brand new session (Participant 4, personal communication, February 2014). Three of the participants noted that equine-assisted psychotherapy has made them more aware of their own countertransference and that is part of the reason they have to make sure they are in the moment and not effecting the horses behaviors or they may overanalyze a client based on their own problems they are transferring

to the horse. The subtle changes that the horses can pick up led to a question regarding the use of a formal plan in working with a client in equine-assisted psychotherapy. All six participants made statements that they always make a general plan for a session, but almost every session changes as the horse reacts in a different way or the client presents with a new problem, therefore working as an equine-assisted psychotherapist requires them to be very flexible and able to change and go in whatever direction the session is heading. Participant #3 explained that the plans always change by stating,

Just go with it. Literally just go with it. And part of what the EAGALA model does, it's the perfect template for knowing how to go with it. If you're following the model, you don't get stuck, but it took me a long time to understand that. (Participant 3, personal communication, February, 2014)

A benefit to this flexibility was that a lot of the problems that arise, that may otherwise not be addressed in office therapy, could be put back on the horse, thus disconnecting the client from the problem. This allows for the therapists to have the client look at the problem as if it was the horse's problem and reactions, when in reality they are addressing the internal problem of the client that they have projected on to the horse. This idea of taking oneself out of the situation, putting it back on the horse, and using the horse as a mirror was mentioned by five out of the six participants.

The intervention that is applied in this therapeutic process deals with using horses as an addition to the therapy session. The participants in this study discussed the way the horse provides a quiet and comfortable environment for the client to interact in. There was no disagreement amongst the participants about the nonjudgmental approach that is taken in the therapeutic process because the horse reacts naturally to the client with no bias. Participant #5 went into more detail about the safe environment the horse provides as intervention,

Safety. They bring, they make this a safe environment because there is no judgment. Honesty. This is, for some people, the only place they can be completely honest because they know they are not being lied to. It is impossible to be deceived. The horse bridges the gap between people.

(Participant 5, personal communication, February, 2014)

A majority of the participants discussed the visual cues that the horse presents with based on a client's state of mind in the moment. The participants stated that the use of horses allows them to pick up on more body language and assess how to move forward with the session as they may get clues they would have otherwise missed.

Participant #1 went in to more detail,

I use them as an assessment. So definitely, umm, they have such like I mentioned clean feedback. You know even as a therapist with our, being in our own therapy, our own countertransference, all our knowledge, even how we filter through the person that's in front of us, is still coming through

us and all our stuff. And so with the horses it's just clean. What you see is what you get. So they've really let me know sometimes on things I can't pick up on. I'm pretty good at picking up body language, so they give me that extra piece that makes me wonder and more curious about what is going on internally for the person. Even the most subtle shifts in somebody dropping out of their head into their body, the horse will all of a sudden walk with them when it had been stuck. (Participant 1, personal communication, February, 2014)

There were five main themes that emerged surrounding the category of theoretical foundation for equine-assisted psychotherapy. All six participants mentioned the experiential process or process of experiencing therapy when discussing how equine-assisted psychotherapy benefits clients. Every participant also stated that they use a trauma-focused approach in equine-assisted psychotherapy. The other three themes that emerged were mentioned by three of the six participants, but were not discounted or in disagreement with anything mentioned by the other three participants. These three theoretical themes were somatic therapy, Jungian perspective therapy, and using metaphors in therapy. Wilfred Bion was mentioned by Participants #1, #3, and #4 as one of the most influential psychoanalysts in their work today. Participants #1 and #6 mentioned Peter Levine's somatic work and Dan Siegel's neuropathways focus as foundations for their work in the field of psychotherapy.

Equine-assisted psychotherapy continues to be utilized as a therapeutic modality, but this is only because of positive reviews during the evaluation phase. During the questions about equine-assisted psychotherapy's benefits for specific diagnoses or disorders many themes emerged amongst the majority of the participants. Every participant was unwavering when they discussed focusing on trauma as the best use of equine-assisted psychotherapy. A traumatic event was believed to be at the core of all other problems that may have been presenting themselves during the therapeutic sessions. Personality disorders, mood disorders, boundary issues, perspective or pattern shifts, anxiety disorders, depression disorders, and post-traumatic stress disorder were all mentioned by five of the six participants as main focuses in using equine-assisted psychotherapy. Working on a client's assertiveness and confidence was also discussed by four of the professionals. When discussing what disorders or diagnoses the practitioners felt that equine-assisted psychotherapy would not be helpful for, five of the participants spoke about people with psychotic disorders or those that were currently experiencing a psychotic episode. Three of the participants mentioned the difficulty they would find in using equine-assisted psychotherapy with people diagnosed with schizophrenia and felt that it would be a poor fit for this type of therapy.

