Equine Assisted Couples Therapy: An Exploratory Study

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ABSTRACT

Equine assisted psychotherapy (EAP) is an emerging experiential methodology that has recently gained recognition as a method for addressing a range of presenting problems for a wide variety of client populations. Couples therapy is one area that the practice of equine assisted psychotherapy has recently gained traction. This study describes the practice of equine assisted couples therapy in terms of practitioner characteristics, approach to treatment, therapeutic goals and outcomes. Mental health professionals currently using equine assisted psychotherapy to treat couples share their experiences and perspectives to provide an overview of this emerging modality.

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Table of Contents

List of Tables

Chapter 1: Introduction

Therapeutic outcomes for couples seeking help to resolve relational issues are as unique as the individuals themselves and the problems that brought them through the therapist's door. Whether working through an acute problem or longstanding relational issues, each couple will experience change in different ways and at their own pace. There are some couples, however, for whom traditional therapy seems not to work. Snyder and Halford (2012) indicate that as many as 25 to 30 percent of couples do not benefit from therapy. Some couples may give up on therapy quickly. For a variety of reasons, a high percentage of clients prematurely drop out of outpatient therapy (Hamilton, Moore, Crane, & Payne, 2011; Masi, Miller, & Olson, 2003), and consequently are less likely to experience change (Hamilton et al., 2011; Stark, 1992). These couples may quit therapy altogether, or may bounce from therapist to therapist becoming more discouraged and consequently more stuck in the dysfunctional interactional patterns that drove them to seek help. What other options are available for these couples? After an unsuccessful therapy experience, what will ultimately make a difference in shifting the way they relate to their partners? Some therapists are now saying that the most powerful catalyst for change for these couples may be a herd of horses.

The Problem and its Setting

The use of horses by mental health professionals to enhance psychotherapeutic outcomes has rapidly gained recognition both nationally and internationally in the past decade, and is emerging as an accepted treatment modality for a wide range of presenting problems (Frewin & Gardner, 2005). Equine assisted psychotherapy (EAP) is an experiential methodology in which horses are used to facilitate therapeutic change. Born out of the more widely known field of animal assisted therapy, EAP involves clients working with a horse or a group of horses in

sessions directed by a mental health professional. Proponents of this methodology assert that interactions with horses provide a unique opportunity for clients to learn about their roles in human relationships in an emotionally safe, non-judgmental and experiential way (Frewin & Gardiner, 2005). The popularity of this unique new model is likely to continue to grow, particularly considering the positive attention it has received in mainstream media in recent years. Using the Google News online search engine, the researcher pulled up nearly 30 news articles about equine assisted psychotherapy published during the month of April, 2013. The same search conducted for the entire year of 2008 produces only about five articles on the topic. In the past two years, equine assisted psychotherapy programs have gained national recognition on the Dr. Oz Show, Dr. Phil, Oprah.com, CNN, ABC Nightline and through several other major print and broadcast outlets. Media coverage features heartwarming success stories of how this unique methodology has helped individuals overcome a variety of challenges ranging from behavioral issues, to trauma and PTSD, to relational conflict.

While there is a wealth of scholarly literature available concerning the benefits of other animal assisted therapies, there is very little on equine assisted therapies. An extensive search produces only a handful of peer reviewed journal articles, most of which focus on children and adolescents, and none of which specifically address the use of horses in work with couples. The bulk of what has been written on EAP is limited to anecdotal accounts of the use of equine assisted activities in a wide range of settings with largely un-documented and non-standardized methodologies, which leave the reader with a lack of tangible, concrete explanations for the mechanisms through which the modality works (McConnell, 2010). Proponents claim that EAP is an effective methodology for a variety of presenting problems including trauma (Meinersmann, Bradberry, & Bright, 2008; York, Adams, & Coady, 2008; Shultz, 2007), ADHD

(Levinson, 2004) eating disorders (Christian, 2005) and emotional and behavioral problems in at-risk youth (Bachi, Terkel, & Teichman, 2012; Ewing, MacDonald, Taylor, & Bowers, 2007; Trotter, Chandler, Goodwin-Bond, & Casey, 2008; McCormick & McCormick, 1997; Mann, 2001; Burgon, 2011). Although the stated benefits of EAP in terms of relationship building, facilitating group cohesion and enhancing communication and problem solving skills would indicate its usefulness for working with couples as well, there is currently little in the literature suggesting how EAP methodologies have been adapted for use with couples.

Complicating the process of conceptualizing how and why EAP works is the fact that practitioners utilize a wide variety of methods and work from a range of theoretical orientations and backgrounds. Some therapists use only experiential groundwork activities specifically designed to address presenting issues, while others provide mounted instruction. Some therapists orient their approach toward "horsemanship" skills that focuses on the care of the horse, while others stay away from horsemanship altogether. Many other therapists use a combination of methods (Lentini & Knox, 2008). Further complicating the field is a significant lack of agreement in terminology as well as methodology (McConnell, 2010). Some of the terms regularly used include equine assisted therapy (EAT), horse therapy, equine-facilitated therapy (EFT), equine-facilitated learning (EFL), equine assisted learning (EAL), therapeutic horsemanship (TH) and equine assisted psychotherapy (EAP) (McConnell, 2010). For the purposes of this study, the term "equine assisted psychotherapy," (EAP) is used to refer to any practice in which a mental health professional incorporates horses in therapeutic work with clients.

The power of the horse. Despite a lack of consistency in methodology, there does seem to be some agreement in the rationale behind the incorporation of horses in treatment (Lentini &

Knox, 2008). In the context of animal assisted therapies, the nature of the "human-animal bond" is frequently proposed as a source of non-judgmental support, comfort and self–esteem for clients. Practitioners who incorporate horses in therapy cite similar benefits, but also suggest that the benefits of EAP are attributable to more than just the comfort of the human-animal bond. While social in nature, horses are different than other companion animals in retaining their natural instincts as prey animals. While a loving dog may sidle up to an anxious or angry client in the same way as it would a client experiencing sadness or loneliness, a horse will react differently to each individual. This allows for the experience referred to in the EAP literature as "mirroring." Horses "mirror" humans by reacting with immediate, non-verbal feedback about a person's way of being with others (Vidrine, Owen-Smith, & Faulkner, 2002). Through interacting with horses, clients become more aware of their thoughts, feelings and behaviors in relationship to others and the world around them (Trotter, 2012). In addition, proponents claim that the sheer size and power of the horse intensifies the therapeutic process and provides opportunities to address interpersonal issues related to vulnerability, power and control (Lentini & Knox, 2008) within a human-animal relationship that feels safe in the absence of judgment or blame. Clients will often project unconscious, worries, fears or beliefs onto the horses (Trotter, 2012) in their effort to understand and describe their experience in the moment. This externalization process provides ample opportunity for the creation of metaphors and further exploration of relevant issues. Dysfunctional patterns of behavior or areas for growth identified in EAP sessions can be worked through in the moment through participation in experiential problem-solving activities. Thus, the unique role of the horses as "co-therapists" in session seems to produce different results than in other animal assisted therapies.

EAP in practice. Currently, two primary organizations offer training and credentialing in equine assisted therapies for mental health professionals: The Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship International (PATH), and the Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association (EAGALA). These organizations both have a large membership of individuals and programs that utilize horses for mental health purposes (McConnell, 2010). Through these organizations, two primary models of the practice have emerged and currently dominate the field (Trotter, 2012). PATH Intl. refers to its model, in which a licensed mental health professional works in partnership with a PATH Intl. certified equine specialist, as "equine facilitated psychotherapy" (EFP). The PATH Intl. model may include programs in which clients participate in riding or driving horses, lungeing (a training technique in which the horse is controlled by and works around a person on the ground holding a long lead line), vaulting (gymnastic activities on horseback) and grooming activities with horses, as well as groundwork activities such as obstacle courses or "challenges" to complete with the horses (PATH Intl., 2011). The EAGALA model of "equine assisted psychotherapy" (EAP), also involves a licensed mental health professional working with a certified horse specialist. However, EAGALA does not include any mounted activities as part of EAP sessions. All sessions using this model are conducted with clients on the ground doing experiential, solution-focused therapeutic work using horses to facilitate the process (EAGALA, 2012). In both models a team approach is used, in which the therapist supports the clients in working though the exercises with the horses in a therapeutically meaningful way, while the horse professional works to ensure safety in working with and around the horses.

Each EAP session is unique, client-centered and designed to meet the specific needs of clients. A highly anxious individual may benefit from the emotionally grounding and

physiologically calming effects of grooming or riding a horse. A woman who has experienced trauma may be able to process difficult memories and emotions through bonding with and working with a horse who she knows has also experienced a trauma in its life. Adolescents may gain self-esteem and enhance social skills by working with other group members to accomplish a challenge set up by the therapist using the horses as props, much like working through a ropes course. EAP activities can help clients of all ages and abilities learn and apply skills such as verbal and non-verbal communication, assertiveness, teamwork and problem solving (Frewin & Gardiner (2005). For couples, EAP can quickly bring to light a number of dysfunctional patterns and interpersonal issues that might have taken multiple sessions to arise in traditional talk therapy approaches. Russell-Martin (2006) provides a case study of a couple, "Beth" and "John," who presented with issues related to sexual intimacy and who participated in six sessions of EAP. The first exercise Beth and John were asked to complete was to catch and halter a horse. This simple exercise brought many issues to the surface that immediately illustrated the couple's interactional process. The couple's discomfort of sharing power and control or accepting influence from one another, in addition to their inability to cope with frustration, contributed to them not being able to complete the exercise and "giving up." The horse finally walked away from them, which was used as a metaphor for how Beth and John had been walking away from each other in their relationship (Russell-Martin, 2006, pp 56). Activities like these not only provide the couple with clear insight into the nature of their process, they also present a tangible, in-the-moment opportunity to work toward change together. In this example, Beth and John were able to experience a shared success when they were eventually able to complete the activity. EAP activities can be designed to build upon each other and may be largely insight-driven or experiential; focused mainly on emotional healing or on behavioral change. The

common thread in all EAP interventions is that interactions between individual clients and between clients and horses are related back to the immediacy of the clients' lives and reasons for seeking therapy.

Statement of the Problem

Underlying the scarcity of empirical studies in the field is a lack of a standardized approach and a lack of unified and widely accepted theoretical framework for understanding how incorporating horses enhances the therapeutic process. This is particularly true about the use of EAP to address relational issues when working with couples and families. Documentation of or literature on the use of EAP with couples is virtually nonexistent. And yet, a simple internet search produces several programs throughout the country touting the ability of this methodology to help couples increase marital satisfaction, solve communication issues and enhance closeness. EAP is a method of psychotherapy that has garnered significant media attention and widespread sentimental favor despite a lack of empirical evidence to support its use (Selby, 2009). The charismatic nature of the horse and its symbolic significance and status in our culture has been the driving force behind the early growth of this methodology. Many anecdotal accounts of EAP point to the horses themselves as the key to the model's success and seem to suggest that there is some "magical" element of the human-horse connection that cannot quite be explained. This dynamic, combined with limitations of feasibility in terms of cost of and access to the modality have likely contributed to the wide gap between literature and practice. Without a fully developed framework from which to conceptualize this practice, or a consensus on the mechanisms of its effectiveness, EAP is bound to remain on the fringe of modern day therapeutic approaches. Before we are able to get to that point, however, we need to bring the practice of EAP into the wider consciousness by fully describing what it is and how it is practiced.

A descriptive, exploratory study is a useful first step in uncovering and documenting new information about an emerging field. The knowledge gained from this type of study builds a foundation from which new insights and avenues for future research can be generated.

Purpose of the Study

This descriptive study sought to explore the phenomenon of equine assisted psychotherapy in the context of its potential to be incorporated and utilized by professionals to treat the relational issues of couples.

The purpose of this study was to describe what is currently happening in the field in terms of practitioners utilizing EAP methodologies to treat couples. The following are the research questions this study sought to answer:

1. To what extent are EAP methodologies being used by PATH and EAGALA members for work with couples?
2. How is EAP being used for work with couples?
    a. What types of issues is it being used for?
    b. What formats and activities do practitioners find particularly suited to work with couples?
    c. What perceptions or beliefs about the usefulness of this particular methodology are held by practitioners in the field?

Significance of the Study

The paucity of empirical studies on the use of equine assisted psychotherapy in general and the specific absence of literature or data on the use of EAP with couples, despite it being implemented in the field, is the basis for the research questions outlined above. The researcher knows of no prior attempt to quantify or summarize the use of EAP with couples. This study

was the first of its kind in terms of providing data on the use of horses in couples therapy with the intent of providing a descriptive overview of what is occurring in the field

Definition of Key Terms

The following definitions are provided to ensure uniformity and understanding of these terms throughout the study. Definitions that do not include a citation were developed by the researcher.

Equine assisted activities: Any one of a range of activities a program may conduct with horses. Activities may include driving the horse, vaulting (gymnastics on horseback), grooming, tacking, riding, or other activities that may or may not be facilitated by a licensed professional (PATH Intl, 2012).

Equine assisted psychotherapy (EAP): An experiential therapy methodology in which a mental health professional incorporates horses into therapeutic work with clients.

Groundwork activities: Deliberate, un-mounted activities set up by a mental health professional for clients to complete using a horse or horses. Horses are used as metaphors to provide the client a ground-based experiential learning experience. The focus of these activities is not on horsemanship or developing specific skills for working with horses, but on human skills that fulfill treatment objectives (EAGALA, 2012).

Hippotherapy: Physical, occupational or speech therapy that incorporates the movement of the horse to reach treatment goals of individuals with functional limitations or disabilities (PATH Intl., 2012).

Therapeutic Horsemanship: Programs where the primary objective is the learning of horsemanship and animal husbandry skills, though learning life lessons, gaining self-esteem and other benefits may also be realized (EAGALA, 2012).

Therapeutic Riding: Mounted activities in which an individual with a disability rides a horse for purposes of relaxation, improving muscle tone and coordination and improving confidence (EAGALA, 2012).

Summary

Equine assisted psychotherapy (EAP) is an emerging experiential methodology that has recently gained recognition as a method for addressing a wide variety of presenting problems when used with individuals, groups, couples and families. Professional credentialing organizations including PATH International and EAGALA have worked to create standards for practice and encourage and facilitate research in the field. In the past few years, several anecdotal accounts, descriptive articles, case studies and a few peer reviewed empirical studies have emerged that examine the benefits of EAP for use with a variety of clients and presenting problems. Despite EAP being used to treat couples as well as individuals, there is currently little literature describing the theory or methods behind the use of EAP to treat relational issues of couples. Efforts to clarify and refine our understanding of this practice will be instrumental in moving innovative, non-traditional approaches like EAP forward in the field of couples therapy. This descriptive, exploratory study sought to begin to close the gap between knowledge and practice by examining how equine assisted psychotherapy is being used to treat relational issues of couples in the field.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

A literature search using the terms "equine assisted psychotherapy" and "equine facilitated psychotherapy" produces only a handful of peer reviewed journal articles on the topic. A review of the literature confirms a lack of standardization in treatment techniques and approaches, as well as a lack of agreement in terminology used to describe equine assisted treatment and its theoretical underpinnings. While some programs involve clients taking part only in groundwork activities with horses, others include horsemanship activities such as grooming, feeding, tacking, vaulting or riding. The few research studies published on EAP are difficult to interpret and lack clarity as to the whether the specific benefits realized can be directly attributed to the presence of the horses, and by what mechanism these benefits might have been realized. What follows is a brief background on the history and growth of animal assisted therapies and equine assisted therapies, a discussion of the theoretical foundations framing the practice of equine assisted psychotherapy and a summary of current research findings.

