“WHAT IS IT ABOUT HORSES?” A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION OF EQUINE FACILITATED PSYCHOTHERAPY

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Catherine B Smith, MA

ORCID Scholar No. 0000-0003-2270-1038

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This dissertation, by Catherine B Smith, has
been approved by the committee members signed below
who recommend that it be accepted by the faculty of
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Dissertation Committee:

Allen Bishop, PhD, Chairperson

Elizabeth Bates Freed, PsyD

Brenda Murrow, PhD

ABSTRACT

"WHAT IS IT ABOUT HORSES?" A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION OF EQUINE FACILITATED PSYCHOTHERAPY

Catherine B Smith, MA

Antioch University Santa Barbara

Santa Barbara, CA

This qualitative study on Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy (EFP) utilized a combined methodology incorporating elements from phenomenology and grounded theory to contribute to the existing body of research on equine therapeutic practices by (a) clarifying foundational understandings its mechanisms of therapeutic action and (b) exploring barriers to the growth of the field from a practitioner point of view. Five phenomenological categories were identified and described as interwoven mechanisms of therapeutic action within the practice of EFP: observation, communication, mindfulness, embodiment and connection. Additionally, six phenomena were identified and explored as challenges to the field's growth: funding, awareness, cohesion, clarity, accessibility and measurability. This dissertation is available in open access at AURA (https://aura.antioch.edu) and OhioLINK ETD Center (https://etd.ohiolink.edu).

Keywords: equine facilitated psychotherapy, equine therapy, equine assisted learning, animal assisted therapy, outdoor therapy, nature therapy, nature-based therapy, mindfulness, somatic therapy, embodied experience, spiritual and depth psychology, PTSD, trauma, complex trauma, CPTSD, developmental trauma

Dedication

> Viewing Medusa by means of his mirror shield, he cut off her head [and] out of the severed head flew Pegasus, the winged horse. […] It is as if the decapitation of the Medusan horror had the effect of transforming the negative energy contained in her and releasing it into positive, creative power, signified by the horse, a symbol of physical energy that is the same time winged. […] So, the arts derived from Pegasus' libido, but their ultimate source was Medusa, since Medusa was the mother of Pegasus. – Edward Edinger, *The Eternal Drama*

To Frumious Bandersnatch, the playful, funny, curious "strange white horse" of my youth – thank you for saving my life.

To all survivors of complex, developmental and/or intergenerational trauma (especially covert abuse): May you dare to be seen. May you dare to know and speak your truth – including truth to power. May the depths of your suffering be transformed. You are not alone. Do *not* give up. Your life matters. It is never too late to become what you might have been.

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Table of Contents

List of Tables

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Purpose

Over the past two decades, Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy (EFP) has steadily gained acceptance and popularity as an alternative and/or adjunct therapy along with various other Equine Assisted Activities and Therapies (EAAT) and Animal Assisted Therapies (AAT) of which it is a subset. This has resulted in a rapidly growing body of qualitative research on its effectiveness, particularly for the treatment of trauma. However, EFP has yet to receive mainstream recognition within the psychological community as a stand-alone modality. The wide variety of terms, definitions and protocols in existence in various equine therapy programs have contributed to difficulty in determining consistent outcomes. Greater understanding of its phenomenology and theoretical underpinnings will build upon the evidence base, validation and mainstream recognition of EFP as an effective form of mental health treatment.

Relevance of the Topic for Clinical Psychology

Despite its apparent resistance to empirical validation thus far, EFP has shown promise as a treatment for various mental health presentations across diverse populations, including but not limited to: adolescents and adults with Substance Use Disorder (Adams et al., 2015; Kern-Godal, Brenna, Kogstad, Arnevik & Ravndal, 2016), women with eating disorders (Sharpe, 2014), youths with Autism Spectrum Disorder (Anderson & Meints, 2016; Gabriels et al., 2015; Holm et al., 2014), youth and adult survivors of interpersonal violence and sexual abuse (Ashley, 2016; Kemp, Signal, Botros, Taylor & Prentice, 2014; Meinersmann, Bradberry & Roberts, 2008; Schroeder & Stroud 2015), as well as adolescents and adults not responding to mainstream treatment (Johansen, Arfwedson Wang, Binder & Malt, 2014). A trauma focus will be applied when exploring the various applications of EFP, along with related studies on the physiological

effects of human-animal interactions, some measurable by medical technology, and others best explained by theoretical concepts such as interpersonal neurobiology and psychoneuroendocrinology.

Autobiographical Origins of the Researcher's Interest in the Topic

As a survivor of severe, repressed childhood trauma, early steps on this researcher's own path to recovery led to the realization, many years after the fact, that time spent with horses not only facilitated her will to survive it formed the foundation for her psychological wellbeing despite a lack of resolution and ongoing adversity. As such, this research aims to advance the goal of bringing EFP more readily to others who have suffered or are suffering similarly.

Research Questions

The primary research question overarching this work is: What are the mechanisms of action of EFP? The secondary question is: What challenges and/or barriers inhibit the accessibility of EFP? What follows is a phenomenological exploration which seeks to utilize the lived experience of practitioners with expertise in EFP to: (a) synthesize, define and clarify its most salient mechanisms of action and (b) understand practitioners' views on what factors constitute significant challenges/barriers to the advancement of the field. Ideally the results of this work will contribute to the development of manualized protocol(s), suitable for quantitative evaluation in order to fully justify and validate the use of EFP as a mainstream practice.