The last major area that was focused on in these interviews dealt with the process of termination and how that might change, as a horse is involved in the therapeutic process. The practitioners were asked how they viewed the

termination process differing from traditional office therapy and how they felt it affected the entire therapeutic process from the beginning to the end. All of the participants stated that the termination process has an added element because there is a definite bond developed with the horse, but only three of the participants felt that the termination process was entirely different from traditional office therapy. Those participants that felt the process was similar to office therapy felt that the termination with the horse was the same exact process as termination with the therapist, therefore the termination process was the same, it just involved terminating with more than one member. Those practitioners that felt the termination process was entirely different felt that the bond with the horse is completely different than the bond with the therapist and must be addressed as such. These practitioners felt that the bond with the horse was stronger than any bond a client makes with a therapist and therefore the grieving process a client will experience leaving the horse must be addressed with the client a few sessions before the last session.

The final step in the generalist model focuses on follow-up procedures that are used to determine if the intervention was fully effective. All of the participants stated that they have no formal long-term follow up procedures, but three do utilize a survey at the end of the last session. Participant #5 explained the use of her outcome measure that she asks clients to fill out after a handful of sessions,

The outcome survey that we used to use, we would ask them what was the most helpful, what was the least helpful, you know how would rate

your symptoms in the beginning and now, things like that. We never had somebody say they got nothing. Never. It varies greatly, from wow this was really cool to oh my gosh you saved my life. Anywhere in between. But we've never once had somebody say that this was a colossal waste of time. (Participant 5, personal communication, February, 2014)

The consensus among the participants was that they wanted to develop a formal follow-up process, however they are unsure of the best form of follow-up measure to use.

Participant #3 explained the desire for a follow-up measure, I want to start using survey monkey more and more. For funding and we want to get to clients that can't come to us and service people that can't afford it, that's the main reason I want to get outcome measures. I don't need anyone to tell me if this is helpful or not, I watch it and I see it happen. So I'm good with that part, but for funding it's a thing that is important. And there are EAP businesses across the world that do some really good quality follow-up. And it has helped them build their business; it's helped them with funding. (Participant 3, personal communication, February, 2014)

Quantitative

Statistical tables (Appendix E) were created based on the data gathered in the Likert-type scale questionnaires utilized to determine each practitioner's use of different theories and therapy models within their equine-assisted

psychotherapy work. Every theory or therapy type, except for experiential theory, received at least two different scores across the six surveys that were completed. Experiential theory received all scores of five, concluding that it is ranked as very important in their practice by every practitioner that participated in the study. The tables further demonstrated the integrated approach that many practitioners take to equine-assisted psychotherapy by numerically showing the wide range of utilization scores that the practitioners gave each of the theories.

Based on the average rating for each theory or therapy type it is apparent that equine-assisted psychotherapy is based on an experiential ($M = 5.00$) theory foundation. Intermixed with this experiential base fall attachment theory ($M = 4.50$), a strengths based approach ($M = 4.50$), and Gestalt based therapy ($M = 4.00$). Phenomenology theory and symbolic interaction theory were the two therapy types that had the most differentiated thought on them. Both theories received scores on the lowest end of importance as well as scores on the highest end of importance. The wide range of scores given to each theory or therapy type shows continued discourse amongst the theories and therapy types being used and associated with equine-assisted psychotherapy.

Summary

This mixed-method study provided the opportunity to explore the current theoretical and therapeutic state of equine-assisted psychotherapy while also finding quantitative statistics on the ways different practitioners view different

theories and therapy types as being integral parts of the equine-assisted psychotherapeutic process. While there was a lot of agreement on the different diagnoses and issues that equine-assisted psychotherapy can benefit, there was less agreement on the way in which they should be addressed theoretically as well as in the physical practice and approach.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

Introduction

This chapter delivers a discussion of the findings presented in chapter four. The themes, commonalities, and differences are blended with the quantitative descriptive data to determine the outcomes of this study. The limitations of this study will be discussed as to help improve future studies. Lastly, the recommendations for social work practice, policy, and research will be addressed as to the data gathered throughout the study.