The Roots of EAP: Animal –Assisted Therapy

Equine assisted psychotherapy evolved from other forms of animal-assisted therapies (Trotter, 2012), the use of which existed long before there was nothing more than anecdotal observations to support its efficacy. In the late 18th century, William Tuke's York Retreat in England incorporated a variety of domesticated animals into activities for inmates, with the belief that they served not only as recreation and pleasure, but also to increase social interactions and decrease negative emotional symptoms (Serpell, 2006). Since those days, the field of animal assisted therapy has experienced significant growth. In the last few decades, a growing body of

research on the benefits of human-animal interactions has yielded some promising results and done a great deal to legitimize the field. Studies of pet ownership have linked the presence of a companion animal to enhanced perception of emotional support (McNicholas, Cloolis, Kent and Rogers, 2001), decreased levels of psychological and physical stress (Allen et al., 2002) and an increased ability to cope with stressful situations and recover from physiological symptoms of stress (Allen, Blascovich, & Mendes, 2002; Siegel, Angulo, Detels, Wesch, & Mullen, 1999). Interactions with animals have been shown to reduce depression, blood pressure, irritability and agitation, lower blood cortisol levels and increase social interaction (Banks & Banks, 2002; Barker et al., 2005; Siegel et al., 1999). In recent years it has become more common to incorporate animals into traditional therapy practices to create a comforting and safe environment for clients and enhance the client-therapist relationship (Fine, 2000). Animals are used therapeutically to enhance a variety of treatment goals, including increasing motivation and positive focus, shifting attention externally, and providing opportunities to enhance fine motor or verbal skills (Pichot and Coulter, 2007).

Equine Assisted Therapies

The use of horses for therapeutic purposes has been traced as far back as seventeenth century Europe (Selby, 2009), when physicians prescribed horseback riding as a method of enhancing physical and psychological wellness (Frewin and Gardiner, 2005; Spink, 1993; Tyler, 1994). Horseback riding as a means of physical rehabilitation was common in Europe before it migrated to the United States in the 1960s. The North American Riding for the Handicapped Association (NAHRA), now called PATH International, was formed in 1969 to promote equine assisted activities to benefit individuals with physical and developmental disabilities (Selby, 2009). The growth of these equine therapies occurred concurrently with an increasing interest in

animal assisted therapy, driven in part by the writings of child psychologist Boris Levinson, who described the benefits of having an animal present during therapy sessions with his clients (Serpell, 2006). Recognizing that individuals taking part in equine assisted activities benefitted emotionally as well as physically and that these benefits were also applicable to individuals without disabilities, the Equine Facilitated Mental Health Association (EFMHA) was formed in 1997 under NAHRA (Selby, 2009). Later these two groups merged into what is now known as PATH International. In 1999, a separate group of mental health professionals established the Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association, known as EAGALA (Selby, 2009). Unlike PATH International, which provides guidelines and standards for incorporating horses in various ways within existing theoretical approaches including gestalt centered therapy, cognitive behavioral therapy and narrative therapy (PATH Intl., 2011), EAGALA has developed its own model for EAP. The EAGALA model is a "solution oriented, experiential approach that promotes emotional growth and learning through structured, unmounted activities with horses" (EAGALA, 2012). Unlike some other equine assisted activities, the EAGALA model does not focus on horsemanship or riding activities, but on the experience of the clients in working through activities comparable to ropes courses in effect and intent. The field of equine assisted psychotherapy in all of its forms has grown rapidly since the establishment of these two organizations, and continues to gain support.

Theoretical Foundations

In a national survey of practitioners in the field, McConnell (2010) found that the most common theoretical foundations cited by EAP practitioners were experiential therapy, the horse-human bond and anthropomorphism. Other orientations specifically cited in the literature were Gestalt therapy (Trotter, 2012, Schultz et al., 2007), brief/solution-focused therapy (EAGALA,

2012; Trotter, 2012), self psychology (Brown, 2007), and reality therapy (Trotter, 2012, EAGALA, 2012).

Biophilia theory and anthropomorphism. Much of the literature on human-animal interactions cites the biophilia theory, which suggests that humans have adapted and evolved to be attentive to nonhuman life within the environment (Kellert, 1997). Schafer (2002) suggests that the biophilia theory can be applied to equine assisted therapies and other animal assisted therapies in that individuals will instinctively seek out relationships and interactions with animals, thus providing a natural catalyst and motivator in the therapeutic process (McConnell, 2010). Also referenced as part of this conceptual framework is the principle of anthropomorphism. The idea, accepted by most EAP practitioners that horses "read" or "mirror" human behavior is essentially a reflection of our tendency to give non-human animals human characteristics. McConnell (2010) theorizes that anthropomorphism allows humans to form strong bonds to horses and relate to them in a very human way. This tendency works to the advantage of EAP approaches, in that clients will naturally interpret the horse's behavior in human terms and project aspects of their own personalities onto the horse. The power and presence of a horse heightens the intensity of emotional experience for clients (McCormick & McCormick, 1997). A client's interpretation of the behaviors of the horse and the client's subsequent reactions can highlight transference issues in a way that makes them more accessible and easier to confront. The phenomenon of anthropomorphism in EAP provides a rich context for the use of metaphors in therapeutic work.

The humanistic paradigm. The practice of equine assisted psychotherapy is most congruent with the philosophy of humanism, which supported Virginia Satir's communication-based model, Fritz Perl's gestalt therapy and Carl Whitaker's symbolic experiential therapy,

among others (Gehart, 2010). Although the specific approaches used by humanistic therapists vary widely, they share the philosophical stance that the therapeutic environment should be intimate and non hierarchical, with the focus on the "here and now" with goals centered on facilitating change through enhancing personal growth and activating the resources believed to be innate within individuals and families (Gehart, 2010).

Experiential therapy. Experiential therapists take a humanistic approach, aiming to reduce the perception of hierarchy between therapists and clients and create a safe, accepting environment. They give direct feedback to how the behavior of the individual affects others and the therapeutic system (Israelstam, 1988). In experiential family therapies the emphasis is on the underlying emotions behind an individual's behaviors and how they affect interactions within the family system (Satir et al., 1991). This way of conceptualizing interactions is consistent with the concept of "mirroring," in equine-assisted psychotherapy, which describes the ability of the horse to reflect back and react to the client's underlying emotions, despite what they are showing or saying externally. McCormick & McCormick (1997) refer to this experience as the "looking glass self" and emphasize mirroring as an effective way for clients to gain a deeper understanding of their behavior in relation to other beings. Clients are encouraged to use insight into their experience to develop new ways of being around the horse that involve mutual respect, clear communication and a greater integration between emotions and behaviors. Through practice and insight, clients learn that challenging tasks in working with the horse become more effortless as their messages become clearer and more collaborative; a lesson that can then be generalized to human relationships (Frewin & Gardiner, 2005).

A primary emphasis of equine assisted psychotherapy is on the importance of clear and direct communication, which is congruent with the belief of experiential family therapists that

symptoms are often the result of dysfunctional communication within the family system. (Israelstam, 1988). The goals of experiential family therapy are not just symptom removal, but also personal and family growth (Gehart, 2010). In these models, growth or change is achieved through an active process, in which family members are encouraged to "practice" new behaviors in session, whether directly or symbolically. Clients working with more traditional experiential therapists may have the opportunity to practice new behaviors through techniques like family sculpting (Satir, 1991) and the Gestalt chair technique (Israelstam, 1988). The active, problem-solving approach taken by practitioners of EAP likely plays a similar role to these more well-known experiential interventions.

Gestalt therapy. Many practitioners of EAP have a strong foundation in Gestalt therapy, which is focused on the client's experience in the here and now (Trotter, 2012). Gestalt-oriented therapists using EAP focus on heightening and intensifying the client's immediate experience through a focus on body language, feelings and behaviors. In an EAP session, this could look like a therapist asking a client which horse he or she most relates to and why, exploring the client's perceptions of the experience and confronting the client's reactions to the horses and the environment throughout different activities. Activities designed to bring out reactive behavior between horses and clients provide numerous opportunities for identification and expression of feelings (Shultz et al., 2006).

Brief/solution-focused therapy. Those who use the EAGALA model of EAP, in particular, claim to follow the tenets of solution-focused brief therapy developed by Steve de Shazer (1985) and Insoo Berg (1994). Like other solution-focused therapists, EAP practitioners believe that inherent in every client are the solutions to their problems. Instead of instructing clients on how best to complete an activity with the horses, EAP therapists using this model

allow clients to experiment, explore, and be creative in coming to their own ways to solve problems in session (EAGALA, 2010).

Research on EAP Interventions

A literature search produced one qualitative study, one quantitative study and one case study focused specifically on the use of EAP with adults. In addition, an unpublished dissertation describes a study comparing equine assisted couples therapy with solution focused couples therapy. Due to the particular scarcity of literature on the use of EAP with adults, results of research on the use of EAP with youth are included to support this literature review.

EAP with adults. Klontz et al. (2007) presents a study of the effectiveness of a treatment model referred to as Equine-Assisted Experiential Therapy (EAET). The authors define EAET as a method that "combines experiential therapy with specific equine activities to give clients the opportunity to work through unfinished business, relieve psychological distress, live more fully in the present, and change destructive patterns of behavior" (Klontz et al., 2007, pp 258). According to the authors, EAET is based on the theory and techniques of psychodrama and incorporates a variety of equine activities, including grooming, riding, lunging and activities on the ground. An example is given of the first activity in the treatment program, called "Choosing a Partner." Each member of the group is given a halter and lead and asked to silently choose a horse to work with for the day by catching it and bringing it back. Group dynamics may be explored more fully by choosing to provide one less horse than the number of participants. Once the participants have completed the activity, the group comes together and the therapist facilitates a discussion about the decision making process of each participant, focusing on how experiences in the session and interactions with the horses or other group members relates to the participant's life. Questions such as "which horse did you choose and why," "what

or whom does this horse represent to you," and "did you make this decision impulsively or thoughtfully," begin to elicit the metaphors that will be used throughout the session(s) as participants interact with the horses. This insight-based approach focuses on the projection and transference of participant's issues to the horse. Study participants were 31 individuals participating in a 4.5 day residential program that provided 28 hours of EAET in a group therapy format, administered by a Master's level experiential therapist and a horse handler. The Brief Symptom Inventory (BSI), and Personal Orientation Inventory (POI) were administered before treatment, on the last day of treatment, and six months after treatment.

The results show that participants showed significant reductions in overall psychological distress and enhancements in psychological well-being between pre-test and post-test and follow up scores. Specifically, participants reported fewer psychological symptoms and reduction in intensity of symptoms. The results of this study cannot be generalized and are very difficult to interpret, due to the lack of background data or history on participants, and the absence of other controls that make it impossible to determine whether the changes reported were actually a result of the specific treatment model.

A qualitative study by Meinersmann, Bradberry and Roberts (2008) described the experience of five women who had experienced abuse and who had participated in equine facilitated psychotherapy (EFP) as part of their treatment. Criteria for participation included being over 18 years old, having experienced abuse at some point in their lives, and having participated in programs by therapists self-identifying as providing equine facilitated psychotherapy using methodology defined by the Equine Facilitated Mental Health Association (EFMHA). Each of the five women participated in an interview in which they were asked to describe the experience of EFP. The researchers identified four major themes in the women's

accounts, which they named “I can have power,” “doing it hands on,” “horses as co-therapists,” and “turned my life around” (Meinersmann, et al., 2008). Themes of power and control came out in the women describing the experience of working with and influencing a large, powerful animal. In this quote, one of the women describes how she was able to relate the experience of working with the horse to her own reality: “So she [therapist] said yes, he’s a big horse, but you – she said you pretend that’s your [abuser] and you just go over there…and like I was moving him all over the stall…it was like this light bulb. It was like, I can have power” (Meinersmann et al, 2008, pp 39). The women described the hands on experience as a visual and experiential way to understand skills learned in traditional talk therapy, such as assertive communication and staying grounded or rooted in the present moment. Instead of just talking about these skills in traditional therapy settings, clients doing EAP reported having the opportunity to practice these skills in a safe environment. The “horse as co-therapist” concept was described in the context of the nature of the human-animal bond in eliciting feelings of comfort and unconditional acceptance as well as in the experience of horses serving as “mirrors” through their sensitivity to the client’s non-verbal behavior. Participants described how horses could read their body language and responded in a way that enhanced self-awareness. One woman gave the following example of approaching a horse in the stall: “If you have all this frustrated spinning, chaotic energy going on…they pick up on that… They are going to back up. They are going to ignore you” (Meinersmann, et al., 2008, pp 40). The participants, who reported having been involved in other traditional therapy, described EFP as “intense,” “intimate,” “focused” and “powerful” in helping them affect change in their lives. The study focused on client’s interpretation of their experiences, but provided no information on the specific methods used, format of treatment or length of treatment.

Christian (2005) offers a detailed case study description of how an equine assisted experiential therapy approach was used at an eating disorder treatment center to provide tangible metaphors for the eating disorder, the client's personal relationships and the recovery process. The case study is of a 26-year old woman (Lori) who was characterized as having a tendency to externalize her problems and resist treatment while remaining unaware of how much her eating disorder was negatively affecting her life. The case study describes the design of an EAP activity using directive metaphors that came out of the client's broader treatment goals. The activity took place in a round arena around which five buckets of horse feed were placed and labeled by the client to each represent important aspects of her life, including family, friends, health and education. The client was then asked to label three horses to represent aspects of her eating disorder. Lori labeled the horses "shame," "control" and "perfection" by writing the words in white chalk on their bodies. Three staff members present were labeled as individuals Lori believed could help her on her journey to recovery. Lori was asked to remain standing on a flake of hay in the center of the arena, which represented her "life." She was asked to keep the three horses moving around the pen, while following the rules that the horses were not to be touched, she must remain stationary in the center of the arena, and the other participants could do nothing unless she made a specific request for help. This problem solving exercise took place over several sessions, during which Lori struggled to complete the exercise successfully. Opportunities for processing the metaphors came up often, as the horses would inevitably stop to devour the feed in the buckets whenever they could, providing powerful and visible ways to address issues such as how Lori's need for control was eating away at her relationships with her friends. Eventually Lori learned that she could better protect the buckets of feed if she moved them closer to her "life" and asked her "support team" to encircle her to provide consistent

protection from the horses. The imposing stature, persistence and strength of the horses provided a good metaphor for the emotional weight of Lori's eating disorder and the value of aspects of her life it was affecting. Processing the experience with a therapist after the session allows for the expansion and heightening of the metaphors. This particular case study focused mainly on one EAP activity and did not expound upon progression of treatment or outcomes.