Definitions

Equine-Assisted Activities and Therapies

The term Equine-Assisted Activities and Therapies (EAAT) is a widely recognized umbrella-term for a variety of activities involving human interaction with horses for therapeutic purposes (Latella & Abrams, 2015). At present, there are three professional organizations at the

forefront of the EAAT field: the Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship International, PATH, the Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association, EAGALA, and the Human-Equine Relational Development Institute, HERD (EAGALA, n.d.; HERD, n.d.; PATH, n.d.). PATH, Intl. was created in 2009 when the Equine Facilitated Mental Health Association, EFMHA, which was founded in 1996, merged with the National American Riding for the Handicapped Association, NARHA, which was originally founded in 1969 (PATH, n.d.).

These organizations offer accreditation for centers and certification for EAAT practitioners, along with specific training and guidelines. HERD offers membership and certification programs in Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy (EFP) for licensed mental health professionals, and two levels of Equine Facilitated Learning (EFL) for coaches, educators, training professionals, and Equine Specialists (HERD, n.d.). EAGALA promotes a model incorporates a licensed mental health professional and an Equine Specialist who work together, and offer training and certification for both roles (EAGALA, n.d.). PATH lists the Specialty Disciplines under the EAAT umbrella as: Therapeutic Riding, Therapeutic Driving, Interactive Vaulting, Hippotherapy, PATH International Equine Services for Heroes (Veterans), Equine-Facilitated Psychotherapy and Equine-Assisted Learning (PATH, n.d.); however, many other specific equine-facilitated therapeutic modalities also exist.

Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy

Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy, an EAAT, is specifically defined as: “an interactive process in which a licensed mental health professional working with or as an appropriately credentialed equine professional, partners with suitable equine(s) to address psychotherapy goals set forth by the mental health professional and the client” (PATH, 2018, para. 4). Although language is continually being revised and developed to differentiate EFP from the wider body of

practices known as EAAT, for purposes of simplicity, the acronym EFP will be used throughout this project to refer to a wide range of modalities with differing names and acronyms, all of which utilize equines as therapeutic partners with the express goal of improved mental health. These include (but are not limited to): Equine Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP), Equine Facilitated Therapy (EFT), Horse Assisted Therapy (HAT), Equine Facilitated Learning (EFL), Equine Assisted Learning (EAL), Equine Assisted Psychotherapy and Learning (EAPL), Horse Aided Psychotherapy, Equine Assisted Counseling, Equine Therapy, and some forms of Therapeutic Horseback Riding and/or Therapeutic Riding; along with specifically defined protocols, such as Trauma Focused Equine Assisted Psychotherapy (TF-EAP), Gestalt Equine Psychotherapy (GEP), Equine-facilitated Body and Emotion-oriented Psychotherapy (EBEP), Equine Facilitated Therapy for Complex Trauma (EFT-CT), etc. More specific nomenclature is used when referring to each practice individually, with the specific name and description of each reflecting its own, often subtle, differentiation from other modalities; however, a detailed analysis of each label and definition lies outside the scope of this project.

Animal Assisted Therapy

Since EFP falls within the larger category of Animal-Assisted Therapies (AAT), the acronym AAT is applied as an umbrella term to refer generally to related practices including: Animal-Assisted Interventions (AAI), Animal-Assisted Psychotherapy (AAP), Animal-Assisted Play Therapy and Pet Therapy, as well as to the field of study known as Human-Animal Interaction (HAI); although, where appropriate, specific terms are used.

Nature Based Therapy

Finally, since both EAAT and AAT can be considered within the still larger category of Nature-Based Therapy (NBT), the acronym NBT is employed as an umbrella term to refer to

nature-based practices including: Ecotherapy, Recreational Therapy, Adventure Therapy, etc. However, again, where appropriate, specific terms are used.

Mechanisms of Action

The term Mechanism of Action is most commonly used in the field of pharmacology, to refer to the biochemical processes involved in producing drugs' effects (Ingersoll & Rak, 2015). In psychology, the term is also used to refer to specific interventions that produce a change in a patient's symptoms. For example, in research that has been conducted to illuminate the specific mechanisms of action of Cognitive Behavior Therapy, CBT (Spangler, Baldwin & Agras, 2004) and Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing, EMDR (Pagani. et al., 2017). The terms Mechanisms of Change or Mechanisms of Psychological Change (Higginson & Mansell, 2008) are also frequently used. For this project, the term Mechanisms of Action (or Mechanisms of Therapeutic Action interchangeably) was chosen upon review of existing literature on EFP (and AAT) to acknowledge the intersection of its psychosocial and physiological effects.

Trauma

In the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th edition (DSM-5) trauma is defined as follows: "Exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence in one (or more) of the following ways: (1) Directly experiencing the traumatic event(s); (2) witnessing, in person, the event(s) as it occurred to others; (3) learning that the traumatic event(s) occurred to a close family member or close friend – in cases of actual or threatened death of a family member or friend, the event(s) must have been violent or accidental; (4) experiencing repeated or extreme exposure to aversive details of the traumatic event(s) (e.g., first responders collecting human remains; police officers repeatedly exposed to details of child abuse)" (American Psychological Association, 2013 p. 271). While this definition is particularly

useful for experiencers of acute traumatic events, it's been argued that it leaves out events that are not life threatening, but which threaten psychological integrity (i.e. extreme emotional abuse, degradation or humiliation, major losses or separations, and coerced sexual experiences which are not specifically violent).

Whether events that do not meet the above definition should be considered "traumatic" has been the subject of ongoing debate. In fact, given this definition, many argue that the extent of trauma among the general population may be grossly underestimated, since current criteria for diagnosis of both posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and acute stress disorder (ASD) appear to interpret traumatic events too narrowly (Briere & Scott, 2013). Despite current diagnostic obstacles, trauma experts have concluded "that an event is traumatic if it is extremely upsetting, at least temporarily overwhelms the individual's internal resources, and produces lasting psychological symptoms," (Briere & Scott, 2013, p. 24).

