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# The effects of equine therapy on the therapist

Winifred Berry Simmons

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Winifred Simmons  
The Effects of Equine Therapy on  
the Therapist

### **Abstract**

This study was undertaken to examine therapists' perspectives of the impact that working with horses through equine therapy has on their lives. The researcher conducted semi-structured, open-ended interviews with eight equine therapists who held various advanced degrees in schools of mental health including social work, counseling, and psychology, as well as at least one year of professional experience working as an equine therapist. This study explored the effects on one's personal and professional life of working with horses. The study looked to identify participants' experiences as equine therapists through their origins as equine therapists, changes that occurred in their personal lives since becoming equine therapists, the positive and negative impacts working as equine therapists had on their lives, and how working with a horse may have changed their experiences as a clinician.

The findings exposed the many benefits and few disadvantages of working as an equine therapist. The study results also revealed lifestyle changes that occurred since working as an equine therapist, the important role the horse plays in the therapeutic relationship between equine therapist and client, and the effect of the setting where equine therapy is conducted. Finally, the study revealed many similarities between participants' responses of how equine therapy affects their lives and the current research in the equine therapy field about the benefits for clients working with equine therapy.

## **The Effects of Equine Therapy on the Therapist**

A project based upon an independent investigation, submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Social Work.

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2011

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I would like to dedicate this thesis in loving memory of my dad, Matthew R. Simmons, who is an incredible inspiration to me. His curiosity about life and continued research efforts, the multiple white papers, speeches, and books he wrote, were all motivating factors in my work on this thesis.

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## **Chapter I**

### **Introduction**

Animal assisted therapy has become an increasingly popular. In particular, equine therapy is a therapeutic intervention utilized by therapists to treat clients presenting a variety of different issues. A recent New York Times article (Brody, 2011) discussed information about the growing number of therapists using animals in treatment. The article discussed how animals are being used in many more ways than solely playing the role of a pet. Brody (2011) posited that animals are now being used to help promote relaxation and provide a source of distraction to people in institutions, hospitals, and nursing homes. Brody described therapist Dr. Audrey H Fine's success in utilizing therapy animals to help children with issues such as selective mutism and sexual abuse histories express themselves. Equine therapy has also been used with returning war veterans and teenagers with behavioral issues. However, equine therapy is not limited to just the aforementioned populations; it is also becoming increasingly more common in standard therapist-client relationships.

This study examines equine therapists' perspectives of the impact that working with horses through equine therapy has on their lives. Gaining a new perspective and developing a deeper insight into an equine therapists' experience working with horses may open the opportunity for clinicians to share their experience and add to the literature base of research conducted about equine therapy. Some mental health clinicians recognize the importance of the impact of therapeutic work on therapists. The development of knowledge from the viewpoint of equine therapists will help increase general understanding of equine therapy.

The benefit of equine therapy on the client has been studied (Marx & Cumella, 2003; Tyler, 1994); however, the field of equine therapy lacks a wide base of empirical research and has not addressed the effects of working with horses on the clinicians. This study will provide a unique addition to the existing research on equine therapy as it focuses on the therapist's perspective as opposed to the client's. The literature presented in the following chapter outlines many results observed from equine therapy and the powerful impact that exists as a result of the horse and human bond. Researchers (Marx & Cumella, 2003; Tyler, 1994); have found equine-facilitated therapy to have positive results on clients including decreased depression, increases in self-esteem and internal locus of control, improvement in interpersonal communication, and relationship building.

A study conducted by Ewing et al. (2007, p.70) discussed the need for further study in the field stating, "equine-facilitated psychotherapy and learning is still in its infancy...the promising results of the pilot studies on EFP/L, together with the qualitative results from the current study, should add to the growing interest in this unique form of animal-assisted therapy." The intent of this project was to gain an understanding of the equine therapists' perspectives of their work and the effect of working as an equine therapist on their personal and professional lives. This research study is a qualitative project and the data were obtained through semi-structured interviews conducted by the researcher with practicing equine therapists. A review of pertinent literature, methodology, findings, and discussion chapter will follow, with references and appendices attached.

## **Chapter II**

### **Literature Review**

This study will provide a unique addition to the existing research on equine therapy as it focuses on the therapist's perspective as opposed to the client's. The research will focus on questions regarding the experiences of being an equine therapist, changes in the therapists' personal life since becoming an equine therapist and benefits or disadvantages of working with horses amongst others. The purpose of this research study is to yield insight into the therapist's experiences working with horses. This chapter provides a review of the literature on the therapeutic use and impact of horses and serves to provide a framework for the current study. The literature review will include an overview about the benefits of equine therapy and examine previous studies conducted in the field, the use of animals and horses in the therapeutic realm, and a brief discussion of the impact of external practices on of the professional and personal life of clinicians.

#### **Background**

The meaningful relationship that is created between the human-companion animal interactions is therapeutic for people (Marx & Cumella, 2003). Previous studies have demonstrated that therapy with animals is an effective way to treat patients dealing with mental health issues. Researchers have tested the efficacy of animal assisted therapy in treating patients with depression, anxiety, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, conduct disorder, Alzheimer's disease, dementia, autism, and other chronic mental illnesses (Marx & Cumella, 2003). Although many different animals have been used for therapeutic services, this study will focus on



therapeutic work with horses. The benefits found for clients who received therapy with horses in particular are widespread and included: self-confidence, self-efficacy, self-concept, communication, trust, perspective, anxiety reduction, decreased isolation, self acceptance, impulse modulation, assertiveness, boundaries, creative freedom, and spiritual growth (Marx & Cumella, 2003). Equine therapy may also benefit the therapist by evoking situations that are useful in the client-therapist working relationship; a few of these key aspects of the therapeutic impact of equine therapy are mirroring, empathy, compassion, and mutual trust (Marx & Cumella, 2003).

The field of equine therapy encompasses a variety of different interventions. These terms fall under the umbrella of the equine-facilitated mental health and educational services (EFMH/ES) and include equine-facilitated psychotherapy (EFP), equine-assisted psychotherapy (EAP), equine-facilitated learning (EFL), and many more (Hallberg, 2008). There are different organizations that regulate programs and license therapists in the profession of equine therapy. NARHA is the North American Riding for the Handicapped Association and EAGALA is the Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association; both are nationally recognized and accreditation programs. The NARHA certified centers cater to individuals with physical and speech needs such as mental retardation, multiple sclerosis, autism, amputations, amongst others (Tyler, 1994). On the other hand, EAGALA focuses on improving mental health. Equine assisted psychotherapy has been described by EAGALA as a “collaborative effort between a licensed therapist and a horse professional working with the clients and horses to address treatment goals” (EAGALA, 2010, para.1). The North American Riding for the Handicapped Association (NARHA, 2001, “Equine-Facilitated Psychotherapy and Equine-Facilitated Learning,” para. 4) defined equine-facilitated psychotherapy, stating it

provides clinical assessment and treatment of mental health needs through equine assisted activities. [Equine-Facilitated Psychotherapy] denotes an established therapeutic relationship with clearly established treatment goals and objectives developed by the client and his or her therapist. The therapist must be an appropriately credentialed mental health professional to legally practice psychotherapy.