EAP with couples. One unpublished dissertation study focused specifically on equine assisted psychotherapy for couples. Russell-Martin (2006) compared the dyadic adjustment of ten couples assigned to a six-week equine assisted psychotherapy program with ten couples assigned to a control group of six weeks of traditional solution-focused therapy (n= 40 individuals). Participants were recruited from referrals to the researcher's private therapy practice. After random assignment to either the treatment or control group, couples received one hour per week of either traditional, solution-focused couples therapy or EAP. Outcomes were assessed based on DAS scores collected before the first session and after the third and sixth sessions. Couples in the control group received traditional, in-office therapy sessions based on solution-focused methods. EAP interventions for the treatment group were limited to four EAGALA model activities: haltering a horse, horse billiards, the obstacle course and extended appendages. The first activity, "Haltering," is an assessment exercise in which the couple is given a halter and asked to choose and catch a horse from the field. Therapists notice interactional dynamics including how the couple makes decisions and works together to solve a problem, whether they ask for help, etc. The therapist also watches for how the individuals and couples react to the horses, and vice versa. The "Obstacle Activity" is designed to elicit issues related to teamwork, communication, problem solving and roles and responsibilities in the relationship. The arena is set up with an alleyway full of obstacles such as poles, cones and

other objects, as well as "temptations" such as hay and grain. The couple is asked to label each object with names of obstacles and temptations in their own lives. A rope is tied to each side of the horse's halter, and each couple is given one end of the rope. The couple is then asked to help the horse navigate through the alleyway without either person entering the alleyway, dropping their side of the rope, or having the horse disturb any of the objects or eat any of the food. The couple is also asked to decide on a consequence that can be completed in the moment when any of the rules is broken. In this activity the therapist can notice how the couple communicates with one another, who leads, who makes the decisions and how they react to problems that arise. The "Extended Appendages" activity is also used to bring out issues of roles, communication and conflict resolution. In this activity the couple is directed to link arms and complete the task of catching and saddling a horse together. The "rules" of this activity are that the individual on the left side controls their partner's right hand, and the individual on the right controls their partner's left hand. Each person can only use their hand in the exact manner requested by the other person. For example, the person has to ask for each step in the process of haltering the horse, instead of simply saying "put the halter on the horse." In the "Horse Billiards" activity, square "pockets" are set up around the arena using poles set on the ground. The horses are considered the billiard balls. The directive for the couples is to get a horse inside each one of the pockets without touching or bribing the horse or using ropes or leads of any kind. As the couple takes turns trying to get a horse in the pockets, only the person whose turn it is can talk. The couple may also be asked in this activity to choose a consequence for breaking any of the rules. This activity brings to light the way in which the couple deals with frustration, how they convey it to each other, and the extent to which they work together to come up with new ideas or stay with the same patterns. Transference reactions, patterns of behavior and communication issues that

come up in each activity are related back to the way they show up in the couple's relationship. In the case example given in the study, a couple struggling with sexual intimacy issues easily gave up on the haltering exercise when it wasn't working for them, much in the way they had given up trying in their sexual relationship. In the appendages activity, the wife of the pair had an opportunity to practice giving clear feedback and instruction to her spouse; a skill that she could translate to the bedroom.

The results of the study found no significant difference between groups in the first two administrations of the dyadic adjustment scale, but a significant difference in relationship satisfaction rates among the couples participating in equine assisted psychotherapy at the third administration of the scale at six weeks of treatment. Case studies conducted as part of the study suggested the benefits of equine assisted couples therapy included increased ability to work cohesively to solve problems and personal growth attributed to greater insight and awareness of individual behaviors within the relationship (Russell-Martin, 2006).

Some of the common themes emerging from the studies of using EAP with adults including personal growth, increased self-awareness and self-efficacy and learned application of interpersonal skills also show up in the literature on the use of EAP with children. Since the literature on EAP work with children is relatively more developed, it is useful to explore these similarities in order to begin to draw out and solidify the specific impacts attributable to the incorporation of horses in therapy.

Use of EAP with youth. In a study comparing efficacy of equine assisted counseling (EAC) to classroom based counseling for students identified as being at high risk for academic and social failure, Trotter, et al. (2008) found that while both treatments proved effective in reducing negative symptoms and increasing positive behaviors, participants in the EAC

treatment group saw improvement in more areas and in different areas than the control group. Study participants (n=164) were students in the third through eighth grades that counselors identified as being at high risk for academic and/or social failure due to significant learning disabilities or behavioral or social adjustment issues. Participants were invited to choose between a 12-week EAC treatment that consisted of weekly, two-hour group EAC sessions in a ranch setting, and a 12-week (one-hour weekly) empirically supported school-based group counseling program called "Kids Connection," from Rainbow Days, Incorporated (RD). Stated goals for both the EAC treatment group (n=126) and the RD comparison group (n=38) included enhancing self-awareness, recognition of behaviors and consequences, and developing healthy coping skills. The EAC treatment consisted of both "horsemanship" type activities such as grooming and riding, as well as EAGALA-based groundwork activities focused on group problem solving. In all activities, participants spent time processing the horse-human interactions happening in session and applying them to real life situations. Assessment instruments included the Behavioral Assessment System for Children (BASC), Self-Rating Scale (SRS) and Parent-Rating Scale (PRS), all completed before treatment and after treatment. In addition, the Psychosocial Session Form (PSF) was used to rate social behaviors at the end of each session. The study found that participants in the EAC treatment group demonstrated statistically significant decreases in negative behaviors and increases in positive behaviors on both the BASC-SRS and the BASC-PRS. In addition, the EAC treatment was found to be more effective than the comparison treatment on several scales, including behavioral symptoms, externalizing problems, social stress, self-esteem, hyperactivity, conduct problems and aggression.

An exploratory study by Schultz, et.al (2007) tested the effectiveness of EAP in treating a cross-sectional group of children (n=63) referred to a psychologist for various issues over an 18-

month period. Thirty-seven (37) of the participants were male and 26 were females, ranging in age from 4-16 years. Diagnosis included mood disturbance (57%), ADHD (16%), PTSD (8%) adjustment disorder (5%) disruptive disorder (5%) and other disorders (5%). The Children's Global Assessment of Functioning (GAF) scale was used by the treatment team to determine the GAF of clients at pre-treatment, at three-month intervals, and at post-treatment. The children received an average of 19 EAP sessions, the format of which followed the guidelines of EAGALA, and involved groundwork activities focusing on client insight generated from in-the-moment experiences with the horse. Activities were developed based on client needs and focused on issues identified in assessment by the psychologist, parent, or client, or by feelings that came up in sessions. All participants showed an improvement in GAF scores, and statistically significant correlations were found between improvements in GAF scores and number of EAP sessions, gender (females showed significantly greater improvement), age (younger children showed greater improvement), and a history of intra-family violence and substance abuse. Limitations of this study include presence of a self-selection bias and lack of clarity as to the specific interventions to which we can attribute change.

A study by Bachi, Terkel and Teichman (2011) examined the effects of EFP on a group of Israeli adolescents (14-18 years) at a residential treatment facility. The treatment group (n=14) participated in weekly 50 minute individual EFP sessions over the course of seven months. The paper did not reveal details of session activities, but suggested that work with the horses included both mounted and unmounted activities. The control group (n=15), similar in age and other characteristics, took part in other routine activities at the treatment facility, but were not exposed to horses. In addition, 40 percent of the individuals in the control group took part in other therapies during the treatment period. Parameters measured were self-image, self-control, trust

and general life satisfaction. Questionnaires were administered prior to therapy starting and at the end of the year. Results showed the treatment group improving across all of the various parameters measured and to a greater extent than the control group, but none of the results reported were statistically significant.

Burgon (2011) employed a participatory, ethnographic methodology to describe the experience of seven at risk youth participating in a therapeutic horsemanship (TH) program over the course of two years. Themes that emerged from her study included an increased sense of empathy toward the horses which came through bonding with and caring for them, and enhanced self-confidence, self-esteem and self-efficacy that came through learning and mastering horsemanship skills. Similar types of psychosocial gains are echoed in a case study by Chardonnens (2009) describing the experiences of a teenage boy diagnosed with severe mental illness who spent a year on a farm as part of his treatment. The author asserts that the farm animals, including horses, used as "co-therapists" resulted in a clear reduction of symptoms.

Summary

Although the literature on EAP is currently quite sparse, the existing and continually growing body of studies suggests that equine assisted psychotherapy will continue to be used as a treatment methodology for a range of presenting problems. Emerging from the literature are a number of potential benefits of incorporating horses into the therapeutic process, such as providing a source of non-judgmental support and acceptance (Yorke et al., 2008; Meinersmann, 2008), creating a substrate for powerful metaphors to emerge (Christian, 2005; Karol, 2007), enhancing self-confidence, mastery and self-esteem (Trotter, et al., 2008; Burgon, 2011; Meinersmann,2008), mirroring behavior to provoke greater insight and awareness (Russell-Martin, 2006; Klontz, 2007; Trotter, et al. 2008) and providing an experiential process for

practicing interpersonal skills and adapting behaviors (Russell-Martin, 2006; Schultz et al., 2007). The vast majority of literature that does exist focuses specifically on the use of EAP with children and youth. The particular lack of literature on the use of EAP with couples necessitates additional exploration and further study in order to provide a conceptual framework for how incorporating horses into treatment may be beneficial for couples.

Chapter 3: Methods

Study Design

The present study utilized a survey design that allowed the researcher to reach a large number of EAP practitioners across the nation and world. Given the increasing presence of the internet in people's lives, a web-based survey was chosen as a quick, cost-effective method of reaching a large geographically-diverse audience and gathering a range of descriptive information about the subject of interest. By conducting follow-up phone interviews with select participants, the researcher was able to augment findings from survey data and provide a more rich description of how and why EAP is being used in the field. Feedback from respondents who are currently using EAP to treat couples provides some insight into how the model is being adapted for use with couples and clarifies the mechanisms through which it is perceived to work.

Participants

Participants for this study were mental health professionals recruited through the membership of PATH Intl. and EAGALA, the two largest and most established training and certification organizations currently in the field. Membership in either of these two professional organizations implies that a practitioner has received some level of training or education on ethical guidelines and standards of quality practice. Both organizations require that equine assisted psychotherapy be conducted by a credentialed mental health professional. This requirement ensured that the data produced in this study provides a description of the ways in which EAP is being used clinically. While both EAGALA and PATH Intl. provide training, credentialing and membership for other equine assisted activities as well, including equine-assisted learning (EAGALA) and hippotherapy (PATH Intl), participants of this study were limited to only those members who self-identified as actively practicing equine assisted

psychotherapy. Since the prevalence of using EAP for couples was unknown, all professionals who practiced EAP in any context were invited to begin the survey. Inclusion of these individuals allowed the researcher to elicit descriptive information about why some EAP practitioners do not provide couples therapy, as well as why others do.

Instrumentation

The survey (Appendix C) was developed with the intent of gathering both quantitative and qualitative information from individuals currently practicing EAP for the purposes of answering the proposed research questions. Demographic information about providers including location, sex, background, training, credentials, experience and populations treated provided descriptive information to help understand the extent to which EAP is being used with couples, and by whom it is being practiced in the field. In the online survey, those individuals who reported providing EAP for couples were prompted to answer a range of additional questions specifically about the use of EAP with couples. Many of these questions were open-ended and covered topics including theoretical orientation, program design, activities used, populations treated and perceived benefits. Six of these participants were selected for follow-up phone interviews that were semi-structure and designed to elicit more rich and descriptive data related to the experience of providing equine assisted psychotherapy to couples. The script used for the phone interviews can be found in Appendix D.

Procedures

The researcher sent a recruitment letter (Appendix B) via email to the certified member programs listed publicly on the websites of PATH and EAGALA. The letter was emailed to 221 programs listed on the EAGALA website, and to 117 programs listed on the PATH, Intl. website. The letter introduced the researcher, explained the purpose of the survey and criteria for

inclusion, and invited participants to take part in the online survey. A follow up email reminder was sent to those programs who did not respond after two weeks. To maximize the number of participants and extend the survey's reach to individuals who may practice but are not affiliated with a registered program, the researcher also asked EAGALA staff to send the letter with the link to the online survey to its entire membership list of approximately 3,500 individuals. An explanation of the study and the survey link was also included in PATH International's monthly e-newsletter that is sent to nearly 8,000 individuals.

Once participants clicked on the survey link in the recruitment letter, they were taken to a page containing the informed consent form (Appendix E) that explained the procedures, the potential risks and benefits of participation and the procedures for maintaining confidentiality and anonymity. Once participants clicked on a button stating that they agreed to the parameters outlined in the consent form, they were able to access the rest of the survey.

The last question on the survey asked respondents to provide a contact number if they were willing to be contacted by the researcher for a follow-up interview. Six participants were chosen for follow-up phone interviews to provide more detailed and descriptive information specifically about their experiences using equine assisted psychotherapy in their work with couples. The researcher chose participants to interview based on an intent to achieve as representative a sample as possible across demographic and practice characteristics reported throughout the survey. In choosing participants for follow-up phone interviews, the researcher first sought to have representation from each of the two primary professional organizations, PATH and EAGALA. Two of the participants chosen selected PATH, Intl. as their primary affiliation, while the remaining four selected EAGALA. This difference in affiliation provided an opportunity to learn more about how differences in PATH and EAGALA models translate to the

practice of EFP in the field. Next, participants were chosen that represented each field of study (psychology, marriage and family therapy, social work, and counseling). The participants chosen also represented a wide range of characteristics in terms of years of experience practicing psychotherapy, years of experience offering EFP for couples, and percentage of the practitioner's caseload that is made up of EFP clients. The primary structure of EFP couples sessions also varied in each case. One of the participants chosen reported providing time-limited workshops in which a set progression of activities is completed. Another indicated that they use no structure, but respond in the moment to whatever comes up naturally in session. The rest of the participants reported having a basic structure for sessions, but also responding to whatever comes up in session with clients. The selection also offered a range in the number of horses involved in session, from only one horse, to more than three horses. Finally, the participants chosen reported using different theoretical frameworks in providing EFP.

Phone interviews followed a semi-structured script (Appendix D) that focused on participants' experience with and perception of equine assisted couples therapy. Interviews were conducted after initial review and analysis of survey data. Preliminary findings from survey responses were incorporated into the interview script and interviewees were given the opportunity to respond to identified themes to selected questions, thus enhancing the credibility of study results. Interviews were recorded, saved on an encrypted USB drive and transcribed for review and analysis.