Complex Trauma, Developmental Trauma

Diagnoses of complex post-traumatic stress disorder (Herman, 2015) and developmental trauma (van der Kolk. 2005) which have been proposed for inclusion in the DSM include in their definition of trauma: multiple, prolonged, traumatic events, typically relational in nature, usually beginning in childhood (Naste, et al., 2018). Although these definitions have yet to be officially accepted by the DSM committee, they nonetheless serve as trusted working models within the trauma field. Despite these diagnostic obstacles, and in part because of them, it is frequently posited that trauma and/or traumatic stress must be considered in the etiology of mood, anxiety, substance abuse, psychotic, and personality disorders (Briere & Scott, 2013; Herman, 2015; Mate, 2010; Levine, 2010; Linehan, 2015; Siegel & Solomon, 2003; van der Kolk, 2005; van der Kolk, McFarlane & Weisaeath, 2012), and is a major risk factor in chronic physical health

problems, including permanent changes to brain structure and shortened life expectancy (Felitti, et al., 1998; Mate, 2010; Teicher, Anderson & Polcari, 2012; van der Kolk, 2014).

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

Although quantitative research on EFP as yet remains limited, there is a vast and growing body of qualitative research in this area. What follows is a critical examination of numerous studies of EFP, along with relevant studies within the larger fields in which it is nested (i.e. EAAT, AAT, etc).

At first glance, most outcome studies on EFP and AAT appear focused on behavioral, social and affective measures, such as symptom reduction, changes in quality of attachment, self-regulation, improved behavior and social competencies. Often these take the form of studies focused on specific populations categorized by age and presenting diagnosis. However, despite the proliferation in research, significant obstacles remain, which are effectively summarized by the following quote: “although many therapists are conducting equine-assisted therapy there is little consensus about how it should be conducted or how effective different therapy programs are for the treatment of different psychological symptoms” (Earles, Vernon & Yetz, 2015, p. 151).

Meta-analyses and Literature Reviews

Since research articles on EAAT and AAT practices are so numerous, side-by-side comparisons of studies serve as a logical point of entry into this vast body of work, as they offer valuable insights. One such project, a systematic review of scholarly literature on Animal-Assisted Intervention practices for trauma (O'Haire, Guérin, & Kirkham, 2015), synthesized the outcomes of ten empirical studies, five involving equines. Participants in these studies had been exposed to traumas of varying degrees and involved adults (mostly war veterans diagnosed with PTSD); and children and adolescents (most of whom had been exposed to family violence including physical abuse, sexual abuse or unspecified trauma. Half of the studies examined

included a comparison condition, while others used a pre-post design or retrospective interviews to examine the treatment condition. One study reviewed, a lab-based experiment with dogs, exposed otherwise healthy adult subjects to traumatic video content.

Outcomes common to the reviewed studies included short term reductions in depression, PTSD and anxiety symptoms, along with improved social competencies and child behavior. Along with these positive outcomes, the research team stated: “a review of the methodology indicated that research in this area is in its very early stages. Given the preliminary nature of the data, we conclude that at present AAI shows promise as a complementary technique, but should not be enlisted as the first line of primary treatment for trauma. Further research is needed to better understand the nature of outcomes for different types of trauma, to directly evaluate feasibility and compliance, to manualize evidence-based AAI treatment protocols, and to evaluate generalizable outcomes in larger community samples” (O'Haire, Guérin, & Kirkham, 2015, p. 11). Notably absent from this conclusion is an explanation of why AAI’s utility is presumed to be limited, i.e. that is best suited as a complementary technique, rather than a first line of treatment.

A meta-analysis conducted in Canada to evaluate the efficacy of Equine Therapy among At-risk Youth yielded similar results (Wilkie, Germain & Theule, 2016). This research team quantitatively assessed treatment effects of equine therapy programs accredited by PATH, Intl. Focusing on seven studies, they conducted a treatment vs. control analysis which proved heterogeneity and ruled-out publication bias, then used the random effects model to aggregate and compare overall effects. Their results indicated medium overall effect sizes, based on which they concluded that “participation in an equine therapy program effectively increase overall level of functioning among adolescent at-risk youth” (p. 388). However, again, many significant

limitations were cited, including (1) limited number of eligible studies, which prevented the ability to run moderator analyses, (2) problems with study design, i.e. potential confounding factors present among control groups and frequently lacking follow-up measures, and (3) a lack of consistency and clarity in the content of the equine therapy programs, resulting in problems with clinical interpretation: "specific programs identified in each study include equine-assisted learning, equine-assisted counseling, equine-assisted psychotherapy, equine facilitated therapy and equine-facilitated psychotherapy. Although the names identifying these programs vary slightly, the activities remained relatively similar, though not identical. In order to improve how results are interpreted clinically, it is strongly suggested that standardized manuals be implemented and utilized across all equine-related therapies" (Wilkie, Germain & Theule, 2016, p. 389).

A review of 47 recent publications (Lentini & Knox, 2015) found EFP to be a useful modality with children and adolescents with a variety of presenting problems and disorders, with most often studied populations being At-Risk Youths and children diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Despite promising results overall, they too cited among their limitations "a lack of consensus on appropriate methods, including length of treatment, type of intervention (…etc.), the review was not able to capture and report about a highly uniform, standardized intervention" (p. 299), and concluded that "although these results are promising with regard to the effectiveness of EFP for children and youths, several challenges remain. First the field would greatly benefit from an inclusive body to come to a consensus on terminology. Second there is a need for more randomized, controlled studies with large samples using non-subjective outcome measures" (p. 300).