Equine-facilitated psychotherapy is goal oriented, designed to meet the client's needs, and can be conducted in individual, group, or family sessions. The relationship between the horse and a client is referred to as a partnership by NARHA (2001) and is seen as an alternative option to traditional mental health services. The EFP model considers the emotional and cognitive aspects of working with the whole person and values a multi-dimensional approach. Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association, standards require that the professionals uphold the EAGALA code of ethics and that "a licensed mental health professional and equine specialist facilitate as a team in all sessions, all work with horses is done on the ground (no riding), the philosophy is solution-focused – allowing clients to discover the best solutions for themselves" (EAGALA, 2009-2010, "Media," para. 4).

Equine therapy can be conducted in a number of ways and, depending on the style of the clinician, it is not always facilitated the same way; however, equine therapy has been found to be effective for a wide range of clients. There are many shared benefits of NAHRA or EAGALA programs such as an emphasis on the client's confidence, improvement of self-esteem, and a sense of control and empowerment (Tyler, 1994). Equine therapy sessions do not have to follow a particular structure and can be used for different lengths of time and as the clinician or client sees necessary in the course of treatment.

### **Evidence of the Benefits of Equine Therapy**

Researchers have found many benefits to clients involved in equine therapy. Traditional therapy has been studied for many years, yet equine therapy is a relatively newer therapeutic

modality that provides an alternative to the traditional office setting. The therapist's use of an animal can stimulate situations in the therapeutic realm that invite teaching moments and give the therapist an opportunity to "demonstrate to the client appropriate interactions and responses to behaviors" (Fine, 2000, p.186) and also to use the animal as a role model. Christian (2005) stated a client's emotions that may have been hidden in an office environment may emerge through equine therapy with a new component, such as a horse, added to the therapeutic relationship. Animals are an added element to the therapeutic relationship that exists between therapist and client and offer a unique element to the relationship. Tyler (1994) stated that equine therapy, using horses as an approach to therapy should be a supplement to conventional psychotherapy and is valuable for clients with many different backgrounds including age, sex, gender, race and ethnicity, diagnosis, etc. The research of Fine, Christian, and Tyler revealed that equine therapy may be beneficial for a wide range of clientele and appeared to be a unique alternative to individual talk therapy.

Equine therapy provides an opportunity for a horse and an exercise to be used as a metaphor to mirror real life situations or examples of issues the client may be facing. For example, a client participated in an exercise where buckets and a horse were used to represent different aspects in her life (Christian, 2003). The objective was to help the client learn new ways of coping with and overcome the disorder she was facing (Christian, 2003). In this scenario, the client was able to metaphorically unload different problem areas into the buckets and work through them with her therapist and the horse by identifying elements of the eating disorder, specific people, experiences in life, the relationship with the disease, and obstacles she may encounter. Additionally, this type of less conventional therapy, equine therapy, has been described as a good alternative to traditional therapy because "work with horses breaks through

the client's defensive barriers and requires the client to develop fresh insights and new perspectives from old relationship and behavioral patterns" (Tyler, 1994, p.139). Using an animal or a horse in the therapeutic relationship brings elements that may not be present in a person-person therapy relationship. The opportunity for a therapist to observe and watch his or her client in hands-on interactions with an animal allows the therapist to see the client in a different light (Fine, 2000). These opportunities help the client and therapist work towards healing and change and may not occur in the same way in a typical client-therapist setting. The added being, the horse, in the therapist-client dyad provides an element that would not exist if the horse partners were not present. These studies have demonstrated that the element of an animal in a therapeutic relationship, or working alliance between client and therapist, increases the presence of latent material that may not present itself in the same way in an office setting.

Several studies (Arkow, 1987; Fine, 2000; Tyler, 1994) showed the efficacy of equine therapy with clients affected by a range of disorders. Tyler (1994) presented cases demonstrating that equine therapy is beneficial for clients with oppositional defiant disorder, clients lacking control in their lives, trauma/abuse victims, depressed or stressed clients, and inner-city youth. Utilizing equine therapy with a client with oppositional defiant disorder was successful because the attention of the client was diverted to focus on the horse, and therefore the client's defensive behaviors decreased. In the case of a client with a history of childhood abuse, the presence of a horse as a third object in the therapeutic alliance assisted the client in feeling empowered and relaxed, which enabled her to disclose struggles with multiple personality disorder to her therapist. Tyler (1994) posited that the combination of increased trust and diminished anxiety enabled the client to share this information with the therapist.

Another advantage people gain from horses in the therapeutic relationship is from the physical touch and feel of a horse. Fine (2000) observed that animals bring a sense of security and warmth into the environment. Touching an animal can be beneficial because the feeling can distract a client's attention and the animal may provide feelings of acceptance, comfort and a more relaxed state (Arkow, 1987). In traditional therapy, trauma victims may be triggered by words or phrases into dissociative states; however, using horses as a therapeutic tool presents a positive alternative. In an equine therapy situation, a client may react to a variety of stimuli including sight, sound, smell, physical touch, and temperature, all of which encourage the client be present while interacting with the horse (Tyler, 1994). The feelings or reactions that one experiences as a response to one of the human senses can provide a space for dialogue with which the client and therapist can work. Research conducted by Tyler (1994) posited in equine assisted psychotherapy, a client must remain in control and pay attention. An example is of this is illustrated through a client suffering from anger issues and difficulty relaxing who found that the movement of a horse and the physical environment of nature helped calm her. The client exhibited both positive behavioral changes and adapted her rapid speech to a more appropriate tone which matched the pace of the horse (Tyler, 1994). This example demonstrated that the physical movement of the horse helped produce a change in the client's physical presentation. Additionally, physical, emotional, and mental changes can be observed from interactions involving equine therapy. This research presented above provides results of different therapeutic effects and outcomes of using animals and horses.

Much of the existing research on equine therapy is qualitative. In a study completed by Ewing, MacDonald, Taylor, and Bowers (2007), the researchers referenced previous studies that found equine-facilitated therapy programs resulted in decreased depression, and increases in self-

esteem and internal locus of control. They also cited a qualitative study demonstrating improvement in interpersonal communication, relationship building as a response to a vaulting program and decreases in anger as results of a five-day therapeutic riding program.

The study conducted by Ewing et al. (2007) reported that quantitative results did not indicate favorable outcomes whereas the qualitative data did. Ewing et al. (2007) selected participants between the ages of ten and thirteen from a special purpose day school. The participants presented with severe emotional or learning impairments. The researchers hypothesized that participants would increase their “self-worth, self-esteem, interpersonal empathy, and internal locus of control...and decreased feelings of depression and loneliness” as a result of “Horse Power,” nine-weeks of sessions of an equine-facilitated program (Ewing et al., 2007, p.61). Participants in the study were both male and female, from various ethnic backgrounds, and most were from poor familial environments and low socioeconomic conditions. There were 28 participants in this study. The participants completed pre and post tests to evaluate the effectiveness of the program including the “Self-Perception Profile for Children” measuring self esteem, “The Empathy Questionnaire,” “The Locus of Control Scale,” “The Children’s Depression Inventory,” [and] “The Children’s Loneliness Questionnaire” producing quantitative results to examine peer relations. Researchers reported no statistically significant differences of the quantitative areas tested; however, the qualitative findings were highly supportive of the program. One staff member involved in the equine therapy program (Ewing et al., 2007, p.67) described a client’s success stating the client

was paired with a female horse...[and] began to discuss issues of fatherhood in regards to her horse...she was able to relate so many aspects of her own life to [the horse’s] life...[she] was able to discuss her fears and anxieties. She opened up. She was able to smile again.