Data Collection

Survey Monkey, an online survey software program, was utilized to administer the survey questions, collect responses and store data in a password-protected account. The survey was set up to allow only one response per IP address, thereby reducing the likelihood of

duplicate responses. Any identifying information given, including names, email addresses and phone numbers remained secure in the password protected database. Phone interviews were conducted in private, and were downloaded onto an encrypted USB drive to maintain security of the data. No identifying information was included in the transcribed interviews.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data from the online survey were analyzed by the researcher using descriptive statistics to provide a snapshot of characteristics of study participants and a broad overview of the field. This data is presented first in the findings to give a broad overview of the nature of the field. Qualitative data gleaned from participants' responses to open-ended survey questions about the use of EAP with couples, as well as qualitative data from transcribed interviews, were reviewed and analyzed by the researcher using thematic analysis methodology (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Through this process, data were manually and systematically coded to inductively extract meaningful themes across responses about the use of EAP with couples, in order to provide a broad description of the phenomenon. In the first step, the researcher examined data from each open ended survey question about the use of EAP with couples, to extract codes representing interesting or important points. Next, these codes were grouped into potential themes that gave an overarching shape to the survey data and described participants' responses in relationship to each other. These initial themes were used to inform and guide follow-up phone interview questions so that the interview data could be used to corroborate, support and enrich the survey data. Interview questions were formulated in a way that gave interviewees the opportunity to provide feedback on and add to these initial themes. In the final step, data from open ended survey questions and data from transcribed interviews were merged and analyzed together. Through this final process themes and sub-themes were reviewed and

refined in context of the qualitative data available to support them and their relationship to the overall research questions. In the reporting of findings, qualitative data from open ended survey questions about the use of EAP with couples and data from the transcribed follow-up phone interviews are presented together.

Chapter 4: Results

A total of 97 individuals responded to the invitation letter and accessed the online survey. 84 individuals signed the electronic consent to participate in the research and began the survey questions. Six of these individuals either skipped through all of the questions in the survey without responding, or only answered the general questions about demographics at the beginning of the survey. Data from these six participants were discarded, as they would not contribute to understanding the research question. During the survey period, the researcher received several emails from individuals who were not qualified mental health professionals and therefore did not meet the research criteria, but who expressed interest in the research. Most of these individuals were "Equine Specialists" who work alongside mental health professional in EFP sessions. Given this, it is possible that discrepancy between the number of people who started the online survey and those that completed it is due in part to individuals who are involved and interested in EFP but not mental health professionals and therefore were not eligible for this study. The data from one participant who completed the survey were removed due to responses that clearly identified this person as not a mental health professional, and therefore not eligible for the study. In total, data from 77 participants are included in the findings.

Demographic findings and information about general characteristics of participants practice gleaned from the online survey are presented first. Qualitative data from open ended survey questions specific to the practice of equine assisted couples therapy and qualitative data obtained from follow-up phone interviews are then presented together.

Online Survey Responses

Mental health professionals participating in the study were predominantly white and female. While the majority (n= 53, 68.8%) of study participants resided in the United States, the remainder represented 12 additional countries, revealing the modality's international presence.

Study participants in the United States were also geographically diverse, representing 21 states. Demographic information of study participants can be seen in Table 1.

Characteristics of EAP practice. Participants were asked about the professional field they received training in, as well as the credentials they hold. In both of these cases, participants were given an option to choose more than one response as well as include others not listed. The majority of participants represented the fields of psychology, social work, counseling and marriage and family therapy. A range of other responses were also given, including family constellation work, psychiatry, youth and community work, divinity, integrated therapy, occupational therapy, human services and early childhood development. More than half of respondents (n=44, 58.7%) reported having at least a master's level education and being licensed providers (n=41, 54.7%). Detailed information on degrees and credentialing of participants can be found in Table 2 and Table 3. Participants reported having been practicing psychotherapy for between two years and 40 years, with a median of 11 years of experience.

The majority (n=63, 82.9%) of participants reported that they received their certification training to practice equine assisted psychotherapy from the Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association (EAGALA). Ten participants (13.2%) were associated with PATH, Intl. Other credentialing or training organizations reported (n=1, in all cases), included the Equine Assisted Psychotherapy Institute of South Africa (EAPISA), The OK Corral Series, the Certification Board for Equine Interaction Professionals (CEIP), Natural Lifemanship, the Certified Horsemanship Association and German psychotherapeutic riding therapy training.

Almost half (n=35, 46.7%) of participants reported that equine assisted psychotherapy comprises less than 25 percent of their total caseload, while thirty percent of participants (n=22) reported that the majority of their caseload is equine assisted psychotherapy (see Table 4).

Estimates of average number of equine assisted psychotherapy sessions conducted per week varied widely, from no sessions currently to 22 sessions per week. The median was three sessions per week. One respondent commented that the number of sessions varied depending on weather, and another said that the number of sessions was limited by access to an equine specialist. Participants reported using equine assisted psychotherapy for a wide range of presenting problems and client populations. Table 5 and Table 6 show types of clients and presenting problems being treated using equine assisted psychotherapy, respectively. A majority of respondents (n=50, 64.1%) indicated that issues additional to those defined by the researcher are being treated. These other responses were categorized according to (1) populations; (2); diagnoses; and (3) goals. The two populations referenced most were the military and youth. The military population was referenced specifically in ten comments, which included references to treating veterans and their families for issues related to combat stress, PTSD, Military Sexual Trauma (MST) and Traumatic Brain Injury. Youth were cited specifically in five responses, which included treating at risk youth, physically and sexually abused youth, suicidal and self-harming youth, First Nations Youth, foster care and adoption issues, and specific issues related to ADHD, autism and developmental issues. The most common diagnoses included in other responses were trauma-related disorders (n=31); eating disorders (n=7); attachment issues (n=7); and relational issues (n=9). Responses in the trauma category included undefined trauma, PTSD, trauma related to physical and/or sexual abuse and "complex traumas." In the attachment category, responses included reactive attachment disorder, attachment disruptions and undefined attachment issues. Relational issues cited include undefined relationship and family therapy issues, domestic violence, family reunification, parental substance abuse, familiar disruption due to foster care and/or adoption and issues facing families of veterans with PTSD and/or TBI.

Additional diagnoses or problems identified were severe medical issues such as cerebral palsy, Bipolar Disorders, Schizophrenia, Borderline Personality Disorders, Schizoaffective disorder, grief and loss, fear of failure, bullying, authenticity issues and life transition issues. The third category includes responses from participants who described not problems or diagnoses, but overarching goals or outcomes sought for clients. These included self-esteem, confidence, personal growth, team building, leadership coaching, and boundary work.

Thirty-five of the 77 respondents (44.5%) indicated that they are using equine assisted psychotherapy to treat couples, while 42 (54.5%) said they do not provide equine assisted couples therapy. While more than half of respondents said they do not treat couples, none of the reasons given for not treating couples related to participants believing that equine assisted psychotherapy is not an appropriate modality for this population (see Table 7). In fact, of the 27 responses given in the "other reasons" category, nine comments indicated that either participants are planning to use the modality with couples in the future, would use the modality with couples if given the opportunity, or believe the modality would be useful for couples despite not currently treating couples. Three individuals indicated a lack of client interest as reason for not providing this service to couples, and one participant stated that they don't currently have couple clients that the model would be applicable for. The remainder of other responses were related to respondent's not having couples as clients, or couples therapy not being the focus of their practice.

Characteristics of equine assisted couples therapy. The data suggests that the use of equine assisted psychotherapy for couples is a relatively new practice, in comparison to the use of equine assisted psychotherapy in general. The number of years respondents reported having been using this modality for couples ranged from less than a year up to 13 years, with a median

of three years. In addition, couples make up a relatively small percentage of the study participants' equine assisted psychotherapy work. The majority of participants (n=23, 71.9%) reported that couples therapy makes up less than 25 percent of their total equine assisted psychotherapy caseload (see Table 8). For most of these participants (n=14, 45.2%), equine assisted psychotherapy is used as an adjunct to traditional, in-office talk based therapy. Some participants (n=9, 29%) indicated that equine assisted therapy is used as the primary therapy to treat couples issues with some sessions of in-office therapy used as an adjunct. Others (n=8, 25.8%) indicated that they use equine assisted therapy as the sole treatment for couples.

Presenting problems. Twenty seven survey respondents provided information on the presenting problems of couples they see in their equine assisted psychotherapy practice. Sixteen of these responses included references to communication issues of clients, including lack of communication, poor communication, general communication issues, and the need for communication strategies or skills. Eight responses related to conflict and aggression, including conflict resolution, anger management and resolvable domestic violence issues. Seven responses related to trust and vulnerability issues, including lack of trust (4 references), vulnerability, and emotional intimacy and attachment issues. Four respondents cited parenting issues. Six comments stated that all relational problems are treated with this model. Other responses included substance abuse, military-specific couples issues, boundary issues, lack of respect, anxiety and depression, survivors guilt and isolation.

Contraindications. Twenty participants responded to the question in the online survey asking about couple characteristics or problems that would be contraindicated for this model. Eight of these respondents (40%) commented that there are no contraindications for this model. Five respondents indicated that they felt high conflict couples would be contraindicated for this

model. These responses included couples in which active domestic violence, out of control rage and sever anger was an issue. One participant specifically referenced high conflict situations that might impact the safety or well-being of the horses. Four responses described clients who are resistant to the model or process of therapy in general; those who are unwilling to consider introspection, active listening and personal change; clients only wanted to focus on the problem and not the context; and individuals who have a difficult time thinking or understanding metaphorically. Three responses included references to active or uncontrolled substance abuse. Three responses referred to severe and/or untreated mental health conditions, including psychosexual disorders, personality disorders and psychosis. Other issues mentioned included allergies to horses and physical disabilities that would prevent participation.

Session length and duration of treatment. The majority (n=22, 71%) of respondents reported that couples sessions are one hour in length. Nine participants (29%) provide 90 minute couples sessions. One participant provides couples group therapy sessions that are 1.5 hours in length, and one participant indicated that most equine assisted couples therapy is provided in six hour couples workshops. While a little more than half (n=15, 53.6%) of participants indicated that the duration of treatment for couples is always open ended and based on client need, some participants indicated that they provide both time-limited programs and open-ended treatment options. Only one participant indicated that all equine assisted couples therapy is completed time-limited workshops.

Session format. The data suggests that the typical format for equine assisted couples therapy varies by provider. While some participants indicated they have a set progression of activities for couples to complete in sessions, others indicated that they use no structure, but respond in the moment to whatever comes up naturally in session. Other participants indicated

that they have a basic structure for sessions, but also respond to whatever comes up in session with clients (see table 9). The majority of participants (n=23, 82.1%) indicated that a therapist and a horse expert are always present during sessions. Two participants indicated that both a mental health professional and equine specialist are used when feasible, but that at times a mental health professional with horse experience conducts the session alone. Two other participants reported that grad students or interns are sometimes present during sessions. In most cases (n=19, 67.9%), participants incorporate three or more horses into therapy sessions. Other responses included two or more horses (n=5, 17.9%); and only one horse (n=4, 14.3%). The types of activities used in session vary by provider as well, although it is worth noting that all respondents reported using on-the-ground activities with the horses in couples sessions. Other activities, not used by all practitioners included riding, driving, lunging, and observation of the horses (see Table 10).

Theoretical framework. A wide range of responses was given to the question of what theoretical framework or model participants apply to equine assisted couples therapy. The most commonly cited were cognitive behavioral (n=8), solution-focused or brief therapy (n=10), systems (n=5) and psychodynamic (n=4) oriented models. The EAGALA model, which is defined by the organization as a client-centered, solution-focused and experiential model was specifically referenced in six responses. Other theoretical frameworks or models referenced included client-centered, structural (n=2), strategic (n=1), Gottman (n=1), humanistic process model (n=1), personal construct psychology (n=1), Winnicottian (n=1), Emotion Focused Therapy (n=1), attachment based therapy (n=1), identity development (n=1), Imago (n=1) and transactional analysis (n=1).

The results of the online survey show a group of EAP practitioners that is diverse in terms of geographic location, background, theoretical orientation and experience. Respondents reported using EAP for a range of client populations and presenting problems. This preliminary data gave some indication of the diversity of demographic characteristics and experience levels of EAP practitioners, in general. A little less than half of all survey respondents (n=32) indicated that they use EAP to treat couples. While respondents who do not treat couples ended the survey at this point, those individuals who indicated that they did provide this service continued on to complete the remainder of the survey. The remainder of the survey asked primarily open ended questions specifically about the practice of equine assisted couples therapy. Responses to these questions ranged from one word answers to more descriptive comments with examples. These data were useful in shaping initial themes and directing the content of the follow-up phone interviews so that they were able to contribute to richness and depth of survey responses. For example, while all 32 participants indicated that couples participated in on-the-ground activities during sessions, only 13 participants gave examples of these activities. The majority of the responses given to this question were a listing of names of activities used, with no explanation of the activity. In the follow up phone interviews participants were asked to describe the activities used, give an example of how it would be used in a couples session, and relate that particular activity back to the treatment goals or benefits realized by couples seeking treatment. In this way, the six follow-up interviews served not only to support and enrich survey data, but also to tie information generated from survey questions together in a meaningful way. What follows is a description of findings on provider experiences of practicing equine assisted couples therapy that merges these two sources of data.

Equine Assisted Couples Therapy: Provider Experiences

The six follow-up phone interviews conducted were used to corroborate themes that came out of the online survey data and to provide more rich descriptions of the experience of providing equine assisted couples therapy. Two of the participants interviewed were PATH Intl. associated, while four were trained in the EAGALA method. All six participants indicated that they were "horse" people first, before becoming mental health professionals.

Types of activities. Given that the majority of study participants reported practicing the EAGALA model of equine assisted psychotherapy, it is not surprising that many of the ground-based activities specifically referenced ground-based, EAGALA type activities. EAGALA practitioners are not taught to use specific activities or treatment plans in sessions, but instead are encouraged to be flexible and creative in creating an environment and setting up activities that build upon each other and build upon the themes or metaphors that come up throughout treatment. According to EAGALA, "activities provide a structure designed to help clients experience through horses a parallel to their lives and an opportunity to work on whatever concerns or goals they have." Therefore, the work is client-centered and facilitators are encouraged to "be more focused on allowing the clients to tell their life stories through the work with the horses rather than on specific activities" (EAGALA, 2012). However, a number of different programs and individuals affiliated with EAGALA have developed and shared activities that seem to be commonly used. Some specific examples of activities study participants commonly referenced for use with couples were (1) catch and haltering exercises; (2) obstacle course exercises; (3) extended appendages; (4) horse billiards; and (5) trust walks. Catch and haltering is an assessment exercise in which the couple is given a halter and asked to choose and catch a horse from the field. Therapists notice interactional dynamics of the couple and also

watch for how the individuals and couples react to the horses, and vice versa. In a follow-up phone interview, one of the participants described catch and halter exercises as one of the primary exercises she does with couples:

> I like the catch and halter with everybody, but I like it a lot with couples. It gives me some interesting, immediate information about how they work as a couple, how they sort of define their roles, who leads, who follows, how do they make decisions, how do they check with one another… how do they not check with one another? Do they work together…..do they work autonomously…do they work parallel. How is that going? So I really like that.