Lee, Dakin & McLure (2016) conducted a narrative synthesis of 24 studies on Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP). They found among the qualitative, experimental and quasi-experimental research they reviewed "initial evidence for the value of EAP" (p. 225) for enhancing children and adolescents' communication and relationship skills as well as emotional, social and behavioral functioning. Yet, they reported that, despite the model's 1999 inception, "EAP research is still in its infancy" (Lee, Dakin & McLure, 2016, p. 244), adding that "future rigorous research is needed to build evidence for this increasingly popular and innovative emerging mental health treatment" (p. 245).

EFP Modalities and Functions

As stated above, there are a variety of specific EFP protocols in common practice. Some of these include riding and others do not. Most if not all involve time outdoors in sunlight, as well as varying degrees of physical activity, which more often than not could be classified as light exercise. Interaction with horses also typically involves varying degrees of physical touch, which, it could ostensibly be argued, might be classifiable as massage. Each of these: light exposure (Schwartz & Olds, 2015), exercise (Otsuka, et al., 2016), adventures in nature (Stich & Senior, 1984), and massage (Sliz, Smith, Wiebking, Northoff & Hayley, 2012), has been shown to have positive effects on mood, sleep regulation and overall physical health, and all of these elements play into the physiological as well as the strictly psychological benefits of EFP.

Though varied in their execution, most EFP methodologies appear to focus on how equines can facilitate conscious awareness of internalized affect states in non-verbal, experiential ways. One study on the use of EFP to address depression, self-esteem, and other psychological impacts of trauma (Yorke, Adams & Coady, 2008) found it particularly promising in terms of personal connection: "the equine-human bonds described by participants have parallels both with

important elements of therapeutic alliances between professionals and clients, and with the positive impact of relationship factors on client outcomes" (p.17). Many anecdotal descriptions and case studies have been offered to describe how therapeutic work with equine partners promotes physical and emotional self-awareness, resolution of unprocessed traumas, increased mindfulness, body presence, increased healthy attachment, self-regulation, communication skills, and the development of clear boundaries (Bachi, 2013; Coleman, 2012; Ford, 2013; Hamilton, 2011; Kohanov, 2001; McCullough, 2018; McCormick & McCormick, 1997; Thomas, Lytle & Dammann, 2016).

AAT, EFP for ASD, ADHD

Several studies have evaluated the effects of therapeutic horseback riding (THR) among children and adolescents diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Among the listed benefits of THR for this population were increased empathy, reduced maladaptive behaviors (Anderson & Meints, 2016); improved self-regulation, socialization, communication, adaptive, and motor behaviors (Gabriels et al., 2015); and significantly improved parent-nominated target behaviors which occurred during THR sessions, and were generalized to home, school and community environments (Holm et al., 2014). Another study on the effects of equine-assisted therapy (EAT) on adaptive and executive functioning in children with ASD noted improvements in social functioning, motor abilities and executive functioning among participants (compared to a control group).

A study on animal assisted therapy (AAT) for children with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) also noted favorable effects on several core symptoms, including self-regulation, social skills, motivation (Busch, et al., 2016).

EFP for Prison Inmates

Since policy makers and correctional authorities seek to enhance effectiveness of incarceration and reduce recidivism, Equine-facilitated prison-based vocational programs have been explored for inmate rehabilitation. One study used a quasi-experimental methodological triangulation design to evaluate emotional and behavioral effects of an such a program for prisoners (Bachi, 2014). Prior to the study, recidivism and disciplinary misconduct rates among prisoners were gathered via clinical data-mining of institutional records. Quantitatively, the study found that participants had a statistically lower chance of recidivism compared with the control group, but that the program did not otherwise a reduce severity of disciplinary misconduct. Qualitative findings highlighted the value of human-horse relations within a prison context, including: alternative opportunities to experience companionship, which may help inmates process their relational issues and improve competencies; increased healthy coping with psychological impact of imprisonment; opportunities for inmates to perform as mature individuals involved in meaningful activities, which can generate pro-social skills; and social learning in which participants were able to interpret herd dynamics by projecting human interactions on horses (Bachi, 2015).

EFP for American Indian Youth and Families

A six-month intervention was studied for American Indian youth and their families (Goodkind, LaNoue, Lee, Freeland & Freund, 2012). Feasibility and preliminary outcomes were examined in a mixed-method within-group design. Based on the idea that wellbeing for this population is rooted in traditional cultural beliefs and practices which require a process of healing and understanding, the four focus areas of the program were: 1) recognizing/healing historical trauma; 2) reconnecting to traditional culture; 3) parenting/social skill-building; and 4)

strengthening family relationships through equine-assisted activities. This program study found that while engagement and retention proved challenging (suggesting numerous barriers to participation), youth who completed the program experienced significant increases in self-esteem, quality of life, positive coping strategies, social adjustment, and cultural identity.

AAT, EFP for Trauma

Several studies have been conducted to study AAT and, more specifically, EFP for the treatment of trauma.

Veterans with PTSD

A program of equine therapy for veterans with PTSD and PTSD symptoms was evaluated through thematic and case study analysis that included outcome measures for PTSD symptoms, mindfulness, and quality of life (Gomez, 2017). Participants' described outcomes included: increased awareness of feelings; increased positive feelings; less anger, aggression and force; greater sense of mastery; greater engagement; improved self-esteem; improved coping; and reduction of symptoms related to trauma, depression, and anxiety. Results indicated that EFP is a promising treatment for PTSD and PTSD symptoms in veterans, and that equine therapy may be effective for other mental health problems such as depression and anxiety, improving social functioning and enhancing quality of life.