This client was diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and had a history of abuse and mental illness in the family. Another instructor noted progress of a client progress who was struggling with behavioral disorder and an educational mental handicap stating, the client “related well to animals and showed a natural rapport with her horse...the discipline and regimen of Horse Power helped ‘FC’ in controlling her own behavior” and went on further to state that the client “has grown from an animal-like, wild child to an adolescent who can successfully function in a mainstreamed classroom” (Ewing et al., 2007, p.67). The researchers from the Ewing study recommended additional research for evidence-based findings of equine therapy.

The researchers’ use of qualitative data allows an opportunity for an expansion of information beyond yes or no results through open-ended responses. The purpose of the program by Ewing et al. (2007) was to teach life skills including social and individual skills to children through the use of horses and a team consisting of therapists and other staff members. The personnel responsible for administering the program relayed success stories through individual case examples, citing a child suffering from post traumatic stress disorder developing an ability to discuss her emotions and smile, a child with a behavioral disorder and educational mental health handicap showing improvements in personal hygiene, confidence, and controlled behavior, as well as other stories of personal development and growth. Additionally, the qualitative results showed that a child with a behavioral disorder gained better social skills and developed a better self-esteem through the program, and a child with ADHD improved his ability to trust others (Ewing et al., 2007). Personal accounts and narratives of the people interacting with the clients demonstrated positive gains, while the quantitative data did not provide the results the study was aiming to prove.

Quantitative research can be limiting because, by design, they lack the ability to provide context to support their results. Ewing et al. (2007) suggested many different reasons why their equine therapy program may not have shown effective quantitative results including disturbances in the home lives of the participants causing a lack of control in the children's lives, the termination of the program, the severe disorders affecting the children, and the children's acclimation to psychological testing (Ewing et al., 2007). This case study presented a prime example as to why qualitative research may yield additional benefits over a strictly quantitative study. Due to the information gathered through the staff interacting with the children, the qualitative data showed that individual experiences may provide results not found in quantitative data.

### **Added Benefits of an Animal, Advantages of a Horse**

Therapists working with animals experience distinct differences from therapists who work with clients on their own. Arkow (1987) stated companion animals can decrease the initial shock of working with a therapist, while Fine (2000) added that animals can minimize the potentially stressful beginning stage of working with a therapist and help in rapport building as animals are an adjunct to the clinician. In this way, animals invite dialogue that may not exist without their presence (Fine, 2000). However, not only the client is affected by working with an animal, the therapist may also be affected by the presence of an animal.

There are many advantages of human-animal interaction and the bond that is shared between a person and an animal. Studies have demonstrated the positive effects animals have on human health. For one, animals are a means to promote people to interact with nature and, Arkow (1987) suggests, to communicate with nature. In addition, studies have shown that animals can improve a person's quality of life and that contact with animals is healthy (Wilson &



Turner, 1998). Horses are often kept on land with space for a barn and an area for the horses to be ridden. The outdoor environment where equine therapy takes place is another component that makes equine therapy different from traditional therapy for both the clinician and the client. Being in nature aids people to feel more connected to the natural world and experience a primitive relationship with their surroundings (Arkow, 1987).

Animals affect the lives of everyone in contact with the animal: the mental health provider and the client. In looking at the loving bond of companion animals and helping professionals, Arkow (1987) discusses the importance the touch of an animal has on a human, stating touch is the earliest human functional sense learned by infants and Fine (2000) reports that people are comforted by touching animals.

Therapists may experience a range of social, emotional, and physical positive and/or negative effects from working with animals. More importantly, although many animals have been proven to be effective as a therapeutic source, horses have special characteristics that set them apart. Christian (2003) compares the size and the power of a horse to the weight that a client's disorder can carry in his or her life. Ewing et al. (2007) state that a horse's stature in comparison to a child's body solicits respect, and suggest the feeling of lack of respect is a problem that affects many at-risk children.

Animals are beneficial for companionship in a variety of settings and for different types of people. Early animal therapy programs began through humane society volunteers bringing dogs and cats to residential facilities to share pet interaction with the people living in institutions (Wilson & Turner, 1998). Companionship is provided in a variety of settings: hospitals, schools, residential treatment centers, agencies utilizing animal-assisted therapy programs, and more. Horses are used for multiple therapeutic purposes and in different ways: learning, ground work,

riding, vaulting, etc., but the common theme in the use of horses to assist clients is to improve their quality of life (Wilson & Turner, 1998). Arkow (1987) states pets can be a source of pride and boosts one's self esteem. Further, he states that animals provide an important nurturing aspect to humans as animals are dependent on their caregivers.

A few studies (Fine, 2000; Arkow, 1987) have looked at the physiological effects on humans interacting with animals. Dogs have been found to show positive effects on a person's cardiovascular health due to an increase in physical activity and short term benefits such as decreased blood pressure and decreases in depression have also been tested (Fine, 2000). The health benefits of animal interaction is also examined by Akrow (1987) who posited that blood pressure is lowered when a person touches an animal that one has bonded with, and animals increase a person's exercise. The research suggests health is improved in certain ways by certain animals, however it is hard to suggest that variables and factors are controlled and that may impact these results. Although direct correlations to horses and people may have not been conducted, research with other animals shows positive benefits to interacting with animals.

### **Disadvantages of Equine Therapy**

Equine therapy is an unconventional and unique approach and is not for everyone. Disadvantages of equine assisted therapy are that it is both expensive, creating a financial burden, (Fine, 2000) and time consuming (Tyler, 1994). Others suggest the amount of care required for an animal may compete with other demands, or take away from human-human relationship time (Fine, 2000; Akrow, 1987). Additionally, the study of an equine-facilitated learning program conducted by Ewing, MacDonald, Taylor and Bowers (2007) did not show increases in the quantitative data of self esteem, empathy, locus of control, or decreases in depression. Another downfall to this specific type of therapy is that the location where the

therapy takes place may not always be convenient to the client; location may also limit some clients from utilizing equine therapy due to financial costs involved with this modality. However, some clients may view the location of the therapy as a benefit because the interaction with horses takes place in the natural environment (Ewing et al., 2007).

### **Practices that Benefit/Effect Clinicians**

Many clinicians are taught that a deeper understanding of oneself adds to the effectiveness of a therapist and that in the world of psychotherapy, introspection and self-awareness are important. Various extracurricular activities are available to individuals who are looking to enhance their self-awareness. One common activity is the practice of yoga. Additionally, physical activities such as horseback riding often provide relief from the stresses of daily life and help positively impact an individual's life. These hobbies or extracurricular activities have the ability to impact a person's overall wellbeing, including his or her personal and professional life. Outlets such as these provide balance in one's life, as they are often used as means of stress relief or personal enjoyment. Clinicians in the field of mental health are attentive to the importance of self care practices and having a balance in life in order to achieve the most favorable level of self regulation (Valente & Marotta, 2005).

Valente and Marotta (2005) conducted a study that examined therapists' perspective on the impact yoga practice had on their personal and professional lives. Acknowledging the need for balance relates to the prevention of burnout, or caring exhaustion. Valente and Marotta suggested an overly busy schedule and too much stress lead to physical and mental health problems; however, having a true sense of self-awareness allows therapists to know how to maintain a balanced life. In the Valente and Marotta study, balance is referred to as a life of health consumption and a consciousness of healthy and unhealthy gratification. Spirituality,

meditation, and yoga are practices used to enhance a therapists' life and, in turn, positively affect their clients.