Obstacle course activities may take many different forms and be modified in a number of different way in order to elicit appropriate couple issues or set up useful metaphors. Four study participants specifically mentioned the "life's little obstacles" exercise, which involves setting up a jump in the middle of the arena and asking participants to try to get a horse or horses to go over the jump. They jump is often used to represent a challenge that the couple is facing. The challenge of the activity is increased by establishing rules, such as not allowing the couple to use halters, ropes, physical contact or bribing to get the horse over the obstacle. Other "obstacle courses" may be set up by the clients themselves, or by the facilitators. The courses may be simple or complex, and the elements or obstacles may or may not be labeled as aspects representing aspects of the couple's lives. Obstacle activities may be designed to elicit issues related to teamwork, communication, problem solving and roles, responsibilities and a range of other issues in the relationship. The "Temptation Alley' exercise is another that was specifically mentioned. In a follow-up interview, on participant described the use of this exercise with clients:

> so we set up an obstacle course running down the middle of the arena and we fill it with different food type triggers for a horse. So we will put sweet feed, then hay and different things in the horse's path and the horse has to travel down the center of the path and not knock anything over or eat anything and the clients have to work on the outside of the path. So one client is on one side of the path and the other client is on the other side and both are holding two different leads, one shorter than the other so that they can work through the obstacle and get the horse through the obstacle by working together and communicating together so that the horse doesn't eat anything or knock anything over…and we make it difficult enough that anything could knock it over. So, they have to work together in order to be effective and some of the metaphors will come up like being at the end of your rope… and we will ask where that is in their life, when do they feel they are being pulled one direction opposed to the other….So we give an opportunity to see what that looks like and how they interact on one specific activity and we relate that to their life and how they would work on planning things, events for the family, even doing dishes and we will give them homework to go home with and do a team exercise activity that is similar to what we did in the arena to see if they have that same approach and if their behavior has changed.

The "Extended Appendages" activity is also used to bring out issues of roles, communication and conflict resolution. In this activity the couple is directed to link arms and complete the task of catching, grooming, or saddling a horse together. The "rules" of this activity are that the individual on the left side controls their partner's right hand, and the individual on the right controls their partner's left hand. Each person can only use their hand in the exact manner requested by the other person. For example, the person has to ask for each step in the process of

haltering the horse, instead of simply saying “put the halter on the horse.” In the “Horse Billiards” activity, square “pockets” are set up around the arena using poles set on the ground. The horses are considered the billiard balls. The directive for the couples is to get a horse inside each one of the pockets without touching or bribing the horse or using ropes or leads of any kind. As the couple takes turns trying to get a horse in the pockets, only the person whose turn it is can talk. The couple may also be asked in this activity to choose a consequence for breaking any of the rules. Again, the activity can be modified in a number of different ways, in terms of using direct or indirect metaphors, or providing structure and rules to the activity that may evoke helpful discussion. Trust based activities, such as “trust walks,” often involve blind folding one member of the couple and have the other partner direct in walking around or leading a horse around the arena or through a specific set of obstacles.

Two participants in the phone interview described a slightly different approach, in giving couples more open-ended directives and then tracking their interactions with the horses:

> I used to be really activity oriented and I have shifted that a little bit because then I think for me I get too focused on what the activity is supposed to…what the rules are and different things like that….so I tend to give them really open opportunities and say something similar to, "Here are some objects out there in the arena and the horse out there in the arena can also be considered an object and I want you to create…let's say they are having issues with finances…. I want you to create a scenario that would feel similar to how you guys feel about your finances." So I really just kind of connect to the issue that they have and then give them a blank slate and if they struggle with it, then that is okay because they are struggling with this issue anyways so then I maybe help them to

> hone down to what it is specifically about that issue and then they can do more with the objects in the ring including the horse. So, I found that is actually more effective.

One of these two participants added how she uses these types of open-ended activities as an assessment tool:

> I get a lot of stuff out of that and when I do stuff in a setting at the barn, I am looking at how they go about doing it, where do they choose to place it, how do they choose to talk about it…that is all evaluation stuff for me and I get a tremendous amount…it is almost like a giant psychological assessment.

While the majority of participants in the current study were trained in and reported working from the EAGALA model, the findings suggested that there are significant difference in types of activities used and the focus of the activities when EAP is used by practitioners not affiliated with EAGALA. The two participants selected for follow up phone interviews who were affiliated with PATH, Intl. reported using more horsemanship-based activities in their work, including riding, driving, lunging and grooming activities. The stark contrast between using horses as tools to draw attention to therapeutic issues and teaching horsemanship skills is highlighted in this interviewee's response:

> Everything that we do is horsemanship based. So, we teach horsemanship and we teach skills. We do not use the horse as a tool and everything that we do with the horse in our entire program is based on teaching good horsemanship and teaching people to respect the horse and to care for the horse and to understand the horse's needs because that is what being a kind person is.

This participant also described a six-hour couples workshop she offered in which the couples work through horsemanship activities that are designed to represent or teach something about the

elements of Gottman's Sound Relationship House. In her descriptions, it is clear that in this approach, which is in contrast to the EAGALA model, the goal is not to elicit responses, but to translate the elements of good horsemanship into good emotional and relational health.

> we do a lot of talking about body language and about reading human body language. If you are in a conversation with somebody and you want to see how they are reacting to you, you have to watch for the really subtle nuances of their body language. We teach you how to look at a horse and read the horse's emotional state and read the horse's body language and they can see if the horse is upset or confused or anxious or worried. And if they are then we need to figure out how to make the horse feel better.

The other Path, Intl. provider interviewed described her approach in a similar way:

> You know, we do horsemanship 101 in slow-mo…so we do catching, grooming, we will do round pen work…so lunging. We do bareback riding and not very often are we saddling, but we will do bareback riding. So, it is really mostly horsemanship, just basic horsemanship skills and then you talk about how they did and what is the struggle and what is going well and then a lot of processing to relate that back to their reasons for seeking help for an issue.

This same participant describes one of the activities she does most often with couples as "driving." In this activity a long line is attached to each side of the horses halter and extends behind the horse, where each member of the couple holds one line. The couple is then asked to "drive" the horse through a course of obstacles,

> which would entail make them communicate as a team and when one side was being pulled, the other one would need to be loose so that the horse had a clear cue and a lot of

> times it did not work so well with marital couples because there are definite communication struggles.

The latter participant, while indicating that the focus of her approach is on horsemanship activities, also uses some teamwork-based activities in her work with couples. This alludes to the likely presence of variations both within and between general models.

Role of the horses. When asked to describe the role of the horse in this modality, participants talked about both the passive role of horses, or how the horses and the setting itself are used as tools to motivate clients and to create an experiential environment, as well as the active roles of horses in the session while interacting with clients. These themes emerged as a way to separate and highlight the aspects of the horses themselves and the uniqueness of them as a species interacting with humans, from the responses that described the impact of participating in an experiential methodology, which may or may not be directly related to the horses. In a follow up phone interview, one participant described the latter concept in this way:

> I don't care if these people like horses or don't like horses. If and African elephant gave me the same results, I would use it. I am interested in trying to help the clients grow and whatever the tool is that is going to help them grow…if I get results with it…I feel like that is helping my client and that is the reason I am going to invite them to the barn because I feel like I can further their narrative… I can further their dialogue with one another and I can further their progress with this tool that happens to be out at the barn, so we have to go there to get it.

Passive role. The passive role of the horses refers to what happens for the clients by just having the horses present in this modality. Three sub themes that emerged were (1) providing an experiential substrate, (2) providing a medium for projection and modeling, and (3) eliciting

metaphors. One participant said that horses are often a source of motivation to get reluctant clients, particularly men, to participate in the therapy process. Participants also talked about the presence of the horses in session being a source of grounding and visual awareness that help clients remain "in the moment." In describing the benefit of working through challenges experientially, one participant stated "The horse being present in the arena facilitates a visual awareness of blocks and barriers." Another participant described how the horse provides opportunities for clients to actively experience the process of change in therapy;

> Without the horses these couples would not have been able to see, feel, and accept the changes they made. The horses allow the clients to practice certain behaviors and try out new behavior patterns in a safe and controlled environment. The horses hold the space for our clients to problem-solve and accept things they want to change.

Five participants mentioned in the online survey the phenomenon of projection or the theory of object relations coming into play in sessions. Clients tend to project their own thoughts, motivations, desires or feelings onto the horses. Clients also naturally interact with the horses and subsequently interpret those interactions in a way that reflects their subjective experiences and world views. This can happen throughout the process and often begins with simply observing the horses, as in this participant's response

> There is absolutely no way to verbally express areas of difficulty in the way 'played out' by the horses. How many times have I heard, "I can't believe they just did that- that looks exactly like us."

Other participants also referred to the horses seeming to "act out" the dynamics of the couple. This familiarity and connection with the horses feeds into the ability of EFP practitioners to develop metaphors for use in therapy. Several participants described the use of the horses as

tools to elicit and enrich metaphors applicable to the clients' stories. These metaphor come out of the horse-human interaction as well as the interactions between clients when they are challenged to engage in an experiential activity that requires team work and problem solving. These experiential activities then provide the impetus for relationship exploration and discovery of underlying truths or issues that may remained more hidden in a traditional therapy setting. In a phone interview, one participant described it in this way:

> Oftentimes it allows them to really kind of explore their working relationship with one another. Sets up really nice metaphors about how they see their relationship, where they have seen their relationship grow from, where they would like to see it grow to.

While some metaphors may come out during the processing of interactions with the horses, others are more directive and come from the mental health professional who is facilitating the session, as in this example from a phone interview participant:

> Oftentimes if they have children, we will use as many horses as they have children. If they have two kids, we will use four horses in the ring. Two to represent them and two to represent their children. Just to see if there is any difference in those dynamics. We usually use two horses minimum for couples. We don't generally use one.

Active role. Participants also described a more active role of horses in the process, in (1) creating and reflecting energy, and (2) providing feedback to clients. In the online survey one participant described the potential for the behavior of the horses to inject energy into the therapeutic system;

> The energy level, cooperation and resistance of the horses bring out the frustration and specific feelings of the couple that cannot be brought into the therapy office in the same way.

The term “energy reflector” was used by one participant, and another described horses as being “excellent barometers of tension, anxiety, emotion, and genuineness.” Another participant described how the horse’s energy levels and behaviors change from client to client;

> I only wish that couples could see the difference in horse energy level from session to session in the same day with different couples or groups.

An excerpt from a participant in a phone interview also supports the concept of horses being “energy reflectors”:

> With our horses, we have 17 horses with different personalities and every time they are in the ring, they do something completely different, so whatever the client is coming in with, that is what we are seeing. For example, one time we had a radio show broadcasted from our farm to promote our work and we use the calmest, oldest horses on the farm, they are 24 years old and we decided to use them so that there was no danger to the people that were filming and people who were radio broadcasting, so we wanted to make sure it was a safe environment…and the horses would not stop running because the personality, the host of the show was very animated, very active and he was all over the place talking a mile a minute and the horses were running around all over the place.

In four of the six follow up phone interviews participants specifically mentioned horses being prey animals, and therefore quick to respond to their environment and highly sensitive to nonverbal cues. One interviewee explained it this way:

> They're animals that are very in tune with their environment, they are really very aware of what is going on at all times because in the wild they had to be in order to survive and because of that ability to tune into their environment they are very much aware of people and their emotions, body language, what have you, so when a person comes into their

environment, they are very much aware and can reflect and react very quickly to what is going on with that person.

This creates the opportunity for what many participants describe as the horses providing "feedback" to clients about their way of being. Unlike some feedback from other people, feedback from horses is direct, and participants indicated that clients may be more willing to accept feedback from the horses than they are from each other or from a therapist or from one another:

> I think the biggest gift that these horses give in this work is that they give people an opportunity…a safe opportunity to understand what they look like and what they respond like, so I think the self-awareness is the biggest thing because once you know what you do, you are pretty invested in fixing it. You know? There really aren't many barriers around it. When you see that the way you look….the horse doesn't want anything to do with you, it is like, Wow, if a horse don't like me, no wonder why my family doesn't like it.

Two of the participants in the phone interviews described how this same process can be useful not only in helping clients to see themselves in a different way, but also in providing new or unexpected clinical data for the therapist. The following is an example given by one of the interviewees from her own work:

> I had a family that came and the family had a perception of the father in the family as a very angry man, a very aggressive man, a man that basically everybody was pretty afraid of and nobody was really wanting to bond with him or get to know him because they were all just kind of afraid of him despite the fact that there was no report that he was beating anybody or that there was any physical or sexual violence in the family system. He was kind of like a grizzly bear was the description that I was given. So I went into a family

session for the first time with the entire family kind of expecting that the horses might sort of move around and pick up some of that energy from him and my equine specialist and I kind of discussed that ahead of time and we were curious about kind of how the horses might react and maybe needing to be ready that we might get quite a bit of activity since this was a large family. You know, so we kind of had that in our mind and what really happened was that one of the horses instantly walked over to this man and just dropped his head and stood beside him very quietly and very still and very nurturingly and that went on in the entire session. No matter what this man did, this horse was just very very still and the man felt and described for him what was happening was that the horse was kind of acting out the supporting role for him and it allowed the family members to really reconsider their construct of who their father was and was he really quite this aggressive person or was the instant feedback from the horse picking up that there was more of a vulnerability…and as it turns out, as they explored that with the father that what they learned from him was that he really was quite a vulnerable man and he kept his distance because he was afraid to let anyone know about his vulnerability. Once they all kind of figured that out, it really changed the entire family's relationship with the father and it made the functioning of the family system so much better. Then they began to approach him and he began to get his needs met in a different sort of way. So all of that came from the feedback that we got from the horse that clarified something for us in a different way and allowed them to see it differently.

Benefits to couples. In the online survey, participants were asked the question: "Think of several couples who you believe got significant benefit from equine assisted couples therapy with you. What changes did they make? What goals did they achieve?" Open ended responses

about benefits realized by couples were categorized using the broad themes (1) seeing things differently; and (2) doing things differently.