Youth Trauma Survivors

McCullough, Risley-Curtiss & Rorke (2015) conducted a pilot study utilizing equine facilitated psychotherapy (EFP) for the treatment of PTSD symptoms in maltreated youth. A purposive sample of 11 youth ages 10–18 who presented with PTSD symptomatology participated in eight weekly EFP outpatient sessions 1.5 to 2 hours in length. Dependent variables were change in PTSD symptoms as measured by the Children's Revised Inventory of

Events Scale (CRIES-13) and change in levels of human-animal bonding as measured using the Human-Animal Bond Scale (HABS), administered at pre-, post- and midpoint. Decreased CRIES-13 scores and increased HABS scores were seen in nine out of 11 participants, which indicated that EFP can be effective in reducing PTSD symptoms and that the human-animal bond between participant and equine may have contributed to the lower PTSD symptomatology scores. Conclusions included the fact that EFP treatment effects are multimodal, working in multiple directions at once, and results indicated that EFP showed promise for traumatized youth suffering PTSD symptomatology.

Another study of EFP to treat survivors of child sexual abuse (CSA), a population known to be particularly reticent, found that equine partners facilitated the development of the therapeutic alliance with practitioners and that "therapies utilizing horses have the added bonus of empowering clients," (Kemp, Signal, Botros, Taylor & Prentice, 2014, p. 558) although the authors made no mention of how the concept of empowerment might be made measurable (i.e., operationalized). A similar study, which focused on EFP for clients with a background of parental substance misuse and severe trauma in childhood, found that horses' negative reactions and uncooperativeness in the presence of dysfunctional behavioral patterns assisted in their resolution: "the key therapeutic element is to use the horse's high sensitivity and responsiveness to human body language as an aid to improve awareness of emotions, bodily responses and communication" (Johansen, Arfwedson Wang & Binder, 2016, p. 222).

Women Trauma Survivors

Additional clinical case studies have argued that EFPs successfully utilize equine partners to address the emotional and neurophysiological wounds of trauma in adolescents and young adults (most often young women), through a focus on reclaiming boundaries (Coleman, 2012),

applying competency-based interventions, mindfulness, cognitive reframes, somatic approaches, play, and attachment work (DePrekel, 2012), and utilizing the human-animal connection as a catalyst for communication, insight, and change: “Through their body language, equines give immediate feedback to clients on how they are functioning and handling their feelings. This feedback helps clients learn how to pay better attention to the connection between their body and mind so they can inhabit their body in a new way. Processing this feedback also offers clients insights, which assist them in a more productive and healthier expression of their emotions” (Deprekel & Neznik, 2012, p. 41).

EFP has been used effectively to help adolescent girls and adult women to overcome the trauma of domestic and/or sexual violence. One such program, known as Equine Partnering Naturally© (Earles, et al., 2015) found evidence suggesting effectiveness in the treatment of anxiety and posttraumatic stress symptoms among women adult participants who had experienced a “Criterion A” traumatic event, such as a rape or serious accident, and had current PTSD symptoms above 31 on the PTSD Checklist. Immediately following treatment, participants reported significantly reduced posttraumatic stress symptoms, less severe emotional responses to trauma, less generalized anxiety and fewer symptoms of depression, significantly increased mindfulness strategies and decreased alcohol use.

EFP in group settings has also shown promise for this population. Schroeder & Stroud (2015) argued that, since “nearly one-third of female sexual assault survivors treated with cognitive-behavioral approaches either completed all counseling and therapy sessions, yet retained a PTSD diagnosis posttreatment, or stopped treatment prematurely… treatment needs to be integrative in order to increase engagement and address trauma survivors’ functioning across affective, cognitive, and interpersonal domains,” (p. 367). To that end, their study on EFP groups

for women survivors of trauma affirmed that benefits were two-fold: the horses' sensitivity increased clients' awareness of attitudinal and affective changes in the moment, and working in a group form at offered immediate opportunities to generalize new insights to interpersonal experiences.

EFP Based on Standard Psychotherapy Modalities and Theories

There are several EFP protocols in existence which are adaptations of traditional psychotherapeutic modalities.

Solution-Focused Brief Therapy (SFBT)

A form of solution-focused brief therapy (SFBT) that incorporates equines was found to be an effective strengths-based model (Kakacek, 2017). Since the goal of strengths-based models is assisting clients to co-create solutions, EFP can utilized to provide an experiential, hands-on activity that helps the client create solutions: "equines are herd animals of prey, therefore they are receive to the sounds, views and emotions around them. This characteristic of equines provides the opportunity for mirroring feelings of clients…It is the meaning or interpretations that clients give to the interactions with the equines that provide information for the counselor to help clients change behavior" (pp. 193-4). This equine-facilitated SFBT model utilizes metaphor as the primary mechanism for change, with target areas divided into four categories: "(a) using metaphors to explain an equine's behavior ("What is the horse running away from?"), (b) analogous language to discuss props or tools ("What does the halter mean to the horse and what is your halter in life?"), (s) clients relating life lessons learned ("What does it mean that you walked to get the horse over the obstacle?"), and (d) clients inferring lessons learned in coping ("When we work through our obstacles, we succeed")" (Kakacek, 2017, p.197).