Valente and Marotta (2005) provide research illuminating yoga's effects on physical and psychological health and the treatment of abnormal psychopathology. Their study utilized qualitative interviews among six psychotherapists, all Caucasian: five women and one male, to explore ways yoga influences the personal and professional lives of the therapists. The researchers categorized the results into four common themes including internal/self-awareness, balance, acceptance of self and others, and yoga as a way of life. Results from the participants indicated that balance in their personal lives affected their roles as therapists, helping them to be more effective and competent (Valente & Marotta, 2005). This study provides significant and interesting information about implications for burnout prevention and development of self; however, the results are limited due to the small sample size.

Another study examined the effects of psychotherapeutic practice upon psychotherapists. In his research, Farber (1983), focused on the effects of the therapists' themselves and the impact conducting therapy had on their lives, particularly their behavior. Farber presented research in the literature review from previous studies with a similar focus whose results found growth in areas including professional commitment, greater self-insight, more mature social relationships, increased self-assurance and humility, and more. The study sampled 60 psychotherapists through two interviews, each one hour long, resulting in data from open and closed ended questions. Farber's research provides a similar focus to this present study, with the focus of each being on the effects of a particular practice on the practitioner. Farber's study indicated that "as a consequence of their practice, therapists become increasingly psychological-minded, self-aware, and self assure" (Farber, 1983, p.174). The study further described that, "These changes, it was

noted, are all in a positive direction and are consonant with changes therapists often seek to promote in patients (Farber, 1983, p.174).

### **Summary**

The present study seeks to explore the benefits therapists gain from working with horses while utilizing the horse for the therapeutic treatment of clients. The research proposed in this study poses a similar purpose to the study conducted by Valente and Marotta (2005) which explored the impact of yoga on the professional and personal life of the psychotherapist. The literature review has outlined the benefits of using an animal in the therapeutic alliance and the unique qualities of horses and equine therapy; however, a gap in the literature exists regarding information about the benefits horses play on a therapist's life.

## **Chapter III**

### **Methodology**

#### **Research Design**

The purpose of this study was to examine equine therapists' perspectives on the impact that working with horses through equine therapy has on their lives. The research intent was to gain knowledge about the experiences of being an equine therapist, changes in the therapists' personal life since becoming an equine therapist, and benefits or disadvantages of working with horses. The research questions focused on gaining knowledge from individual equine therapists through their unique perspectives about their work with horses. The researcher chose to design a qualitative study to be able to gain in-depth response material and data from the participants. Exploratory studies allow the researcher to gain information about first hand experiences. As described by Yorke et al. (2008),

In exploratory studies, the quality of the study is not determined by the size or randomness of the sample, as the research goal is not to generalize but rather to go into-depth with a small number of people. Thus qualitative research seeks to compose a group of people who have something in common, and to include individuals who are information-rich. (Yorke et al., 2008, p19.)

The researcher received approval from the Smith College Human Subjects Review (see Appendix A) and then began to recruit participants for the qualitative interviews.

#### **Recruitment**

During the recruitment process, a brief recruitment email was sent (see Appendix B) to various equine therapists, found from Google searches of equine therapists and names listed on EAGALA, NAHARA and other equine therapists list serves, describing the study, participation,

and outlying basic information in the informed consent letter. The recruitment email explained the general purpose, requirements and expectations of participants. After recruiting a large sample of potential participants, the researcher found positive responses were limited. A few different reasons for not participating in the study were given by potential participants including not able to respond due to time constraints and/or the potential participant did not meet the qualifications of the study. Many of the participants who were contacted by email did not respond to the request for an interview. The individuals who responded with an interest in participating were then sent an informed consent letter (see Appendix C) and contacted further to schedule a time for the interview. Participants agreed to sign the informed consent form prior to the interview.

### **Sample**

Participants in the study were selected through a purposive and a snowball sampling method. The participants were required to have certain characteristics or qualifications in order to meet the criteria for participating in the study. These characteristics included: at least one year of work as an equine therapist and a Masters degree from a mental health field. Initially, participant criteria included therapists with a licensed degree from their Masters' degree program; however, based on the recommendation of the Human Subjects Review committee, this requirement was removed from the criteria and was changed to include therapists without a license in their particular field. Participants were presumed to be in good physical health, had to read and speak English, and not be considered vulnerable for the purposes of participating in the research study. The desired sample size was between twelve and fifteen participants.

Obtaining a large sample was more difficult than anticipated. The participants who composed the study were recruited under the criteria listed above and were contacted as potential

participants for an interview because of their locations in the geographic Southwestern United States. When the number of responses received by the researcher appeared to be low in comparison to the number of potential people contacted, the researcher decided to broaden the criteria. This meant that a revision to the Human Subjects Review application and the researcher expanded the criteria to open the study to equine therapists all over the United States.

Unfortunately, this revision did not yield much more interest in participating in the study and only two additional equine therapists responded out of a large sample of equine therapists who were contacted for a requested interview. Given the small sample size of participants willing to participate in the study, it was not possible to ensure diversity among participants in terms of gender, age, and race/ethnicity.

This study was composed of 8 participants, all of whom were women. All of the participants identified as Anglo/white, white/non-Hispanic, or Caucasian. The participants ranged in age from 41-67 years old. The participants' educational backgrounds varied including four participants with a Masters in Social Work, two holding a Masters in Counseling, and other degrees included a Masters in Vocational Counseling and a Masters in Psychology. The participants' experiences with practicing equine therapy ranged from 1 ½ years to 10 years. The participants held a number of different licenses including two Licensed Clinical Social Workers, two Licensed Social Workers, three Licensed Professional Counselors, a Marriage and Family Therapist license, a Licensed Substance Abuse Counselor and a Licensed Addictions Counselor. Furthermore, the participants' number of years as a psychotherapist ranged from a 1 ½ to 30 years.



## **Data Collection**

The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with equine therapists using open-ended questions in order to gain understanding into the distinct lives of each therapist. Using flexible, semi-structured, and qualitative methods, the researcher hoped to generate descriptive responses from the therapists. The design of the study aided in the breadth of information gained and would add to the little research previously conducted about equine therapists in the field of equine therapy.

Due to the geographic location of the participants, all interviews were conducted over the phone and all interviews were recorded on a digital recorder. Interviews lasted approximately twenty to thirty minutes. The participants seemed eager and willing to share their backgrounds, experience and perspectives about the equine therapy field and its impact on their individual lives. Pre-structured and approved demographic questions and interview guide (see Appendix D) were asked as part of the measurement instrument during the interviews. These questions included general demographic and background questions and opened ended personal and therapeutic content questions.

## **Data Analysis**

The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed into narrative documents in order to ensure accuracy in data collection. The transcriptions were coded and analyzed at a later date through a content analysis method. Data were analyzed for reemerging themes found among participants' responses as well as unique findings that were not common responses of participants interviewed. Once themes were identified, the participants' responses were organized around their content, highlighting the most relevant and descriptive data. The study

allowed for the researcher to ask follow up questions to the participants' responses and gave the participants and opportunity to describe examples from their work.