Seeing things differently. Within the theme "seeing things differently," three sub-themes emerged; "awareness," "understanding and respect" and "appreciation." Participants talked about the experiential nature of the work creating a sense of being focused and present. Other aspects of awareness mentioned were awareness of roles within the relationship, awareness of values as well as awareness of specific issues or barriers in the relationship and how each contributed. Participants also talked about couples gaining a greater understanding of and respect for the other's perspective. One interviewee gave the following example of how this would look during a session:

> They were just doing a simple activity to pick a horse and get the horse over an obstacle in the middle of the arena. Okay? And they decided on the horse together and then they both were starting to work with the horse and the husband had an idea, went and got a lead rope, came back to get the horse and just kind of took off and the wife was following behind and he turned around to kind of look at her, but didn't respond and was just like come on. And during the processing of that, I asked him did you feel like you worked as a team and we were describing what had happened and the wife said, well that is kind of the way it is at home that if we have to make a decision or come up with a plan, then he gets ahold of an idea in his head and he runs with it and doesn't allow me to…he is gone and I am trying to catch up and don't really know what to say and that was for him, he recognized that and said yeah, I turned around and kind of looked, but I didn't really ask her and I had that moment where I could have asked her if she was alright or he recognized that moment when he could have asked her and he didn't. So, that was kind of that whole thing. She

> also realized, well I could have spoke up and I didn't. So for both of them to just see a pattern in their behavior and the way that they were communicating with each other because that often happens where he doesn't think to ask and she doesn't think to speak up, so something like that. And in the office…In the office, he just felt like he was…he was very defensive and was like I get your input all the time and I do, you know… he had denied kind of just not thinking that he was a part of or attributing to the communication problem.

Participants also talked about the couples gaining a greater appreciation for and understanding of one another and the relationship through the work done in session. A phone interview participant described it this way:

> I think just having more respect for the other individual, just hearing them for the first time to see what is going on for them and having that understanding, and I guess the awareness of what the other person is feeling and trusting that other individual.

Doing things differently. Study participants also talked about the couples benefitting from "doing things differently" through the experiential process and work with the horses. One of the major benefits mentioned was that couples were able to communicate differently. Experiential work in session helped couples see and correct dysfunctional communication, communicate more clearly, and communicate more openly. One respondent described changes to communication in the online survey this way

> They began to communicate more openly, became aware that their own defenses got in the way of healthy resolution to conflicted areas in their marriage and family.

On a phone interview, another participant gave an example of how the issue of communication is addressed in an EAP session:

> I think with the couples…a lot of couple do not recognize the tone in which they talk to each other, which is often a trigger. So, a man, they want to feel respected, the woman wants to feel loved. So is the tone that they are saying reflective of that? So, when you get them going in an activity that offers stress and vulnerability because there is pressure to complete it, etc, those tones come out and so now there are witnesses to it. You have a horse that is responding to the tone and you have people watching to say… so now you kinda gotta go…you can't really say you don't do it, you know? And so, that is really the subtle stuff that comes out is that tone and sometimes it doesn't usually escalate in a session, but you can see where it would escalate at home. But you could talk about, boy if you guys could stop right here at this tone and figure out a different means of communication or a different way to say things to each other without the tone, it wouldn't even have to get to the point of throwing things at each other. You know, just an example.

Study participants also talked about creating opportunities for couples to work together as a team and improve problem-solving abilities through activities. This dynamic can nurture a sense of togetherness as well as skills building, as evidenced in the following response from the online survey:

> Therapeutic/recreational fun that also challenges their ability to interact, problem solve, negotiate and understand each other's perspective. They also learn to have healthy conflict and disagreements through this process.

Obstacles. Twenty three study participants responded in the online survey to the question: "What obstacles to providing equine assisted psychotherapy treatment for couples have you experienced or do you believe to exist?" Three themes identified from the responses were: 1) Resistance to the process; 2) Lack of knowledge about the practice; and 3) Access to resources.

Under the first theme, "resistance to the process," participants referred to resistance of clients to the process of couples therapy in general, as well resistance specifically to the EAP model. Others cited an obstacle being having both members of the couple present, as well resistance by one member of the couple who is less invested. Respondents also cited resistance to the unique approach taken by therapists in terms of incorporating horses and in terms of the heavy emphasis on the use of metaphors. Some responses that support this theme include: "Adults are more resistant to the idea of working with horses;" "distrust in the process of working with horses;" and "Some clients may be resistant to engage in the process or struggle to see/recognize the 'process' that takes place as metaphors if they are very 'concrete' thinkers." One respondent also cited a client's fear of horses as an obstacle. The second theme, "Lack of knowledge about the process," broadens the perspective from specific clients to the general public and potential clients. It also encompasses both awareness of the model and credibility of the model. Respondents suggested that the general public is unfamiliar with this treatment approach, and that therefore potential clients do not know about its existence, its potential benefits, or how they can access services. The issue of credibility of the modality was also brought up, as in this response

> People often don't understand what it is that we do and either believe it's hippotherapy, therapeutic riding or simply quackery by people who like to play with horsies.

Another respondent also cited a misunderstanding of what equine assisted psychotherapy is and agreed that it is often confused with therapeutic riding, which has been around a lot longer:

> One of the big stigmas is separating it from an equine-therapeutic riding program as opposed to an all on the ground 100% program that is just working with the horses and you don't have to be a certain size or shape in order to be effective. I think most people

> think that it is a riding program. That is one of the biggest stigmas that we run into because we do have a very large riding academy here for individuals with physical disabilities and they are a very well-known organization and they have been around our area for 30 years.

The third theme, "access to resources," encompassed issues of space, time and financial resources in practicing or benefitting from EFP. The need for ample space to care for horses impacts time constraints, in that location of services may not be convenient for clients. Participants referenced "time involved to drive out to the barn;" "lack of reliable transportation;" and "timing of sessions to not interfere with an already busy appointment calendar and attempt to coordinate with the couples availability." Cost was also a major issue, in terms of affordability of session for low-income clients, as well as the cost to practitioners or programs to offer such intensive services. In the absence of external funding sources, costs of horse care, facilities and time of professionals must be passed on to clients.

Interestingly, some differences in opinion in terms of significance of these obstacles emerged in the process of substantiating this data with participants in follow-up phone interviews. These differences came out particularly around the issue of credibility or mistrust of the model, and in terms of financing the practices. Responses suggest situational and personal variations in terms of both credibility and financial issues. One interviewee shared how she tackles issues of credibility in her own practice:

> I have found in my own practice that probably the most helpful contributor to being seen as credible is my previous work and my previous reputation that was already in place and my colleagues who know me and know what I do and know that I have been a member of a professional community for 20 odd years and that I have not really taken leave of my

> senses before now and so now they will trust me a bit further because of that and then as soon as I do the work, then the work speaks for itself and those couples go forward and go, you know, I think this is really crazy, but let me tell you something. So, that is what kind of helps me, but I think credibility wise, I have a program in ____ that I also run and my private practice is not in ____ and I am not as widely known there and I have really run up against that credibility because people don't know me and they don't have something to hang their hat on in terms of okay, we think this is kooky, but we know her and she is pretty solid, so if she is saying it works, we are going to give it a whirl. Selling it down there has been at times like selling an air conditioner to an Eskimo..people look at you like you are crazy.

Other phone interview participants did not cite running into problems with credibility or mistrust of the model, and even talked about the success and growing popularity of their work, as in this case:

> I think it is really growing. I mean just since I have had awareness of it since 2001, I would say the awareness out there is double if not tripled and insurance companies are starting to acknowledge that they are not paying that great, but they are starting to acknowledge it, which is a huge part of the battle. So, it is just like any other therapy modality, if it is good for one group, why wouldn't it be group for everybody as far as it is good for individuals and families, well of course it would be good for couples. So, I think it has become much more widely accepted as an option.

One interviewee brought up an additional obstacle to the practice of equine assisted couples therapy that wasn't mentioned by specifically by other participants, but was also related to the credibility of the model:

I think one of the other difficulties, to be honest, as far as couples..is that who teaches facilitation skills in couple equine therapy? You know? So facilities probably don't feel very comfortable with couples because where have they gotten that experience to do it? There is not a clear model for couples therapy in this field. You know you can kind of take bits and pieces of what is being taught out there, but there is no facilitation training and in fact, when you think about this field, there is no guaranteed quality facilitation training anywhere. You go to Path, you attend a three-day workshop. You go get your hours through volunteering. How do you guarantee that is good facilitated training? You go to EAGALA, you do a three-day workshop. You go get your hours. But there is no guarantee that the place these people are going to is good training.

Phone interviews suggested that practitioners struggle with managing costs and insurance payments to varying degrees as well, as evidenced in comparing the following four responses:

1. Definitely the insurance is an issue, the cost of the insurance. Also an obstacle has been again the cost of doing it. The only reason that I am currently doing it is because the arena and the gentleman who owns the arena and the horses is basically volunteering his time and his horses and his property. And so that is an in-kind donation, so that is a big deal as far as being able to do it.
2. You know offering this modality and being able to support two professionals that have the necessary credentials to make it work, it is really very difficult to price it at a price point where you haven't just priced yourself right out of the market… If I am working as a team in an EAGALA model approach, I am making virtually half of what I make in my office and I am working virtually double the amount of time that I work in my office

3. We bill them as individual counseling or family counseling or couples counseling and generally if we just have that on a receipt, we don't put equine-assisted therapy on the receipt. Most or all of them have gotten their coverage or if they have a third-party insurance therapy.
4. You know, I haven't had too many problems. I define it as I am cash pay only, so I don't take insurance so that right there kind of creates a different clientele because if they are motivated enough to pay the cash to come to the session, but I also give them a bit of a discount, so I don't charge necessarily my full rate in order to kind of drum up business, so if that is an obstacle that I am not financially at 100% where I would like to be, I am probably at about 60%

Chapter 5: Discussion

Summary

The purpose of this study was to describe what is currently happening in the field in terms of practitioners utilizing EAP methodologies to treat couples. Findings indicate that equine assisted psychotherapy is being practiced by an international cohort of professionals from a diverse array of backgrounds to treat a wide range of client populations and presenting problems. While it's use for treating couples appears to be relatively newer and not as widespread as its use for other client populations, the data does support the thesis that it is being used in the field and is perceived by practitioners as being at least as effective for treating the relational issues of couples as it is for meeting individual treatment goals. The majority of study participants reported being trained in the EAGALA model. This fact, while limiting the depth of our understanding of other approaches, does give us some insight into the cohesiveness in theory and practice of this group of providers.

To What Extent is EAP Used for Couples Among PATH and EAGALA Members

Study findings indicate that couples are one of a number of different client populations being treated with EAP methodologies. The recruitment letter used in the study did not limit participation to those professionals currently working with couples, nor did it specifically state the researcher's interest in couples work. This was a strategic decision to allow for exploration as to the extent to which EAP practitioners are using the methodology to treat couples. Findings suggest that while EAP is being used to treat couples, it is not being used to the extent that is for other populations, including children, adolescents and groups. Just less than half (45.5%) of all survey respondents indicated that they are currently treating couples using EAP. These individuals came from a variety of mental health fields, including marriage and family therapy,

psychology, counseling and social work. The number of years these participants reported to have been offering equine assisted couples therapy was much lower in comparison to the number of years of experience practicing psychotherapy in general, suggesting that equine assisted couples therapy is a new and growing practice. Further research would be necessary in order to assess whether couples work is also a recent development relative to the use of EAP for other populations, or whether its growth has kept pace with the development of EAP methodologies in general.

Findings also showed that participants were not specializing in equine assisted couples therapy. Data from survey respondents showed that couples clients make up a small percentage of total EAP work for those mental health professionals using the methodology. However, not one study participant chose a belief that the model was not appropriate for couples as rationale for not providing couples therapy. This finding suggests that the relatively small portion of EAP work being focused on couples is due not to the methodology itself not being applicable to couples work, but to the nature of the clientele seeking services and the characteristics of the mental health professional's practice.

How is EAP Being Used for Work With Couples?

Types of presenting problems. Findings suggest that practitioners believe the EAP model is useful for a range of presenting problems of couples. The most commonly cited were general communications issues, managing conflict and aggression, parenting, and trust and vulnerability issues. Many participants responded that they felt all relational issues could be treated using this methodology. Online survey responses about types of problems seen, combined with provider descriptions of treatment goals and benefits to clients indicate that the emphasis of this methodology is placed on treating relational issues of couples within a systemic framework.

The focus of the work is on enhancing awareness and shifting unhelpful patterns of interactions in motivated and committed couples who are capable of thinking metaphorically and gaining insight into their process. Some survey respondents did not feel that EAP would be indicated for active domestic violence, high conflict, untreated substance abuse or serious mental health or personality disorders in one or more partners. One participant's comments suggested that a sense of "control" over client responses, specifically in terms of volatility, was necessary to protect the well-being of the horses during this work. This discrepancy between some practitioners viewing conflict and aggression as a treatable presenting problem and others viewing domestic violence issues as not appropriate for this methodology suggests a need for further exploration.

Format and activities. Generally, couples work is being done in 60 or 90 minute sessions, incorporating two or more horses and with two professionals present when feasible. In about half the cases practitioners perceive EAP as being the primary methodology to treat couples, while other practitioners see EAP sessions as a tool that is an adjunct to traditional in-office therapy. Information gleaned from the follow-up phone interview suggests that practitioners feel that EAP work is more impactful and revealing than traditional talk therapy for many couples, but that work without the horses is also necessary at times as a means of initial assessment, processing, and for those couples for which the EAP method is contraindicated. Whether the more traditional couples work without the horses is done in an office setting or simply outside in the barn or arena but not actively using the horses seems to be primarily a function of whether the therapist's office is at the barn or elsewhere.

The study data allude to the existence of some very different approaches in the practice of equine assisted couples therapy, in terms of an emphasis on marital enrichment versus problem

solving and on horsemanship skills versus ground based assessment and experiential activities. Standards outlined by PATH, Intl. allow for much more flexibility and freedom to incorporate horsemanship activities into EAP work, whereas EAGALA has developed a model that specifically avoids the use of any horsemanship activities. Horsemanship activities, which were described by the two PATH affiliated participants interviewed by phone, can include grooming, riding or other activities where teaching a skill is the focus. Therapeutic issues that come up during the practicing of that skill are addressed by the mental health professional and related back to the context of the presenting problem and how they can be applied in the client's life outside of therapy. In the EAGALA model, on the other hand, knowledge about horses or horsemanship is deemphasized, and the focus remains on the clients experiencing and then processing what comes up for them while working around and with the horses. In the former approach, a client might be taught the appropriate way to halter and lead a horse. In the EAGALA model, a client might be given a halter and asked to catch a horse, with no further instruction on the best way to accomplish the task. For a couples session using a horsemanship-based approach, information about the most helpful way of being with a horse (i.e. gentle, clear, consistent) would be translated into how these qualities would be helpful in the relationship. In the EAGALA approach, the interactional pattern of the relationship is brought out and addressed in a tangible way in the moment by challenging the couple to work through an activity together. Since the PATH standards don't provide specific guidance on activities or approaches to the work, and due to the relatively low number of PATH affiliated participants in this study, it is not clear how widely and consistently this style is shared.