Discussion

“Working with horses is therapy in real time”, (Participant 6, personal communication, February, 2014).

Equine-assisted psychotherapy is a therapeutic modality that is currently experiencing growth in its use and growth in the amount of research focusing on its methodology and its model of practice. Equine-assisted psychotherapy has developed out of the work of animal-assisted therapy methods, originally studied by Boris Levinson (Bachi, 2012; Geist, 2011; Mallon, 1992). Equine-assisted psychotherapy is the process of incorporating horses into the therapeutic process in order to reach a new level of growth and learning. It requires a team effort between a licensed therapist and a professional horse expert who work together

to address the treatment goals developed in the assessment and planning. The clients learn about themselves by participating in non-riding activities with the horses, and then discussing their emotions, actions, and behaviors (EAGALA, 2014). As equine-assisted therapeutic methods continue to grow in numbers, there has been some discourse in the naming of the therapy method. The practitioners interviewed for this study all concurred that equine-assisted psychotherapy is the terminology they use when referring to the use of horses in a psychotherapeutic method. Many of the practitioners also perform equine assisted growth and learning (EAGALA), but they stated that when they are solely working in a psychotherapeutic manner, they use equine-assisted psychotherapy as their primary term.

The main focus of this research project was to look into the current theoretical framework of equine-assisted psychotherapy. Through discussions with all of the participants it became apparent that the main focus of using equine-assisted psychotherapy was working with trauma, anxiety, depression, and boundary issues. The participants also agreed that personality and mood disorders were diagnoses that were treated well using the equine form of psychotherapy. Determining what diagnoses equine-assisted psychotherapy works the best with and what diagnoses it does not work quite as well with will help to focus on specific theories to become foundations for future models. There are many theories that have been used and tested in many different forms of psychotherapy, but no theories have been focused on in equine-assisted

psychotherapy. The participants in this study focused mostly on experiential theory and trauma focused therapy models, such as eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR) and depth psychotherapy. Somatic therapy and Jungian theory, including the use of metaphors, were also discussed by half of the participants as playing vital roles in their current practices of equine-assisted psychotherapy. Many of the participants made statements about having an eclectic style of therapy practice based on many years of schooling and therapy work experience, however the names Wilfred Bion, Dan Siegel, and Peter Levine were cited by more than one participant as influences into their equine-assisted psychotherapy practice. Based on the information gathered in the interviews it would appear that equine-assisted psychotherapy is moving in a direction that is focusing on treating trauma, just as animal-assisted therapy focused on as its time progressed.

The therapeutic process is drastically different in equine-assisted psychotherapy versus generic office talk therapy. Each professional talked about the present state a client has to be in during equine-assisted psychotherapy, where a client may be able to focus more on the past and not get to the point of what is really bothering them. Including the horse in the process requires a client to take note of their body language and be in the present moment with their emotions as the horse will give instant feedback and be a mirror to the actions and emotions of the client in the present moment. This focus on the present state of a client works well with a Jungian approach to therapy because it

focuses on using the horse as another screen for projection, like a sand tray or art therapy. Participant #4 mentioned Wilfred Bion's focus on having no preconceived notions going into a session (Participant 4, personal communication, February, 2014), which fits into equine-assisted psychotherapy as well. The therapist must come into a session without any thoughts about the client's current state of mind because they have no knowledge of where the client is that day or what led up to the feelings they are having. Most of the participants in the study said that the first moment the client sees the horse tells them a lot, but two of the participants disagreed with that opinion. Participant #3 stated,

It doesn't. It doesn't. It doesn't tell us how the process is going to go, because that would be like you meeting me tomorrow and I'm not going to be in the same place tomorrow as I am right now. (Participant 3, personal communication, February, 2014)

Participant #4 made a similar statement:

Kind of like taking the approach of Wilfred Bion, his idea was no mind. We approach every client as if it is the first time we've met them. So even though we might have the history, it's like I don't know who you are today, so we will see. (Participant 4, personal communication, February, 2014)

It may just be that the client needs a moment to come back in the moment so the therapist needs to wait on passing judgment, as Bion would encourage.