Trauma Focused Equine Assisted Psychotherapy (TF-EAP)

Another study was conducted to examine the phenomenological experiences of licensed psychotherapists practicing trauma focused equine assisted psychotherapy (TF-EAP). It also explored those therapists' beliefs about the benefits to children who have experienced abuse and neglect (Beck, 2014). Components these practitioners found most important to this modality included: "heightened engagement, sustained effort, parental involvement in the treatment model, and the experiential element of relationship development with the horse" (p. 64).

Gestalt Equine Psychotherapy (GEP)

A phenomenological study conducted on Gestalt Equine Psychotherapy (GEP) which sought to identify its essential psychological structure (Lac, 2016) found that patients' descriptions of GEP included several essential elements, experienced as a "moment-to-moment unfolding of the fullness of one's bodily and emotional existence" (p. 194). These included sharing breath and touch as a non-verbal act of connection, psychological release from internalized constraints, opening pathways to relationship and psychological expansion, returning to a place of fullness of being, and finding solidity in oneself. While acknowledging that this research only offers a glimpse into the potential efficacy for the modality, it offered an understanding of how GEP and other somatic, experiential therapies like it, can promote the self-discovery that facilitates change.

Equine Facilitated Therapy for Complex Trauma (EFT-CT)

Equine Facilitated Therapy for Complex Trauma (EFT-CT), created for survivors of complex trauma (i.e., multiple and/or developmentally adverse events, typically of a relational nature) was recently studied (Naste, et al., 2018). EFT-CT, which embeds EFP practices within an Attachment, Regulation and Competency (ARC) framework, found consistent decreases

among participants in anxiety, depression, somatic/sensory complaints, and behavioral dysregulation, along with improved interpersonal skills, communication strategies, and overall social functioning. “As a result of clinician support and the development of a shared sense of safety fostered by routines and rituals, prototypical participants demonstrated improved internal regulation and organization. Finally, after treatment completion, many participants evidenced higher-order cognitive functioning (e.g., accessing language, decision making) and the development of positive coping skills)” (p. 299).

Attachment Theory and EFP

A study of EFP found that, despite the general lack of consensus around how and why the human-equine relationship contributes to psychosocial well-being, these mechanisms might be better understood and organized when considered within an attachment framework (Sakai, 2012). The study concluded that attunement, internal working models, and the corrective emotional experience were key mechanisms of change in the equine-client therapeutic relationship.

Another study which also viewed EFP through an attachment lens (Vincent & Farkas, 2017) similarly concluded that “attachment theory can guide the understanding of how EFT operates and can support more rigorous inquiry to evaluate its effect in mental health treatment” (p.22) and called for more research to strengthen its empirical base.

Physiological and Neurobiological Research on AAT

Certain physiological markers have been measured to document the benefits of AAT. For example, medical studies have documented reduced symptoms of fibromyalgia and pain resulting from AAT (Braun, Stangler, Narveson & Pettingell, 2009; Marcus et al., 2013). Since many biochemical markers are readily measurable, more quantitative research on the positive

effects of EFP becomes available when it is considered within the broader scope of Animal Assisted Therapies (AAT). Several such studies follow below.

AAT and Cortisol

Numerous studies have documented the buffering effects of AAT on human stress systems. Many have used endocrinological parameters to document increases in oxytocin and decreased cortisol and increased oxytocin levels in plasma and saliva. Cardiovascular parameters have also been used to document positive effects on blood pressure, heart rate and heart-rate variability (Beetz & Bales, 2016; Krause-Parello & Kolassa, 2016). Skin conductance responses among children with ASD during free play with peers in the presence of animals, compared to toys, also indicated that animals may act as social buffers, conferring unique anxiolytic effects. (O'Haire, McKenzie, Beck & Slaughter, 2015).

Various studies have associated AAT with reduced cortisol levels, which are commonly understood as a marker of chronic stress, in a variety of populations. Horseback riding therapy in particular has been found to reduce cortisol levels in elderly persons (Cho, Kim, Kim & Cho, 2015) and children who have experienced abuse and neglect (Yorke et al., 2013). Cortisol reducing effects of AAT involving dogs and/or cats have also been documented in patients with schizophrenia (Calvo et al., 2016), military veterans with PTSD (Rodriguez, Bryce, Granger, & O'Haire, 2018), children with autism (Viau et al., 2010), college students (Somervill, et al.,2008), and children demonstrating trauma effects (Yorke, 2010).

AAT and Oxytocin

Though it as yet may lack the scientific attention required to be completely understood, the role played by oxytocin in the effectiveness AAT must not be minimized. Oxytocin is a neuropeptide which is released into the brain's circulatory system from the hypothalamus in the

presence of sensory stimulation (Beetz & Bales, 2016). It has been associated with favorable mood effects linking it to the neurotransmitter, serotonin (MacDonald, et al., 2013), and has been considered as a possible mediator of SSRI-induced antidepressant effects (Uvnäs-Moberg, Björkstrand, Hillegaart & Ahlenius, 1999).

A meta-analysis on the natural oxytocin-promoting effects of AAT reviewed 69 original studies on human-animal interactions (HAIs), finding well-documented benefits that included improved stress-related parameters such as cortisol, heart rate, and blood pressure; self-reported fear and anxiety; and measures of mental and physical health, especially cardiovascular diseases, and proposed that the naturally-occurring activation of the oxytocin system plays a key role in the majority of the above-reported psychological and psychophysiological benefits:

> Oxytocin and HAI effects largely overlap, as documented by research in both humans and animals, and first studies found that HAI affects the oxytocin system. As a common underlying mechanism, the activation of the oxytocin system does not only provide an explanation, but also allows an integrative view of the different effects of HAI (Beetz, Uvnäs-Moberg, Julius & Kotrschal, 2012, p. 11).