## **Chapter IV**

### **Findings**

The major findings of the study were identified from content analysis and have been set apart through themes found from reoccurring or distinct concepts within the collected data. Findings include therapists' discussion of their origins as an equine therapist and how they came to be involved with this work with many describing an early experience with horses as a child leading to their interest in the field. Data also revealed many positive changes observed in participants' lifestyle after becoming an equine therapist. Participants indicated benefits of working with horses include the environment where equine therapy takes place and the immediacy of results of therapeutic content through working with a horse. Additionally, much of the data supported research findings about limitations observed within the field of equine therapy, such as increased cost and travel time. The findings also describe how working with horses has affected the clinician's role as a therapist. The following findings were a result of interviews with equine therapists who voluntarily selected to participate in this research study. The participants were asked demographic questions and open-ended questions about their personal experience as an equine therapist.

#### **Origins as an Equine Therapist**

The following section describes the clinician's perspective of their personal experience as an equine therapist and outlines the majority of the findings. The section also discusses the important role the horse may play in the therapist's life; the participants often viewed their horse as a therapist.

## **Longtime Feelings and Horse's Role as a Therapist**

The various participants all reported an early connection to horses in their individual lives. Throughout the interviews, many participants described their underlying relationship with horses and how horses had an involvement in their life from a very early age. Several of the participants had previous positive experiences with horses prior to making equine therapy their career. For many, these positive experiences happened at an early age and contributed to their love for horses they carried into their adult lives. Combined with a natural love for horses, participants expressed a therapeutic component to the human-horse relationship was expressed. One participant described her involvement with horses throughout her life stating,

horses have always been a part of my life and they've always been my passion in life. They were always my personal outlet. The horse that I grew up with, he came into my life when I was 14 and he was my best friend. He was a therapist many times, he was a parent, he was my buddy, he always knew what was going on with me, and that was always my space with him. So that was my personal therapy.

Another participant described her similar experience with horses throughout her lifetime and the powerful connection created with the horse as a therapeutic being for her commenting, "I've always loved horses since I've had horses since I was five years old, and always loved them, they always been therapeutic for me." A therapist can often be someone whom a person confides in to release their stress and use as a place to vent their issues or frustrations. One participant noted her horse's role in acting as her therapist stating,

Its always been therapy for me, so I mean it takes a lot. It helps with me having to see another therapist, you know, to be able to vent some of the things as a therapist that I hear, because the horses now become that for me, where it's not as bad professionally, where, you know, I'm not carrying all that stress.

Other participants described how they perceived that a horse allowed them to experience personal growth, which is also a therapeutic role. However, unique to the majority of the

findings, as a child, one participant described a traumatic experience with a horse as a child that led her to develop a negative perception towards horses and a fear of horses.

I had been in a pretty traumatic accident with a horse when I was a kid and I was terrified of horses, and had tried to overcome that when I was younger, and done a lot of riding to overcome fear, and finally decided the way to overcome the fear is to don't go near horses. And after 30 years, I didn't go near horses...

This negative encounter described by a participant resulted in an idiosyncratic finding. This participant further described her recovery from this trauma through therapeutic work with a horse. She described a powerful healing intervention with a professional with horse experience, which resulted in her transformational connection with horses because they had been a part of her experience “work[ing] through the trauma”. None of the other participants described any previous experience with animal-assisted therapy prior to becoming an equine therapist.

### **Career Match**

The study revealed that many participants found working as an equine therapist to be a professional and career match due to a prior interest in horses and a long familiarity with horses. Although the participants came upon the profession in a number of different ways, they appear to have found a connection with being an equine therapist. One participant noted how her own positive healing experience led her to see the opportunities that exist for her clients to experience this same healing nature. Another participant described the positive career fit stating, “I realized basically what I was supposed to be. That here was a way for me to combine my passion for horses with my love of helping people in their healing process.” Other participants commented similarly. A participant noted her connection with the profession stating,

Oh my gosh! That's just like somebody took all the components of me and wrapped it up in a ball and look, here's the perfect job for you. And so that's, you know, I like therapy, I like working with horses and being outdoors. I like the interpersonal interactions, and that's why I chose it.

Although for many it seemed to be a very good match and a natural fit due to their interest in horses, for others the career choice happened very differently. Some of the participants discovered equine therapy through an introduction to the field from a colleague or other professional resource. These therapists appeared to enter the career on a happenstance or coincidental occurrence. One participant described a woman walking up to her and asking her if she was interested in the field, which led to her eventual discovery for this work as part of her career. Other participants described the opportunity for change after practicing psychotherapy in an office for many years as a leading factor persuading them to choose this career.

### **Lifestyle Changes**

A few of the participants described that working with horses has helped them become more relaxed. One participant described this change as resulting in a “sense of peace”. One particular participant discussed that working with horses have allowed her senses to be turned on, and that she has developed a level of “centeredness” and her intuitive level has become much stronger.

An introspective focus was also observed as the participants felt they became more in tune with their true selves and were more present with their own biopsychosocial needs. These changes were described as a greater awareness and consciousness as an individual, taking care of and knowing oneself better, and focusing and working more on myself. One participant explained, “...the horse is trying to tell me what will work. How I can be tuned in enough to learn what the horse is trying to teach me. It is really heightening my awareness of myself and how I am in the world.” Participants described other positive results were described as receiving more enjoyment from their work, continual learning, being empowered, having an improved self confidence, and experiencing more clear boundaries.

The findings show that equine therapy has an all-encompassing affect on the participant's lives: positive changes were noted in their physical, emotional, spiritual, and psychological well being. A participant described her newfound passion as being "completely obsessed" with horses. Another participant described changes in her personal life as a result of work with horses as an equine therapist in a very vibrant way stating, "Everything. No, seriously. My husband and I joke about our lives are divided into two periods; BH and AH, before horses and after horses....I mean my whole professional life has changed."

Some of the data revealed life changes that can be viewed as neutral or non-positive changes. A participant discussed that because of working in equine therapy her life is much busier and she now asks for help from others more. The participant described this change as a shift from her previous work experience practicing individual therapy in an office setting. The participant attributed travel, conducting workshops, and working in conjunction with an equine specialist to this difference. The participant didn't describe these changes as positive or negative; they were simply the result of new working conditions. These data are unique to the majority of the largely positive changes observed in participants' personal life.

### **Benefits**

While the majority of participants experienced a positive life change after becoming an equine therapist, they also spoke about other benefits resulting from this question. This section details participant perspective about the unique benefits of equine therapy for clients. The data is presented in the following sub-sections: setting, quick results, and various other findings.

### **Setting**

The interviews showed that working as an equine therapist provided a unique setting for a therapist to work with clients. This space was described by one participant as a healing space.

Working in this environment evoked a different experience from traditional therapy in an office setting. One participant described working outside on an office as less intimidating in that it allows the clients to be more open and show their true selves. Another confirmed this view stating,

I know a lot of clients are very uncomfortable sitting in an office; especially a small cramped one with someone in their face. But here's a stranger asking them how they feel about something. And so to be outside in a really open space and surrounded by nature and have this magnificent being next to you who's you know, really just wants to be in a relationship with you, and help you and support you, is profound.

This theme was commonly discussed. A different participant expressed the unique therapeutic benefits that can occur with equine therapy in contrast to traditional therapy stating,

the things that happen in the arena are just amazing as far as therapeutically goes...it's the awareness that happens is awesome, and to be a part of that... because it brings out things we don't traditionally think about. When we're in an office setting...we're sitting there and were just counseling with somebody. It just brings out so much more.

A participant described the benefits of working in an equine therapy setting as working from a different angle, which can construct a difference in the working relationship between the therapist and client. Interviews reflect the unique benefits that equine therapy offers as an adjunct experience to traditional therapy or as an alternative form of therapy that may yield different results from a therapeutic relationship in an office setting.