Participant #1 explained one of Bion's ideas:

Bion, he talks about the therapist in therapy picks up the raw elements somebody can't digest and filters them through us, like we are the instrument, and feeds it back in a way that is digestible to the person so they can digest this raw muck that is stuck. (Participant 1, personal communication, February, 2014)

The horse becomes the tool that raw material can be processed through without any fears of countertransference or assumptions as the horse is nonjudgmental and cares only about the current situation, nothing about the client's past or anything outside of the current material they are dealing with.

One other important area that deals directly with the current status and theoretical foundation of equine-assisted psychotherapy deals with termination with clients. The termination process must be incorporated into the theoretical foundation of therapy, as termination must begin to be addressed early in the therapy process in order to avoid causing grieving problems at the conclusion of the therapeutic process. The termination process is different in equine-assisted psychotherapy as the horse, or horses, add an extra element where a strong bond is established and must be terminated. It was discovered that the termination process is similar between the client and therapist as with the client and the horse. In terms of terminating the relationships between the client and the horse, the client must focus on taking away the positives of the relationship and keeping the tools they have learned as part of their repertoire, just as they would when terminating with their therapist. Many of the participants stated that

the clients are able to return to the ranch and see the horses at certain times during the months as many of the horses are kept on public grounds. This allows for the clients to continue their relationships with the horses as they know where the horses are and know they can go back and talk to the horses if needed at a later date. Understanding the termination process allows for a therapist to have a better understanding of the theoretical process they need to take to help a client from the very beginning up until the time of termination, without causing any added stress, anxiety, depression, or grief.

While the main focus of this study was to try and find the current theoretical trends and develop a more centralized theoretical foundation for equine-assisted psychotherapy, the true discovery came in how eclectic this type of therapy really can be. There are a number of different theories that are used in general office therapy based on the therapist's preference or on the different symptoms that a client presents with. Through the research for this study it was discovered that equine-assisted psychotherapy does not use a single theory that only works for one diagnosis or one set of symptoms. Equine-assisted psychotherapy can work with many different diagnoses or sets of symptoms clients may have. Therefore, it is unlikely there will ever be one single therapeutic foundation for the use of equine-assisted psychotherapy. Instead, the focus needs to be placed on developing evidence based models of equine-assisted psychotherapy using different theories that benefit clients, just as has been done with the equine assisted growth and learning model.

Limitations

This study presented some exploratory findings related to theories used in equine-assisted psychotherapy and had several limitations. The first, most apparent, limitation was the sample itself. As equine-assisted psychotherapy is a growing field, the amount of certified practitioners is smaller than for other forms of therapy. Therefore, the sample was based solely on practitioners in Southern California between Los Angeles County and Riverside County. The sample was also limited to only six participants as there were time constraints limiting continued exploration of the topic with more participants. Due to this sample size, the findings are not generalizable to the field of equine-assisted psychotherapy as a whole. Future research needs to be conducted with certified practitioners of equine-assisted psychotherapy nationwide to incorporate the different theoretical frameworks based on the area of the country, the biases included in the practice based on the cultures of different parts of the country, and the ability to implement equine-assisted psychotherapy based on parts of the country with a higher and lower equine population concentration.

Another major limitation of this study was the lack of previously developed questionnaires related to equine-assisted psychotherapy that have been tested for reliability and validity. That lack of questionnaires required an exploratory qualitative questionnaire and a Likert-type scale questionnaire to be developed by the researcher without being able to test reliability or validity before using it.

One other limitation of this study dealt with a lack of other studies conducted on similar topics or in a similar nature. As more research is done in this area, it will be easier for researchers to narrow relevant categories and themes and use existing information to design studies which will increase the knowledge base related to equine-assisted psychotherapy.

Recommendations for Social Work Practice, Policy, and Research

Future research should be conducted in the field of equine-assisted psychotherapy. Qualitative exploratory research needs to continue to be conducted to discover the main direction that current practitioners are taking the field. Further exploring the theoretical foundation of equine-assisted psychotherapy would also allow for future models to be designed and modifications be made to the current models of practice in the areas of both equine-assisted psychotherapy and equine assisted growth and learning (EAGALA). Future research would also benefit from the development of quantitative surveys, for both practitioners and clients, created solely for the use in equine-assisted therapeutic practices. The creation of these types of data gathering instruments would allow for reliability and validity to be confirmed, thus increasing the evidence based foundation for equine-assisted therapeutic work.