Affective Neuroscience

Jacques Panksepp (2009), the Estonian neuroscientist and psychobiologist who famously created the field of affective neuroscience, studied the neural mechanisms of emotion by examining important connections and commonalities between humans and animals. He wrote, "oxytocin clearly works primarily through influences on lower brain mechanisms we share with other animals that modulate our higher mind functions" (p. 725).

Polyvagal Theory

Also relevant to the biological mechanisms involved in AAT is polyvagal theory (Porges, 1995; Porges, 2009), which centers on an evolutionary development common to mammals and emphasizes the role of the vagus nerve in a coherent coupling between visceral states (i.e.

defensiveness) and readiness for social interaction thought to be regulated by the oxytocin system:

> Both HAIs and AATs are grounded in the same neural systems that are used to explain the general benefits of social support. Identifying these systems can offer insight into naturally occurring processes through which perceived social support protects or restores human health. Here we focus primarily on the neurobiology of HAIs under conditions in which these relationships are reciprocal and positive, and thus mutually capable of regulating behavior. However, HAIs present behavioral challenges as well as benefits. Large animals may threaten or harm humans. The coexistence of overlapping neural systems for affiliative support and defensive aggression creates behavioral complexity for the HAI. Thus, awareness of the autonomic and neuroendocrine bases of defensive behaviors can provide insights into situations in which danger or aggression may arise (Carter & Porges, 2016, p. 90).

This research points to the natural tendency toward co-regulation afforded by interactions with animals, and may also begin to explain why horses, as prey animals much larger than humans, hold such value as mirrors of internalized (and often unconscious) negative affect states, and while offering non-verbal, experiential instruction on safe recognition and appropriate tolerance for danger potentials and/or aggression present in the environment.

Brown & Coan (2016) studied the social regulation of neural threat responding in humans and posited that household pets, specifically dogs, have adapted to this human social ecology such that "companion animals may indeed fulfill the roll of a social support provider—even a relational partner—with consequences for the regulation of neurobiological mechanisms supporting the brain's threat response and, by extension, for the many consequences of that regulation for health and well-being, both human and animal" (p. 127).

Brain Scans

Research in the recently developing field of anthrozoological neuroscience (the use of neuroscience techniques to study human-animal interaction), employed fMRI technology to

study neural correlates for perception of companion animal photographs (Hayama, Chang, Gumus, King & Ernst, 2016). Thirty adult male participants, 15 “Pet Owners” and 15 “Non-Pet Owners” viewed photographs of companion animals during functional MRI (fMRI) scans and provided ratings of attraction to the animal species represented in the photographs. Fourteen subjects additionally submitted and viewed personal pet photographs during fMRI scans and completed the Lexington Attachment to Pets Scale (LAPS).

This study found that pet owners exhibited greater activation in the in areas of the insula, and frontal and occipital cortices than did non-pet owners, and found that ratings of attraction to animals correlated positively with neural activation in the cingulate gyrus, precentral gyrus, inferior parietal lobule, and superior temporal gyrus during the viewing of representative photographs. Scores on the LAPS for the 14 subjects with pets at home correlated positively with neural activation during the viewing of owned pet photographs in the precuneus, cuneus, and superior parietal lobule. They concluded:

> Our preliminary findings suggest that human perception of companion animals involve the visual attention network, which may be modulated at the neural level by subjective experiences of attraction or attachment to animals. Our understanding of human-animal interactions through anthrozoological neuroscience may better direct therapeutic applications, such as animal-assisted therapy (Hayama, Chang, Gumus, King & Ernst, 2016)

Although fMRI technology has not yet advanced to the level of portability that will be necessary for use in outdoor, live action fieldwork, this research bodes well for a future involving increased empirical validation of the biochemical mechanisms of action of AAT including EFP.

Conclusion

Despite its promise, research in the field of EFP appears to remain in its infancy. The field of EFP would clearly benefit from more operationalized forms, which would lend themselves more readily to empirical measurement (Bachi, 2012). Although there is ample qualitative research to suggest its efficacy, particularly for the treatment of trauma, thus far the field lacks the cohesion and clarity required for the replicable, randomized control trials that are needed in order to validate EFP as an evidence-based practice. Clear protocols can be written or adapted from other traditional theories and/or therapies, which would lend themselves to replicable quantitative study. As a next step in this direction, this project aims to synthesize and define the mechanisms of action of EFP for trauma, to assist others in writing protocol(s) which would lend themselves more readily to empirical measurement, and/or otherwise contribute to the mainstream advancement and understanding of EFP as a valuable mental health treatment.

CHAPTER III: METHOD

Overview

Various EFP modalities have been found effective for a variety of populations, particularly survivors of trauma and traumatic stress. However, many factors contribute to the field's barriers to methodologically sound measurement and mainstream understanding. Despite a large and rapidly expanding body of research, the field as yet lacks the cohesion and clarity required for empirical validation.

EFP is part of the larger field of AAT, which has gained mainstream recognition in recent years, however rather than bringing small animals such as dogs or cats to the clients, EFP therapists work with their clients using large equine partners, so the therapy must take place in non-traditional clinical settings. This factor, along with the added expense of keeping large animals leads to feasibility questions in the absence of quantitative validation to justify the extra expense and effort. Furthermore, EFP modalities appear to vary widely in theory and execution, and existing literature has yet to clearly and consistently delineate just how it is that horses facilitate change.

For example, the lack of standardized terminology in the field of EFP creates confusion, which becomes a barrier to mainstream acceptance and understanding. This study attempts to clarify the phenomenology of EFP by gathering first-hand information based on the lived experiences of practitioners with expertise in the field.