### **Quick Results**

In discussing the way the client benefits from working with an equine therapist and a horse, participants discussed the speed of seeing results. A number of participants reported issues coming to the surface faster through their work with horses. This was also described by another participant as quick, self-motivated change. She stated,

...in this modality a client doesn't have to go to therapy for years to work through what's coming up for them. No matter what the presenting issue is, even if it's something from



way back that they didn't realize that suddenly surfaces, there a space for them to work through it, and they do it in a really complete and holistic way, but at the same time, it happens a lot faster that it would in a traditional setting.

Reiterating this same idea, participants noted that working with horses through equine therapy aided in bringing issues to light more efficiently. One participant acknowledged this by commenting:

They come to their issues a lot quicker and they get an opportunity to, you know, they do identify patterns and the patterns can be identified faster, and then they have options trying different things and applying that to their personal life...in the arena with the horses within a safe, secure place.

One participant gave a very profound example of how a horse can contribute to bringing therapeutic material to the surface for the client and therapist that may not have come up in the same way in traditional therapy. The participant described she was working with a child through equine therapy. The child came to the barn very afraid of horses. This client was especially frightened by one horse in particular who was described as a very gentle but playful big horse with dark hair. In an activity designed to have clients identify their current emotions and feelings, clients were to move horses into different squares, and while doing this activity, this child disclosed feelings of fear and anger. Talking about these feelings that had surfaced led the client to recount to a history of sexual abuse by his stepfather with similar feature traits, big with dark hair, as the horse. The participant stated,

so every time that horse would approach him, then he felt like it was his stepfather coming at him. And in the therapeutic sessions when we were taking, he never even eluded to anything like that...he could have probably gotten to it eventually, but it was the horse that was the facilitator that help him to be able to tell me about it.

### **Additional Benefits**

Data from the participants also provided a variety of other findings that can be categorized under the theme of benefits to the clients; however the data is parsimonious and can

stand alone. One participant described the benefit of working with horses for clients is that it is an emotionally corrective experience. Another participant described situations of clients receiving emotional and mental health gains from working with horses stating,

I've had kids that come out to the arena that are petrified of horses...they feel like the horse is so big and it's so overwhelming that they actually have to approach it. It helps build confidence, it helps build social awareness, it helps build self-awareness. I mean it has been amazing the turnaround that I've seen in kids that were working with the horses that we have.

Other participants described how equine therapy provided a setting in which the horse can provoke situations that become teaching moments and allow clients to apply metaphors to their lives using horses as their instrument. This idea of clients using horses to express and depict other issues in their lives is supported by the following example:

[The client] was able to take attributes of the different horses and link them into characteristics of her family members, and actually worked through some pretty serious childhood big dysfunctional experiences. But that's what the cool thing about the horses is, is they are just themselves and they all have their own personalities and different clients see different things in them.

Benefits to the client from working with horses are also illustrated through an increased development of insight. This is portrayed by one participant through her description of horses special ability that

...allows that person to tap into themselves on a profoundly deep level and make connections to what is being stored inside of them, and be able to look at it in a way that's not ripping the lid off a major information for them that they've been holding onto for a long time, and it just comes in this very safe, beautiful way. The horses just really hold the space and they're right there with them throughout the process.

One participant described how working in an environment with horses encourages a client to be "more relaxed and deal with things that might have been heavier problems in a lighter way".

## **Limitations of Equine Therapy**

Many of the participants found financial difficulties as a major burden of working with horses, citing the costs of working as an equine therapist as a prohibitive factor. One participant described the multifaceted financial burden that comes from working with horses; this includes the work environment and care and up-keep of the horses, which are very expensive animals. Another participant described limitations on the allotted time for clients to spend with horses due to funding issues and the cost to finance the program. Other issues around funding were attributed to the lack of insurance coverage for private equine therapy work. Furthermore, one participant attributed the current economy and the high price of gas as an additional financial burden. Repeatedly, the location of their practice was discussed as an issue that affects cost and was described as a disadvantage to the field. One participant described her location as “out in the country” and another stated that she is an hour north of a large metropolitan city, which is a deterrent for some clients who are not willing to drive that distance. A different participant stated that the location of her practice was inconvenient for clients which resulted in an inconsistent client base. However, one participant stated that although this is a very expensive modality, and regardless of not making a significant profit from her work as an equine therapist, the experience is “worth it and is very effective.”

Participants’ expressed feelings about the lack of recognition of the impact of equine therapy. One participant explained that she has found other professionals in the therapeutic community express disbelief regarding the effectiveness of equine therapy. Another participant described finding others who view equine therapy as only an adjunct therapy rather than a “viable primary therapy modality”. In contrast, a participant described her training modality, EAGALA, as a limitation. Through the EAGALA model training, the equine therapist works in

conjunction with an equine specialist and this participant described difficulty working in a partnership with another. Conversely, this participant also acknowledged the importance of having the equine specialist in the relationship stating,

I think there's a tremendous amount of value in [the equine specialist]. I really understand why the paring happens, but I'm not the only person that I know who really struggles with that relationship. I think in some ways, it's such an intimate relationship to do co-therapy with someone, and so to do co-therapy with someone who's not a real therapist is a real struggle. And I think that the horse specialists often don't know quite what their role should be because there's a limited amount for them to do as the horse specialist. They have some ability to look at what's going on with the horses and recognize things that I wouldn't see, because they know the horses better than I do.

Some participants reported other findings, which differ from the majority but also add to the perceptions of disadvantages of working in the equine therapy field. One participant stated that the work was very time consuming under the best of conditions, and the work came to a stop all together during bad weather creating economic difficulties. Yet, another participant described that risk of injuries is a disadvantage when working with children in a group equine therapy setting. She described that although children are always supervised, working with horses can present a dangerous situation when a horse may act out and scare a child or possibly step on a person's foot.

### **Horses Effect on the Therapists' Role**

The various participants all reported a change in their roles as therapists working in the equine therapy model. Many participants noted how the horses altered the traditional client/therapist relationship because the horse is an active and integral part of the therapy. One participant noted that she tends to listen more and take a non-direct approach. The horse helps remove the therapist as the one in charge and instead, the client and the horse can take more leadership. Her role also changed because the therapist felt that the presence of a horse released

pressure off of the therapist to reveal big insights and the client/therapist dichotomy became more of an equilibrium. This role change was also described as the therapist becoming a mediator between the client and the horse. One participant described that the horse acts as a co-therapist; while another participant described that the horse reduces the therapist's "ego importance." A third participant reiterated this effect of the horse's dominant presence stating, "I think pretty uniformly I can say that every time I'm in a session between the horses and people...I really see the horses as the therapist, and I'm sort of a co-facilitator, but they're really the show."

Participants felt that they are more aware of their actions in an equine therapy setting than they were prior to working with horses. One participant described this change stating, "one of the biggest eye openers to me is to remain that non-biased, non judgmental person and try to mirror what the horse is doing." Others described that the horses help give the therapists clues about what issues are arising for the client and help pick up on content or feelings they may have not noticed. A participant noted horses' effect on her role as a therapist stating,

It's helping me to be a better therapist in the individual practice as well, because I'm just more aware of nonverbal communication...it's more experiential and used in a little bit different methods, and I think I listen more and not as quick to give solutions or that where... in being a new therapist...I think you kind of tend to do that a little bit more too. But I think it's helped me to let it be there for my clients' experience a lot more.