This exploratory mixed-method study was conducted to further look at the theoretical foundation for equine-assisted psychotherapy. The findings of this study could impact several areas of social work. Licensed clinical social workers

need to begin exploring more alternative methods of therapeutic practices, such as using animals or horses in the process. The current field of equine-assisted psychotherapy is dominated by marriage and family therapists who have taken their desire to expand the therapeutic field and moved into new methods. Licensed clinical social workers need to join the movement in order to help make sure these alternative therapy methods focus on the entirety of a person, as a social worker does, and not just mental health of a client. The study also affects advanced case management services conducted by social workers as it goes to show that there is a strong theoretical foundation to refer clients to equine-assisted psychotherapy services to deal with trauma, depression, anxiety, and many other very common mental health issues faced by clients.

Conclusions

This mixed-method study focused on the current theoretical foundation of equine-assisted psychotherapy. Better understanding the theoretical foundation of equine-assisted psychotherapy allows for a more concise approach to developing new models and furthering the current practice. According to the participants in this study, the current theoretical approach to equine-assisted psychotherapy has shown a significant impact in the areas of trauma, depression, anxiety, and boundary issues. By helping clients disconnect from themselves, be more in the present, and focus on themselves and their

emotions, equine-assisted psychotherapy can continue to help better the lives of many people.

APPENDIX A
INFORMED CONSENT

INFORMED CONSENT

An Exploratory Study of the Theoretical Base for Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy

The study in which you are being asked to participate is designed to explore and develop a comprehensive foundation theory for the practice of equine-assisted psychotherapy. This study is being conducted by Bradford T. Dawson, Master of Social Work Student, under the supervision of Dr. Ray Liles, DSW, Social Work Practice Lecturer at California State University, San Bernardino. This study has been approved by the School of Social Work Sub-Committee of the Institutional Review Board, California State University, San Bernardino.

PURPOSE: This research project is being conducted as an exploratory study in to the theoretical framework of equine-assisted psychotherapy. The study is being conducted in hopes of beginning to develop a comprehensive theoretical framework for the use in equine-assisted psychotherapy.

DESCRIPTION: Your participation would consist of completing a semi-structure interview and a short Likert type scale questionnaire. The interview will be audio recorded, transcribed, and analyzed to see the ways in which your responses are similar and/or different from other participants. You have been identified to participate in this study because you are a current certified practitioner of equine-assisted psychotherapy and are over the age of 18.

PARTICIPATION: Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and refusal to participate will have no penalty or repercussions. You may also choose to end your participation in this study at any time with no penalty or repercussions.

CONFIDENTIALITY: Your participation in this study comes with an expectation of complete confidentiality. The informed consent and all other identifying information will be kept in a locked office. Your contact information will be kept on a separate document from your answers throughout the entirety of this study. Neither your name nor any identifying information will be included in the transcription of your interview answers for content analysis in this study. Your contact information and your transcribed answers will also be stored on separate password protected computer hard drives providing an extra level of confidentiality. The findings of the study will be presented in aggregate (group) form and any quotations used will be listed as anonymous.

DURATION: The study you are voluntarily participating in will consist of an interview and a short Likert type scale questionnaire. Your participation should last no longer than two to three hours. You may be contacted for clarification as needed, however this is not expected.

RISKS: There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts with this study.

BENEFITS: The findings of this study may assist in building a foundational theoretical framework for the practice of equine-assisted psychotherapy as it continues to grow.

909.537.5501

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College of Social and Behavioral Sciences
School of Social Work

AUDIO: The interviews will be audio recorded for clarity and to ensure accurate data collection. These recordings will be studied and used in this project only. Please initial the following statement:

I understand this research interview will be audio recorded and agree to be recorded for the use by this researcher.

Initials _____

CONTACT: If you have questions and require answers to pertinent questions about the research and your rights as a research subject, please contact my research advisor.

Dr. Ray E. Liles, DSW
Social Work Practice Lecturer
California State University, San Bernardino
(909) 537-5557
reliles@csusb.edu

RESULTS: Upon completion of this study, the results will be available at the California State University, San Bernardino John M. Pfau Library after December 2014. If you request a paper copy of the results it will be mailed to you upon completion and approval of the project.