The level of conformity in the responses from EAGALA practitioners in terms of activities used suggests that the model is strongly embedded in the fabric of the EAGALA

community and that the approach and theory behind it is being used with some level of consistency. These providers describe an experiential methodology in which horses, in their acute responsiveness to body language and non-verbal cues, are used as tools to inject energy into the therapeutic process through evoking emotion, enhancing awareness and offering opportunities for clients to practice new behaviors and skills. Therapists direct clients to engage with the horses in a way that is meant to force couples to work as a team and challenge their communication, negotiation and problem-solving skills. Activities might be set up simply as experiential activities to be used for assessment, or challenges that are developed specifically to incorporate metaphors that relate to the presenting problem of the couple. The belief in this approach is that by creating opportunities and allowing clients to work through the process, the clients will come to the best solutions for themselves.

The findings of this study give a broad and descriptive overview of two general approaches to this methodology. Given the relatively underdeveloped and unstructured nature of the field and the extent to which therapists operate from a wide range of theoretical orientations and beliefs, it is fair to assume that there are likely other approaches yet to be clearly defined in the literature, and that there is considerable cross-over in methods and activities utilized by practitioners of EAP. In fact, study findings suggest that mental health professionals may be incorporating EAP as a tool into their clinical work within the theoretical frameworks they are already operating from, instead of using EAP as a distinct model or theory in and of itself. Thus, a shift in the definition of the "field" or "practice" of EAP might be warranted to further our understanding of the various ways mental health professionals are incorporating horses into their work.

Beliefs about effectiveness of the methodology. Study participants indicated that they felt EAP is an effective and sometimes even powerful tool for use with couples. It is interesting to note that in the online survey many respondents who don't treat couples as part of their practice nonetheless commented that they could see how it would be beneficial, or that they would like to use it in the future. Four of the six professionals who participated in follow up phone interviews specifically talked about the significant benefits gained from doing the experiential EAP work with couples out at the barn in comparison to the results of traditional talk therapy. Practitioners assert that both the clients and the therapist benefit from the opportunity to see the issues in the relationship played out in a tangible way through the EAP work. This creates an opportunity for couples to gain a better understanding of each other, as well as take ownership of their own roles in the system. The couples also benefit from working through challenging activities that require changes in behavior, teamwork and problem solving. In other words, instead of couples simply talking about how things can be different and promising to try to implement these changes outside of therapy, EAP provides an opportunity to implement changes in the moment. For EAP practitioners, the experiential environment is a useful assessment tool and the horses are the means through which successful therapeutic interventions are delivered. For the methodology to be effective, however, couples have to be engaged in the process and be motivated to participate in an experiential methodology. Many participants specifically reference resistance on the part of the clients to participate in this methodology as one of the main obstacles to its effective use. In the follow up phone interviews, participants were asked specifically about their beliefs about the potential of equine assisted couples therapy to continue to grow and be seen as a viable option for couples therapy in the future. All participants conveyed enthusiasm for the growth they have seen in the use of EAP, and

referenced its potential effectiveness in comparison to, or as an adjunct to, traditional couples therapy as evidence of its potential for the future.

Contributions of the Current Study

Many of the studies on EAP are difficult to interpret and lack clarity as to what approach is being used and what specific activities clients are engaged in. The exploratory nature of the current study offers a more rich description of the role horses play in the process of EAP. Data from interviews with study participants offered clear examples of how practitioners believe the ability of horses to inject energy into the process, enhance awareness by providing feedback about clients' nonverbal behavior and create opportunities for problem-solving facilitated progress toward treatment goals. The concept referenced often in EAP literature about horses "mirroring" clients or providing non-verbal feedback about the client's way of being with others (Russell-Martin, 2006; Klontz, 2007; Trotter, et al. 2008; Vidrine, Owen-Smith, & Faulkner, 2002) is echoed in practitioners' descriptions of horses reflecting back the energy and non-verbal behavior of clients. Equine assisted psychotherapy being a powerful substrate through which metaphors can be developed and used to enhance treatment goals (Christian, 2005; Karol, 2007) was clearly viewed as an essential element of equine assisted couples therapy as well. This study also aligns with literature in terms of benefits practitioners believe their clients gain from having an opportunity to practice interpersonal skills and adapt behaviors experientially within the session (Russell-Martin, 2006; Schultz et al., 2007).

Some of the suggested benefits of EAP present in the literature, including horses being a source of non-judgmental support and acceptance (Yorke et al., 2008; Meinersmann, 2008), and the process enhancing self-confidence, mastery and self-esteem (Trotter, et al., 2008; Burgon, 2011; Meinersmann, 2008), did not emerge from the current study findings. This could indicate

that those specific benefits are more relevant to the use of EAP with client populations other than couples.

Literature specifically addressing the use of EAP to treat relational issues of couples has been virtually non-existent. The current study contributes to the literature by introducing equine assisted couples therapy as a methodology that is currently being practiced and that is perceived to be effective by practitioners utilizing it. Findings provide insight into the how EAP is being used, and why practitioners find it useful to incorporate horses into their work with couples. They also confirm that the field has yet to develop any clear facilitation guidelines or standards of practice for the use of EAP with couples, and that practitioners rely on creativity and the sharing of experiences with others to find effective ways to adapt the method to work with couples. Study findings indicate that EAP practitioners operate from a wide range of theoretical orientations, and that a clear theoretical model for the practice of EAP has not been developed. For the field to grow in influence and credibility in the future, it will be crucial to continue to collect, analyze and build upon the shared experiences of practitioners to create a more structured theoretical framework for this practice that can then be empirically tested and validated by the broader mental health field. The findings of this study take a first step in painting a more descriptive, clinically-relevant picture of the use of equine assisted psychotherapy with couples than that which has come from the mainstream media or the literature to date.

Limitations

A primary methodological limitation of this study was the potential for self-selection bias. Self-selection or non-response bias, in combination with a small sample size increases the risk that respondent's views are not representative of the entire population. Other limitations

might have arisen from outdated contact information on email lists, resulting in the survey not reaching all practitioners. The self-reporting nature of the study may have influenced reliability of the data. In addition, given the lack of previous research in this area, the survey questions developed for this study may not have adequately covered all relevant themes or subjects of interest.

In addition, the study only involved participants from the memberships of EAGALA and PATH, Intl, and therefore excluded an unknown number of practitioners who have received training from other organizations or who work independently in the field without association to or membership with a credentialing organization. This clear selection bias, while useful in allowing for a more in-depth exploration of a common approach, means that the description of the use of equine assisted psychotherapy for couples is likely incomplete and not representative of all practitioners.

A final limitation of this study is inherent in its descriptive nature. A descriptive study, while a useful first foray into a topic of interest by providing information about what is occurring, is limited in its ability to provide any explanatory or inferential information. The current study is helpful in generating further questions and identifying additional avenues for exploration in terms of the theory behind, efficacy of and mechanisms involved in EAP, but is not able to answer these questions itself.

Recommendations for Future Research

Findings suggest a need to continue to further delineate and describe different approaches to equine assisted psychotherapy in existence today in order to develop a clear and comprehensive picture of the range of conceptual frameworks, goals, outcomes and methods used for different populations. While organizations like EAGALA and PATH are similar in

providing members basic ethical guidelines and standards for the practice, even these two organizations differ significantly as far as approach to the work and methodologies used. Other approaches in existence may differ more significantly still. The primary difference that emerged in the current study was a focus on horsemanship skills by some of the PATH affiliated practitioners, versus a focus on experiential, non-horsemanship type activities described by most of the EAGALA affiliated practitioners. Due to the small number of PATH affiliated practitioners taking part in the study, the researcher was unable to glean much descriptive information about how these practitioners are using horsemanship skills to assist couples, or how these horsemanship skills are perceived to translate into real life relational skills. As there are likely many other EAP practitioners and programs that are also predominantly horsemanship focused, this would certainly be an area warranting further study.

In addition, EAP training from PATH and EAGALA, and likely others, is generalized to a wide range of presenting problems and client populations. There is a clear need for more targeted research on EAP for different populations, in order to begin to clarify differences both of approach and of outcomes. This is particularly true for the use of EAP for couples, for which the absence of a clear model or standards for facilitation combine with a lack of descriptive literature to create an air of mystery around what equine assisted couples therapy is and why it's useful. Clearly defining the practice will build a stronger foundation from which further studies of greater validity and reliability can be conducted. In building the case for equine assisted couples therapy, quantitative outcomes research as well as more qualitative inquiry into the experiences of both clients and therapists will be crucial.

There is also a need to further explore the characteristics of clients who are most suited to this methodology. Many participants in the current study felt that clients needed to have some

ability or willingness to consider issues metaphorically to benefit from EAP. What does this mean for individuals with cognitive processing issues, such as individuals who have been diagnosed on the autism spectrum, or those who are simply more "concrete" thinkers? Study participants also shared their beliefs about the power of the methodology coming from the clients' tendency to project thoughts and feelings onto the horses, and for interactions with the horses to evoke strong reactions and produce metaphors that are then used throughout treatment. This brings up the question of how the experience of this methodology would change based on the client's previous knowledge of or experience with horses. One of the study participants mentioned in a phone interview that he found clients who were "horse people" to be more difficult to work with, because they tended to be focused on the "correct" way of handling the horses. The dynamic of an equine assisted couples therapy session might shift significantly in the case of one partner being more comfortable with or knowledgeable about horses than the other.

Finally, for equine assisted psychotherapy to gain traction and earn a broader base of support within the field of mental health professionals, researchers must do a better job of describing the methodology and how it is used. Producing outcomes research stating the effectiveness of an EAP program without clearly and painstakingly defining the methods used and specifically how the activities and interactions with the horses translated into positive gains does little to enhance credibility among the general public or the many mental health professionals who have no context for understanding this unique methodology.

Clinical Implications

Equine assisted psychotherapy is continuing to gain recognition as a methodology used for a wide range of presenting problems and client populations, including couples. Practitioners who use it for couples find it useful for "stuck" couples with which traditional talk therapy is not

translating into behavioral change. Couples may benefit from an experiential methodology that helps them to "see" their unhelpful patterns of interaction in activities with the horses and work on actually changing behavior in session. For motivated and committed couples, the activities used in EAP can enhance closeness and appreciation and help them to start working together as a team. As a clinician, having knowledge about the existence of EAP and having some understanding of how the methodology works provides opportunities to refer appropriate clients for adjunct services that might enhance treatment goals. Some clinicians may even attend their client's EAP sessions to observe and bring what was learned back into the therapy office. A clinician interested in actually practicing equine assisted couples therapy must have a considerably higher level of motivation for and interest in the work. Unlike other clinical tools or methods, this one requires a great deal of time, money and resources to support. The field itself arose from a deliberate attempt to translate a passion for horses, and an understanding of the very impactful way people can relate to them, into a therapeutic methodology. While working alongside an equine specialist to some extent exempts a mental health professional from being an expert on horses, it is unclear how effectively the methodology would work in the hands of someone with no prior experience with horses. Perhaps the barometer of the potential for growth of this methodology in the future will be whether it is able to attract practitioners who are not already "horse people," or if it will remain a tool used by a limited group of therapists who already identify with the equine crowd.

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Appendix A: Tables

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Survey Respondents

	Female	Male	Response Total (percent)
Age			
18 to 24	1	0	1.3
25 to 34	11	1	15.8
35 to 44	14	1	19.7
45 to 54	22	3	32.9
55 to 64	18	0	23.7
65 to 74	2	3	6.6
Race			
White	62	7	90.8
Hispanic or Latino	2	0	2.6
American Indian or Alaska Native	2	0	2.6
Other	2	1	3.9

Table 2

Geographic Location of Survey Respondents

	Total Response Count	Frequency	Response Percent
Country of Residence	77		
United States		53	68.8
Australia		1	1.3
Belgium		1	1.3
Canada		5	6.5
Germany		2	2.6
Isle of Man		1	1.3
Netherlands		3	3.9
New Zealand		5	6.5
Norway		1	1.3
Slovenia		1	1.3
South Africa		1	1.3
Sweden		1	1.3
United Kingdom		2	2.6
U.S. State of Residence	49		
Arizona		3	6.1
California		10	20.4
Colorado		4	8.2
Connecticut		1	2.0
Florida		4	8.2
Georgia		3	6.1
Illinois		1	2.0
Indiana		1	2.0
Kansas		2	4.1
Kentucky		1	2.0
Maryland		1	2.0
Minnesota		1	2.0
Missouri		1	2.0
Montana		1	2.0
New Hampshire		1	2.0
New Mexico		1	2.0
New York		1	2.0
North Carolina		2	4.1
North Dakota		2	4.1
Texas		5	10.2
Virginia		3	6.1

Table 3

Degree Field of Survey Respondents

	Frequency	Response Percent
Psychology	24	36.4
Social Work	23	34.8
Counseling	20	30.3
Marriage and Family Therapy	9	13.6
Other[a]	17	25.76

*Participants were asked to select all options that applied. Therefore, response percentages add up to more than 100%

[a] Other related responses given (n=1 in all cases) included family constellation work, early childhood development, psychiatry, human services, youth and community work, master of divinity, occupational therapy, integrated therapy.

Table 4

Credentials Held by Survey Respondents[*]

	Frequency	Response Percent
Bachelor's degree	23	30.7
Master's degree	44	58.7
Doctorate degree	10	13.3
Medical degree	2	2.7
Licensed provider	41	54.7
Other	13	17.3

*Participants were asked to select all options that applied. Therefore, response percentages add up to more than 100%

Table 5

Percentage of Caseload Comprised of Equine Assisted Psychotherapy Clients

	Frequency	Response Percent
Less than 25%	35	46.7
25-50%	11	14.7
50-75%	7	9.3
75-100%	22	29.3

Table 6

Types of Clients Treated Using Equine Assisted Psychotherapy[*]

	Frequency	Response Percent
Children	41	53.2
Adolescents	63	81.8
Adults	62	80.5
Groups	46	59.7
Families	43	55.8
Other [a]	9	11.7

[*] Participants were given the option of choosing more than one response.

[a] Other relevant responses included managers, executives or other corporate professionals (n=4)

Table 7

Presenting Problems of Equine Assisted Psychotherapy Clients[*]

	Frequency	Response Percent
Anxiety	59	76.6
Depression	56	72.7
Anger Management	46	59.7
Substance Abuse	35	45.5
Behavioral Problems	53	68.8
Relational Issues	58	75.3
Other	48	62.3

[*] Participants were given the option of choosing more than one response.

Table 8

Reasons for not Providing Equine Assisted Couples Therapy[*]

	Frequency	Response Percent
I don't have training in this area	9	21.4
I don't have interest in this area	11	26.2
I don't think equine assisted therapy is appropriate for this population	0	0.0
Other	27	64.3

[*] Participants were given the option of choosing more than one response.