For some, horses have provided the opportunity for a new perspective. Instead of focusing on her thoughts or feelings, the participant described that the horses have helped her remain centered on the client and be more balanced and neutral. Participants also described that working with horses helped them to practice with a more subjective view of the client's experience. One participant discussed that she has always considered herself an existential therapist; however, working with

horses has been a “heart opening experience.” A different participant expressed similar sentiment stating,

I’ve noticed that my practice, the work has a much deeper approach to it if you will because in traditional therapy, pretty much you’re mostly accessing the cognitive part of the client’s self. And just throughout this modality, what I see is a deeper more integrated holistic healing that occurs because it’s pulling in their spiritual self, their emotional self, and their physical self as well...I see and I’ve learned just a more expansive way of a person’s feelings and their processes.

Another participant echoed this opinion that horses motivate the therapist to explore new subject matter describing,

I just find it fascinating and I have also noticed that as a facilitator, if I paid attention to the horses, they will tell me quicker what to pay attention to by the way they respond. And so that’s a shift for me. I’m used to paying attention to the client, and I do do that, don’t get me wrong. But if I pay attention to the horses, if the horses are acting up or high energy, you know, then I can look at the client and say, “Okay, is there anything going on with you that might correlate with this?” And usually, something will come up that, “Well, yeah,” that they hadn’t even thought about.

Some findings were unique to individual participants. One commented that becoming an equine therapist opened up a lot of opportunities and collaborative efforts with other agencies and provided an alternative option for clients in traditional therapy. Another stated that her role as a therapist changed because she became more creative in her practice and used the horses for symbolic and metaphorical interpretations of client’s issues.

## **Chapter V**

### **Discussion**

The objective of this study was to explore equine therapists' experiences of being an equine therapist through their narrative of personal and professional encounters. The researcher interviewed equine therapists about perceived changes in their personal life since becoming an equine therapist, benefits or disadvantages of working with horses, and recognized experiences with clients utilizing equine therapy. As noted in the previous chapter, this study revealed important information about the impact of working as an equine therapist. This chapter includes a comparison of this study's findings to the relevant literature that has been reviewed. Important similarities and differences are discussed, and implications and suggestions for future research are also explored.

Information cannot be generalized from the responses provided and the analyzed data because of the small sample size; however, the information provides a positive light into the effect working with horses has on an equine therapist, their views of their role as equine therapists, and perceived benefits or disadvantages of working as an equine therapist, among other findings. The findings also provide in-depth examples of equine therapists' perceptions of experience in the field.

#### **Parallel Findings with Research**

This present study's findings are particularly important when understood in the context of the reviewed literature. There are several similarities between the data gathered from the interviews with equine therapists and the existing research into the equine therapy field. This

study explored the question of how participants became familiar with equine facilitated therapy. Several participants described early childhood experiences with horses that have evolved in their continued lifelong experiences with horses in their present role. In their responses, participants described a passion for horses which contributed to their viewing working as an equine therapist as a fulfilling career choice. The personal connection to horses and working with horses as a co-therapist is apparent through the descriptive narratives recounted in the interviews.

Both the pre-existing literature and the findings from this study indicate positive improvements in one's personal life as a result of working with horses. Participants' descriptions of changes observed in their lives included words like empowered, improved self-confidence, sense of peace and centeredness in life. These sentiments echo the research that equine therapy can impact one's confidence level, self esteem, sense of control, and as concurrently described in the research, "empowered" (Tyler, 1994). The relationship between humans and animals has been described as therapeutic and often noted to build trust, creative freedom, and spiritual growth (Marx & Cumella, 2003). The findings from the participants' experiences also support these views of an animal fostering positive personal growth. Many of the participants described a variety of changes in their personal lives as a result from interacting and working with horses. The researcher was unable to locate current literature regarding the impact of benefits for the therapist/clinician/practitioner. However, the literature says that animals can improve a person's quality of life and that contact with an animal is health (Wilson & Turner, 1998). Participants agreed with this finding and reported that they saw improvements in their life on a physical, mental, and spiritual level. One participant proclaimed that everything in her life had changed since working with horses.



In addition, the study revealed data upholding the views that equine therapy provides an alternative with unique benefits to a traditional office setting. This concept was explored by many participants who shared their experiences of working with their clients and horses to address personal struggles and issues. Participants echoed the research that an animal can bring a distinct opportunity to the therapeutic relationship between the client and the clinician. In his research, Fine (2000) described that an animal can bring about learning situations that allow the therapist to discuss their clients response to certain situation. Another study by Christian (2005) identified that hidden emotions may emerge when working with a horse. Fine (2002) referred to the addition that a horse adds to the therapeutic relationship describing that with this new element, a client can be seen in a different view. In an interview, Dr. Fine highlighted that the use of an animal can assist therapists to teach their clients skills about relating to other stating, “children are more likely to reveal inner thoughts to the therapist because the animal is right next to them and helps them express themselves” (Brody, 2011, para.10). Brody described therapist Dr. Fine’s success in utilizing therapy animals to help children express themselves with children with issues such as selective muteism and sexual abuse histories. Findings also supported the idea that animals can ease the client’s feelings about addressing their personal problems. Participants in this study resonated the opinions found in the reviewed research through their reports that working with horses helps clients address their issues. Participants expanded on this concept with examples from their work. One participant described her client using horses as a metaphor to symbolize different dysfunctional family members in his or her life. The overall consensus from the findings and the literature is that the presence of the horse creates a different, and possibly safer, environment for these feelings to surface and be explored.

This study also explored the question of benefits and limitations of equine therapy. Both the literature and findings indicate that working in an outdoor setting and in an environment around horses is an advantage to equine therapy. On the other hand, the literature noted that the downfalls to equine therapy can be that it may involve further traveling distance to the therapy and may be time consuming (Ewing et al., 2007; Tyler, 1994). Fine (2000) described another drawback as the financial burden and expensive costs that go into working as an equine therapist. The expense of horses was a highly common theme found among participants of this current study. There were discrepancies between those who viewed the non-traditional setting, and therefore added expense, as a disadvantage, and those who saw it as a unique advantage, regardless of the cost and time expended.

### **Noteworthy Distinction**

Further investigation into the field of equine therapy and gaining a unique understanding from the therapist's perspective uncovered differences in the existing literature. One participant critiqued the EAGALA model in which an equine therapist works in conjunction with a horse specialist. The participant described her difficulty working with another person who did not fully understand her role as a therapist and the horse's role as a tool in the therapeutic relationship. The relationship of working as an equine therapist under the training of the EAGALA model was described as a roller coaster ride because the therapist felt that she had some frustrations with the model, and equine therapy as a modality as a persistent effective practice for clients. She cited the challenge of blending the work style of the horse specialist and that of the equine therapist as a difficulty; the therapist preferred for the client to do the majority of talking and the equine specialist wanted the professional to have a more prominent role.

## **Research Limitations and Implications**

The positive results found in the participants' responses warrants further research. Additional studies will impact the mental health field's view of equine therapy. The research by Valente and Marotta (2005) suggest further research into the perspective of the psychotherapist and this researcher agrees that there is a strong need for continued research from this viewpoint.