CONFIRMATION STATEMENT:

I understand that I must be 18 years of age or older to participate in your study, have read and understand the consent document and agree to participate in your study.

SIGN: Please sign below if you agree to the conditions of this study and volunteer to participate.

X: _____ Date: _____

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, SAN BERNARDINO
SOCIAL WORK INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD SUB-COMMITTEE
APPROVED 1/16/14 VOID AFTER 1/16/15
IRB# 201412 CHAIR [Signature]

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**AUDIO USE
INFORMED CONSENT FORM
FOR NON-MEDICAL HUMAN SUBJECTS**

As part of this research project, I will be making an audiotape recording of you during your participation in the study. Please indicate what uses of this audiotape you are willing to consent to by initialing below. You are free to initial any number of spaces from zero to all of the spaces, and your response will in no way affect your credit for participating. We will only use the audiotape in ways that you agree to. In any use of this audiotape, your name would *not* be identified. If you do not initial any of the spaces below, the audiotape will be destroyed.

Please indicate the type of informed consent

Audiotape

(AS APPLICABLE)

- **The audiotape can be studied by the research team for use in the research project.**

Please initial: _____

- **The audiotape can be shown/played to subjects in other experiments.**

Please initial: _____

- **The audiotape can be used for scientific publications.**

Please initial: _____

- **The audiotape can be shown/played at meetings of scientists.**

Please initial: _____

- **The audiotape can be shown/played in classrooms to students.**

Please initial: _____

- **The audiotape can be shown/played in public presentations to nonscientific groups.**

Please initial: _____

- **The audiotape can be used on television and radio.**

Please initial: _____

I have read the above description and give my consent for the use of the audiotape as indicated above.

The extra copy of this consent form is for your records.

SIGNATURE _____ **DATE** _____

APPENDIX B
QUESTIONNAIRE

QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Age?
2. Gender?
3. How long have you been practicing or researching psychotherapy?

Engagement

4. How long have you been doing equine assisted therapy?
5. What terminology do you use for psychotherapy with horses? (Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP), Equine-Assisted Therapy (EAT), Equine-Assisted Learning (EAL), Equine-Facilitated Psychotherapy (EFP))
6. How do you introduce clients to the idea of bringing a horse into the therapeutic process?
7. How is the use of horses useful in engaging clients?
 - a. What do you do to establish a comfortable interaction between the client and the horse?

Assessment

8. What kinds of clients do you usually work with in terms of age, gender, diagnosis, etc.?
9. What kinds of clients are not appropriate for equine assisted psychotherapy?
10. Is your equine assisted therapy practiced in individual and/or group settings?
11. What does the client's initial interaction with a horse tell you about the client?

Planning

12. What issues are considered when planning the equine portions of the therapy?
13. How do you use horses in therapy?
 - a. Does your use of horses differ from client to client? If so, how?
 - b. What steps do you take to plan the individualized therapeutic process for each client?
14. What are your typical goals in using horses in therapy?
 - a. How do you formulate the goals?

Intervention

15. What does the use of horses add to the therapeutic process?
 - a. Possible need for follow up questions based on their answer to get a more concrete theoretical answer.
16. If the practitioner did another form of therapy before equine-assisted psychotherapy:
 - a. How has your use of horses influenced your overall approach to therapy?
17. In your therapeutic process, do you only use equine assisted meetings/methods alone, or do you incorporate other therapeutic modalities as well?

Evaluation

18. What are the major results you see in your clients as the result of using your equine assisted method?
19. What diagnoses have you seen equine assisted psychotherapy be most effective with?
20. How do you measure outcomes?

Termination

21. How do you determine it's the right time to terminate with the client?
22. How does the process of termination with clients differ based on the use of horses in the therapeutic process?

Follow-up

23. Do you have follow up measures you utilize to determine the effectiveness of equine-assisted psychotherapy?

Developed by Bradford Tyler Dawson

APPENDIX C
LIKERT-TYPE SCALE

LIKERT-TYPE SCALE

Please rank each of the following theories or therapy models in terms of its importance to your equine-assisted work: 1 would be not important at all and 5 would be very important.