Table 9

Percentage of Equine Assisted Psychotherapy Caseload Comprised of Couples

	Frequency (n=32)	Response Percent
Less than 25%	23	71.9
25-50%	7	21.9
50-75%	2	6.25
75-100%	0	0

Table 10

Structure of Equine Assisted Couples Therapy Sessions

	Frequency (n=28)	Response Percent
I have a specific treatment plan and a set progression of activities to complete	2	7.1
I have a basic structure in mind, but respond to whatever comes up in session by adapting activities to fit the couple's needs	22	78.6
I respond to whatever comes naturally in each session in the moment	4	14.3

Table 11

Activities Used in Equine Assisted Couples Therapy[*]

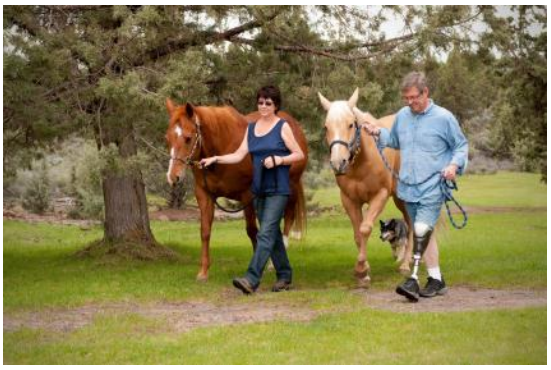
	Frequency (n=32)	Response Percent
Riding	1	3.1
Driving	1	3.1
Lunging	7	21.9
Grooming	18	56.3
Activities on the ground with the horse	32	100.0
Other[a]	4	12.5

[*] Participants were given the option of choosing more than one response.

[a] Other activities reported included verbal counseling not using the horses (n=1) and observation (n=1)

Appendix B: Recruitment Letter

Your experience needed!



Note: Photo by: Gary Alvis (2010). Retrieved from: http://www.istockphoto.com/stock-photo-13293098-amputee.php.

Are you:

- A mental health professional?
- Actively incorporating equine assisted activities into your practice?

You are invited to be part of a research study on the uses of equine-assisted or equine facilitated psychotherapy

Equine assisted psychotherapy is rapidly gaining international recognition for its use in treating a wide range of mental health issues for both children and adults; individuals and couples. We want to add to the growing pool of knowledge in the field by finding out how and why therapists are using it, and for whom it is helpful.

My name is Taylor M. Ham and I am a graduate student in the marriage and family program at Virginia Tech. I would like to invite you to participate in a research study for my master's thesis about uses of equine assisted psychotherapy to treat relational issues.

In order to participate in this study, you must:

- be a mental health professional
- be currently practicing equine assisted psychotherapy as at least part of your practice.

Participation will involve answering a brief online survey about your experiences incorporating horses into your practice.

If you would like to participate in this study, please follow the link below. Thank you in advance for your time and contribution to the field of equine assisted psychotherapy.

Start Survey

Appendix C: Online Survey

Demographic Characteristics

2. What is your gender?

- ◯ Female
- ◯ Male

3. What is your age?

- ◯ 18 to 24
- ◯ 25 to 34
- ◯ 35 to 44
- ◯ 45 to 54
- ◯ 55 to 64
- ◯ 65 to 74
- ◯ 75 or older

4. What is your race? Mark one or more.

- ◯ White
- ◯ Black or African American
- ◯ Asian
- ◯ Hispanic or Latino
- ◯ Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
- ◯ American Indian or Alaska Native
- ◯ Other

5. In what country do you live?

6. In what state or U.S. territory do you live? (if applicable)

7. In what field do you have a degree?

- [ ] Psychology
- [ ] Social Work
- [ ] Counseling
- [ ] Marriage and family therapy

Other (please specify)

8. What credentials do you currently hold? (Check all that apply)

- [ ] Bachelors degree
- [ ] Master's degree
- [ ] Doctorate degree
- [ ] Medical degree
- [ ] Licensed provider

Other (please specify)

9. Are you currently certified to practice EAP by:

- [ ] PATH Intl.
- [ ] EAGALA
- [ ] No Certification

Other (please specify)

Characteristics of Your Practice

10. How many years have you been practicing psychotherapy?

11. Are you currently licensed?

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

12. Approximately what percentage of your total caseload is equine assisted psychotherapy?

13. On average, how many equine assisted psychotherapy sessions do you conduct per week?

14. For which types of presenting problems of clients do you use equine assisted psychotherapy? (Please check all that apply)

- [ ] Anxiety
- [ ] Depression
- [ ] Anger Management
- [ ] Substance Abuse
- [ ] Behavioral Problems
- [ ] Relational Issues
- [ ] Other (please specify)

15. For which types of clients do you use equine assisted psychotherapy? (Please check all that apply)

- [ ] Children
- [ ] Adolescents
- [ ] Adults
- [ ] Groups
- [ ] Families
- [ ] Other (please specify)

16. Do you use this methodology to treat couples?

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

22. Typically, how often do couples participate in equine psychotherapy sessions?

- ◯ Once a week
- ◯ Once a month
- ◯ Once every two weeks
- ◯ Twice per week
- ◯ Other (please specify)

23. What specific activities do couples participate in? (Check all that apply)

- ☐ Riding
- ☐ Driving
- ☐ Lunging
- ☐ Grooming
- ☐ Activities on the ground with the horse
- ☐ Other (please specify)

24. Please give some examples of on the ground activities you might use in a couples session.

EAP Activities

25. While clients are working with horses, which professionals are present?

- ◯ Therapist only
- ◯ Therapist and horse expert together
- ◯ Horse trainer/expert only
- ◯ Other (please specify)

26. In general, how many horses are incorporated into your sessions with couples?

- ◯ 1 horse
- ◯ 2 horses
- ◯ 3 or more horses

27. Which best describes your treatment approach for couples using equine assisted psychotherapy?

- ◯ I provide a time-limited program (i.e. workshop or couples retreat)
- ◯ The duration of my treatment is open-ended and based on client needs
- ◯ I provide both time-limited and open-ended treatment programs.

28. Which best describes the way in which you practice equine assisted psychotherapy with couples:

- ◯ I have a specific treatment plan and a set progression of activities to complete
- ◯ I have a basic structure in mind, but respond to whatever comes up in session by adapting activities to fit the couple's needs
- ◯ I respond to whatever comes naturally in each session in the moment

29. Do you use a specific theoretical framework or model? Please explain

30. Please describe the presenting problems of couples you feel are most effectively treated using this methodology (open ended)

31. Please describe any specific couple characteristics or problems you feel are contraindicated for this model

32. Think of several couples who you believe got significant benefit from equine assisted couples therapy with you. What changes did they make? What goals did they achieve?

33. Please describe your beliefs about the role of the horse(s) in facilitating change in equine assisted couples therapy

34. Please describe your beliefs about the role of the mental health professional in facilitating change in equine assisted couples therapy

35. What is the average fee you charge per session?

36. How are couples referred to your equine assisted psychotherapy practice? (please check all that apply)

- [ ] Targeted advertising to couples
- [ ] Referrals from court systems
- [ ] Referrals from other mental health professionals
- [ ] Other (please specify)

37. What obstacles to providing equine assisted psychotherapy treatment for couples have you experienced or do you believe to exist?

38. Thank you for your participation in the online portion of this study!

Would you be willing to provide more detailed information in a follow up phone interview with the researcher? If so, please provide your name and phone number below.

Name

Phone Number

Appendix D: Phone Interview Script

Introduction and Consent

Hello, my name is Taylor Ham. I'm a master's student in marriage and family therapy at Virginia Tech, conducting a study on the use of equine assisted psychotherapy. Thank you for taking the time to complete my online survey and for being willing to provide some additional information. I would like to ask you some open ended questions about your experiences using equine assisted psychotherapy.

The interview will be audio-recorded, and you can expect it to take approximately 30-45 minutes. Your confidentiality will be maintained. Any identifying information will be removed and replaced with aliases in the typed transcript and study report. Portions of your interview text may be used verbatim in the report of the project or in subsequent publications. The audio file will be destroyed after thesis approval.

As you will be asked about your experiences as a professional providing equine assisted therapy to clients, this study carries minimal risks. By participating, you will be contributing to the field by adding to research on the topic.

You can say as little or as much as you would like, and you are free to stop the interview at any time.

Do you have any questions about this research study?

Do you voluntarily agree to participate in this study?

[Recording starts after consent is given]

Interview Questions

1. Describe how you came to use equine assisted psychotherapy in your practice?
2. How would you explain to a non-horse person the role that the horses play in this modality?
    - Can you give an example from your work?
3. How would you describe the roles of the mental health professional and the equine specialist?
4. What has been your experience of using EAP with couples?
5. What format or activities do you find particularly suited to work with couples?
    - Can you give examples of these activities?

6. In the online survey, participants described some of the most significant relational benefits they have seen for couples. Some of these were: enhancement in communication, increased trust and respect, correction of boundary issues, conflict resolution and greater self-awareness in the relationship.

    - Are there any that you have experienced in your work that you would add?
    - Which have you experienced the most success with?
    - Can you give an example of how this particular issue or benefit would come up in a session while working with the horses?

7. In the online survey I asked about obstacles to practicing this modality. Participants mentioned: EAP being unknown to the general public, a lack of credibility, mistrust or misunderstanding of the model, difficulty getting both members of the couple to participate, as well as cost as obstacles to it being used more widely for couples treatment.

    - What are your thoughts on these, and are there any more you would add?
    - Based on your experience and your knowledge of the field, what are your thoughts on if EAP will continue to grow and be used as an option for couples therapy in the future?

Appendix E: Informed Consent

Informed Consent for Participants in Research Projects Involving Human Subjects

Title: Equine Assisted Couples Therapy: An Exploratory Study
Principal Investigator: Dr. Eric McCollum
Co-Investigator and Interviewer: Taylor M. Ham

I. Purpose of the Research

Equine assisted psychotherapy (EAP) is an emerging experiential methodology that has recently gained recognition as a method for addressing a wide variety of presenting problems when used with individuals, groups, couples and families. Despite EAP being used to treat couples as well as individuals, there is currently little research on the use of EAP for relational treatments. This descriptive study will explore the phenomenon of equine assisted psychotherapy in the context of its potential to be incorporated and utilized by professionals to treat the relational issues of couples. The purpose of this study is to describe current perceptions and experiences in the field of using EAP with couples.

II. Procedures

You will be asked to fill out a questionnaire asking demographic questions as well as questions specifically about your equine assisted psychotherapy practice. You can expect this survey to take approximately 30 minutes to complete. You will also have an opportunity to participate in a follow-up phone interview, if you wish to do so. If you volunteer to participate in a follow-up interview, you will be contacted via phone by the interviewer, who will conduct an audio-recorded interview about your experience practicing equine assisted psychotherapy. You can expect the audio-recorded interview to take approximately 30-45 minutes.

III. Risks

This study carries minimal risks to participants. You will be asked about your experiences as a professional providing equine assisted therapy to clients.

IV. Benefits

By participating in this study, you will be contributing to the field by being part of adding to the body of research on equine assisted psychotherapy.

V. Anonymity and Confidentiality

All of the information provided in the online survey and over-the-phone or email is confidential. Any identifying information provided during audio-recorded phone interviews will be removed and replaced with aliases in the typed transcript and study report. The only individuals with access to the audio recording and original audio transcript will be the Principal Investigator and the Co-Investigator. Portions of your interview text may be used verbatim in the report of the project and/or in subsequent publications. The audio file will be destroyed after thesis approval.

VI. Compensation

There is no compensation for taking part in this study other than our gratitude and appreciation for your time in participating.

VII. Freedom to Withdraw
You have the right to refuse to answer any question at any time. You have the right to withdraw from this study at any time without penalty.

VIII. Participant Responsibilities and Permission
I voluntarily agree to participate in this study. In agreeing to participate, I understand that I have the following responsibilities: to discuss, to the best of my ability, my experiences and/or thoughts about providing equine assisted psychotherapy to clients.

I have read and understand the Informed Consent, which states the conditions of this project. I hereby acknowledge the above and give my voluntary consent for participation in this project.

AGREE

IF you have any questions about this research in any capacity, research subjects' rights, and/or whom to contact in the event of a research-related injury, you may contact:

Dr. Eric McCollum
Principal Investigator
Telephone: (703) 538-8460
Email: EricMcCollum@vt.edu

David M. Moore
Chair, Virginia Tech Institutional Review
Board for the Protection of Human Subjects
Office of Research Compliance
2000 Kraft Drive, Suite 2000 (0497)
Blacksburg, VA 24060
Telephone: (540) 231-4991
Email: moored@vt.edu

Appendix F: IRB Approval Letter

VirginiaTech

Office of Research Compliance
Institutional Review Board
2000 Kraft Drive, Suite 2000 (0497)
Blacksburg, VA 24060
540/231-4606 Fax 540/231-0959
email irb@vt.edu
website http://www.irb.vt.edu

MEMORANDUM

DATE: February 22, 2013

TO: Eric E McCollum, Taylor Marie Ham

FROM: Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board (FWA00000572, expires May 31, 2014)

PROTOCOL TITLE: An Exploratory Study on the Use of Equine Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP) With Couples

IRB NUMBER: **13-108**

Effective February 20, 2013, the Virginia Tech Institution Review Board (IRB) Chair, David M Moore, approved the New Application request for the above-mentioned research protocol.

This approval provides permission to begin the human subject activities outlined in the IRB-approved protocol and supporting documents.

Plans to deviate from the approved protocol and/or supporting documents must be submitted to the IRB as an amendment request and approved by the IRB prior to the implementation of any changes, regardless of how minor, except where necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to the subjects. Report within 5 business days to the IRB any injuries or other unanticipated or adverse events involving risks or harms to human research subjects or others.

All investigators (listed above) are required to comply with the researcher requirements outlined at:

http://www.irb.vt.edu/pages/responsibilities.htm

(Please review responsibilities before the commencement of your research.)

PROTOCOL INFORMATION:

Approved As:	**Expedited, under 45 CFR 46.110 category(ies) 6,7**
Protocol Approval Date:	**February 20, 2013**
Protocol Expiration Date:	**February 19, 2014**
Continuing Review Due Date*:	**February 5, 2014**

*Date a Continuing Review application is due to the IRB office if human subject activities covered under this protocol, including data analysis, are to continue beyond the Protocol Expiration Date.

FEDERALLY FUNDED RESEARCH REQUIREMENTS:

Per federal regulations, 45 CFR 46.103(f), the IRB is required to compare all federally funded grant proposals/work statements to the IRB protocol(s) which cover the human research activities included in the proposal / work statement before funds are released. Note that this requirement does not apply to Exempt and Interim IRB protocols, or grants for which VT is not the primary awardee.

The table on the following page indicates whether grant proposals are related to this IRB protocol, and which of the listed proposals, if any, have been compared to this IRB protocol, if required.