In this current study there were limitations within the participant sample. The sample size, a total of eight individuals, and the lack of ethnic, racial, and gender diversity confines the overall findings of the study. If the sample size had been larger, it may have allowed for greater diversity of demographic findings and overall data and narrative findings. Although the criteria for the study may have impacted the participants able to participate, selection bias is highly unlikely as participants who expressed an interest in contributing to the research were included in the study.

It would also be wise to conduct a similar research study with a similar exploratory focus to clarify the true results of the findings and determine whether or not there was bias among the small number of participants. However, a quantitative study may help determine how much bias exists in the findings presented. Empirical research and continued study will potentially build the acceptance base of this therapeutic modality and the credibility of the effectiveness of equine-based treatment in the mental health field.

Future research should expand the representative sample as well as diversify the sample. This may include the experiences of men in the field, as well as perspectives from people of different racial, cultural, ethnic, and geographical backgrounds. This expansion would allow for a broader understanding, an expansion of findings, and more accurate representation of the

diverse range of experiences. Furthermore, any additional research pursued would add to the equine therapy field as well as benefit the profession and field of social work.

Equine therapy is a unique therapeutic modality due to the nature and the requirements of working with horses such as continued care and space for the animal. There are both positive and negative implications to working as an equine therapist. Positive aspects to adding equine therapy to one's practice may include the therapist becoming more in-tuned with their feelings and experiencing positive changes in their personal and professional life. Some of the negative implications may revolve around the financial expenses of working with horses and the time commitment involved in using horses for therapeutic work. Regardless of the challenges, equine therapy and working with horses can be a very powerful experience for both the clinician and the client.

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# Appendix A

## HSR Approval



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Smith College  
Northampton, Massachusetts 01063  
T (413) 585-7950  
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February 21, 2011

Winifred Simmons

Dear Winnie,

Your revised materials have been reviewed and they are fine. We note that you still haven't identified yourself as in the Smith School for Social Work program in your first paragraph of the Consent. That was not required, just a suggestion to enhance credibility.

*Please note the following requirements:*

**Consent Maintaining Data:** You must retain all data and other documents for at least three (3) years past completion of the research activity.

*In addition, these requirements may also be applicable:*

**Amendments:** If you wish to change any aspect of the study (such as design, procedures, consent forms or subject population), please submit these changes to the Committee.

**Renewal:** You are required to apply for renewal of approval every year for as long as the study is active.

**Completion:** You are required to notify the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Committee when your study is completed (data collection finished). This requirement is met by completion of the thesis project during the Third Summer.

Good luck with your very interesting project.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Ann Hartman / DSW".

Ann Hartman, D.S.W.  
Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

CC: Mary Beth Averill, Research Advisor

## **Appendix B**

### **Recruitment Script**

Dear Potential Research Participant:

My name is Winnie Simmons, and I am a graduate student at Smith College School for Social Work. I am conducting a research project designed to examine therapists' perspectives of the impact working with horses through equine therapy has on their lives. This study is being conducted for the Master's of Social Work degree at Smith College School for Social Work, and may be used in possible future presentations or publications on the topic.

Participants suitable for this study should have specialized training in equine therapy with at least one year of professional practice. Participants will also have a graduate degree in an area such as social work, psychology or other mental health fields. Participants will be interviewed on their experience and knowledge of equine therapy. The interviews should last approximately 30 minutes to one hour. All interviews will be audio tape-recorded and information will be kept confidential and secured.

If you are aware of anyone else who may be interested in participating in this study, please contact me and let me know. Thank you for your assistance in helping me to recruit contacts for my study. Please contact me if you have any further questions or if you would like to refer yourself or someone else for an interview.

Winnie Simmons  
[wsimmons@smith.edu](mailto:wsimmons@smith.edu)  
MSW Candidate  
Smith College School for Social Work  
Lilly Hall  
Northampton, MA 01063

## **Appendix C**

### **Informed Consent Letter**

Dear Potential Research Participant:

My name is Winnie Simmons. I am conducting a qualitative study on the impact working with horses through equine therapy has on equine therapists' lives. This research study is for my thesis and for future presentations and publications.

Your participation is requested because you are a person who has experience with equine therapy with at least one year of professional practice as an equine therapist, and you have obtained an advanced degree in a field of mental health such as social work, marriage and family therapy, psychology, or other similar areas. If you choose to participate, I will interview you about your experience as an equine therapist, how working with horses affects your personal life, how you have been affected by the combined interaction of horse and client, and any advantages or disadvantages you may have experienced working with horses. I will also ask you demographic questions. The interview will be conducted over the phone or face-to-face and will last for approximately 30 minutes to one hour. Interviews will be audio tape-recorded. I will ask you to not disclose any identifying information about clients with whom you worked. If I use a transcriber, he/she will sign a confidentiality pledge.

Risks from participation are highly unlikely, except in the event that you feel uncomfortable discussing your experiences with equine therapy. You will not be paid for your participation, but you might enjoy being able to share your perspective and knowing that you have contributed to the knowledge of equine therapy as it is used for mental health.

Strict confidentiality will be maintained, as consistent with federal regulations and the mandates of the social work profession. Your identity and privacy will be protected, as identifying information will be disguised in the reporting of the data and no names will be used. My research advisor will have access to the data, once all identifying information has been removed. Your confidentiality will be protected by numerically coding all identifying information, storing the data in a locked file for a minimum of three years and after three years the data will be destroyed unless I continue to need it, in which case it will continue to be secured and destroyed when no longer needed.

Your participation is completely voluntary. You can refuse to answer any questions and withdraw from the study at any time before April 15, 2010. If you decide to withdraw, all materials pertaining to you will be immediately destroyed. If you have additional questions about the study or wish to withdraw, please feel free to contact me at the contact information below. If you have any concerns about your rights or about any aspect of the study, I encourage you to call me or the Chair of the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Review Committee at (413) 585-7974.



YOUR SIGNATURE INDICATES THAT YOU HAVE READ AND UNDERSTAND THE ABOVE INFORMATION AND THAT YOU HAVE HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, YOUR PARTICIPATION, AND YOUR RIGHTS, AND THAT YOU AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Study Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date Signed

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Researcher

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date Signed

Please keep one copy of this consent form for your records.  
Thank you for your interest in this study.

Winnie Simmons  
(713) 301-0134 / [wsimmons@smith.edu](mailto:wsimmons@smith.edu)  
MSW Candidate  
Smith College School for Social Work  
Lilly Hall  
Northampton, MA 01063

## Appendix D

### Interview Guide

#### Demographics & Background

How old are you?

How do you identify yourself in terms of race or ethnicity?

How do you identify yourself in terms of gender?

What is your educational background?

How long have you been practicing equine therapy?

What professional license do you hold?

How long have you been a psychotherapist?

#### Personal and Therapeutic Content

\*Please remember, when disclosing information about your work with clients, do not reveal any identifying information\*

1. Tell me about what it has been like for you personally working as an equine therapist?
  - a. What made you decide to enter this field?
  - b. Were you impacted by animal assisted therapy prior to becoming an equine therapist?
2. Describe changes you may have noticed, if any, in your personal life as a result of working with horses as an equine therapist?
3. What are the benefits, if any, you perceive from working with horses?
4. What, if any, are disadvantages (problems/limitations) you find working as an equine therapist?
5. Focusing on a particular client experience, describe how the combined interaction with the client and the horse affected you.
6. From your experience, please name at least three effects or changes, if any, working with horses has had on your role as a therapist.
7. Is there anything else you would like to add about what you have experienced working as an equine therapist?