Attachment Theory	1	2	3	4	5
Awareness and Contact Theory	1	2	3	4	5
Behaviorist Theory (Behaviorism)	1	2	3	4	5
Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy	1	2	3	4	5
Experiential Theory	1	2	3	4	5
Freudian Theory	1	2	3	4	5
Gestalt Therapy	1	2	3	4	5
Human-Animal Bond Theory	1	2	3	4	5
Jungian Theory	1	2	3	4	5
Object Relations Theory	1	2	3	4	5
Psychodynamic Theories	1	2	3	4	5
Phenomenology Theory	1	2	3	4	5
Strength Based Perspective	1	2	3	4	5
Symbolic Interaction Theory	1	2	3	4	5

Developed by Bradford Tyler Dawson

APPENDIX D
DEBRIEFING STATEMENT

Debriefing Statement

This study is being conducted to explore the potential theoretical framework of present day equine-assisted psychotherapy. The findings of this study may assist in building a foundational theoretical framework for the practice of equine-assisted psychotherapy as it continues to grow. There are no foreseeable immediate, short-term, or long-term risks to the participants in this study.

Results of this study will be available through the California State University, San Bernardino John M. Pfau Library after December 2014. The results may will also be made available through the library website at a later date. A paper copy of the results may be requested and will be provided upon approval and dissemination of the results.

As this study is an ongoing exploratory qualitative project, I politely request that you do not discuss the nature of this study or the questions being addressed with any other members of the equine-assisted psychotherapy community until I have completed my research.

If you have any questions or feel as though you were harmed in any way, please contact my research advisor:

Dr. Ray E. Liles, DSW
Social Work Practice Lecturer
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Thank you for taking the time to participate in this study and thank you for your help and support in this project.

APPENDIX E
QUANTITATIVE TABLES

Attachment

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
3.00	1	16.7	16.7	16.7
4.00	1	16.7	16.7	33.3
5.00	4	66.7	66.7	100.0
Total	6	100.0	100.0	

Awareness

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
1.00	4	66.7	66.7	66.7
4.00	2	33.3	33.3	100.0
Total	6	100.0	100.0	

Behaviorist

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
1.00	3	50.0	50.0	50.0
2.00	1	16.7	16.7	66.7
3.00	2	33.3	33.3	100.0
Total	6	100.0	100.0	

CBT

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
1.00	2	33.3	33.3	33.3
3.00	3	50.0	50.0	83.3
5.00	1	16.7	16.7	100.0
Total	6	100.0	100.0	

Experiential

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
5.00	6	100.0	100.0	100.0

Freudian

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
1.00	3	50.0	50.0	50.0
2.00	1	16.7	16.7	66.7
4.00	1	16.7	16.7	83.3
5.00	1	16.7	16.7	100.0
Total	6	100.0	100.0	

Gestalt

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
3.00	3	50.0	50.0	50.0
5.00	3	50.0	50.0	100.0
Total	6	100.0	100.0	

Human Animal

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
1.00	1	16.7	16.7	16.7
3.00	2	33.3	33.3	50.0
5.00	3	50.0	50.0	100.0
Total	6	100.0	100.0	

Jungian

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
2.00	2	33.3	33.3	33.3
3.00	1	16.7	16.7	50.0
4.00	1	16.7	16.7	66.7
5.00	2	33.3	33.3	100.0
Total	6	100.0	100.0	

Phenomenology

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
1.00	4	66.7	66.7	66.7
5.00	2	33.3	33.3	100.0
Total	6	100.0	100.0	

Strength Based

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
4.00	3	50.0	50.0	50.0
5.00	3	50.0	50.0	100.0
Total	6	100.0	100.0	

Symbolic

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
1.00	2	33.3	33.3	33.3
4.00	2	33.3	33.3	66.7
5.00	2	33.3	33.3	100.0
Total	6	100.0	100.0	

Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean
Attachment	6	3.00	5.00	4.5000
Awareness	6	1.00	4.00	2.0000
Behaviorist	6	1.00	3.00	1.8333
CBT	6	1.00	5.00	2.6667
Experiential	6	5.00	5.00	5.0000
Freudian	6	1.00	5.00	2.3333
Gestalt	6	3.00	5.00	4.0000
Human Animal	6	1.00	5.00	3.6667
Jungian	6	2.00	5.00	3.5000
Object Relations	6	2.00	5.00	3.8333
Psychodynamic	6	3.00	5.00	3.6667
Phenomenology	6	1.00	5.00	2.3333
Strength Based	6	4.00	5.00	4.5000
Symbolic	6	1.00	5.00	3.3333

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