Projected benefits of this work include a clearer understanding of the mechanisms of action of EFP as well as their specific impacts on clients, particularly those recovering from trauma or traumatic stress. Ideally this work will contribute to clearer theoretical foundations upon which further research can build. Additionally, through an open-ended exploration of EFP

practitioners' lived experiences, complex, detailed understandings can be developed which may serve to answer important questions about what limitations and barriers challenge the growth of the field.

Choice of Method

When a problem or issue needs to be explored for which variables cannot easily be defined and measured, qualitative research is indicated. Since the field of EFP as yet appears to lack the cohesion and clarity needed for empirical evaluation, this project calls instead for a detailed and complex exploration of its mechanisms and issues in context, which affords the flexibility to identify and address gaps in understanding. Thus, a qualitative methodology was selected for this research, as open-ended inquiry and a flexible style of reporting appears most appropriate (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The combined methodology used in this study draws from both phenomenology and grounded theory approaches, as described below.

Phenomenology

Phenomenology draws largely upon the philosophy of the German mathematician, Husserl (1859-1938), along with Sartre and Heidegger, who are said to have expanded upon his work (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Present day phenomenological researchers hold common philosophical assumptions which place the study of individuals' conscious, lived experiences at the forefront (van Manen, 2014), and seek to describe the essence of these experiences rather than just explanation or analysis (Moustakas, 1994).

Phenomenology lends itself to this topic because its aim is to explore the "what" and the "how" of an experience by a heterogenous group of individuals (in this case the mechanisms of therapeutic action as experienced by EFP practitioners from varying backgrounds). The current study seeks to explore and analyze, in subjective and objective ways, experiences that are unique

to the individuals along with those common to the group. Given the current state of the EFP field, this methodology is appropriate for generating answers to both the primary and secondary questions put forth by this project, since both are necessarily open-ended. The method also allows for a certain level of anonymity, which welcomes participants' open expression of differing and/or controversial viewpoints.

Grounded Theory

Grounded theory is an emergent research approach, wherein understanding of a particular area of interest unfolds as knowledge is accrued (Charmaz, 2015). This method aims to generate theories that explain social phenomena by essentially working backward — from data to theory (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). Distinguishing characteristics of grounded theory include simultaneous data collection and analysis; analytic categories and codes developed from data rather than preconceived hypotheses; and middle-range theories constructed to understand and explain processes (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Systematic principles of grounded theory include iterative definition and re-definition of processes, actions and beliefs; and raising focused codes to conceptual categories (Charmaz, 2015; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 2008). Given the current state of the EFP field, this methodology lends itself to this study's research questions, since both are necessarily open-ended and one important goal of this project is to generate ideas which in turn "may later be verified through traditional quantitative methods" (Charmaz, 2015, p.81).

Combined Methodology Used in This Study

While the main methodology utilized in this project is phenomenology, it is important to note that the specific aims of the primary research question involve a departure from a strictly phenomenological approach. Whereas in traditional phenomenology, coding of significant

statements is limited, the current study identifies phenomena as significant inasmuch as they can clarify participants' lived experience around "the what and the how" of their equine practice. As such, during the idiographic analysis, a greater than usual number of phenomena were identified, as significant statements were further coded into subcategories which seek to clarify EFPs mechanisms of therapeutic action. These phenomena were then analyzed in aggregate (nomothetic analysis) to explore commonalities within and among equine practitioners' lived experience of how their equine practice brings about change for their clients.

As such, the reader will find that this project, while essentially phenomenological, also borrows heavily from grounded theory. As with grounded theory, one objective of this project is to extend common understanding of existing theory (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008) about how EFP works. However, while this project does seek to describe significant mechanisms of EFP, unlike grounded theory, it does not aim to generate or define a specific empirical theory at this time, but rather to provide a nascent framework for future theoretical and/or empirical research.

Participants

Eight equine practitioners from around the United States were found through online advertising and/or by personal recommendation and contacted through social media or by email (see Appendix A). Although the study was initially planned to focus only on licensed psychotherapists (six), the inclusion criteria were deliberately widened in order to capture insights reflective of the wide range of education and qualification levels held by equine practitioners who have found success in the field. Upon preliminary engagement, one participant was ruled out when it became clear that their practice centered primarily on hippotherapy, which, although it can include elements of EFP, is primarily a form of physical therapy. Of the seven practitioners who completed the full interview, one is a clinical psychologist, another is pursuing

a doctoral level license in clinical psychology, two are masters level clinicians (i.e., licensed psychotherapists who hold MA degrees in clinical psychology), and three are non-psychotherapist EAL practitioners who, incidentally, hold degrees in fields other than psychology.

All participants were assured anonymity for the project, so names have been changed and demographic details about each participant have been purposefully truncated. In addition, information pertaining to the participants' locations have been redacted (i.e. states, towns, business names). Finally, to shield participants from any potential professional conflicts and to maintain impartiality, names of specific certifying agencies, training programs and their authors (i.e. PATH, EAGALA, Natural Lifemanship, Epona, etc.) have been redacted as well.

Research Design

After a preliminary screening call, complete semi-structured interviews were conducted with six participants by telephone. Open-ended questions were asked, with responses digitally recorded and then transcribed.

After transcription, each interview was subjected to an idiographic analysis, whereby key statements were identified and then organized into phenomenological meaning units and coded for their significance to the study's primary and secondary research questions.

Finally, a nomothetic analysis was applied to the phenomena identified as significant within all seven interviews to explore commonalities among the lived experience of all study participants.

These processes were completed with the goal of generating a nascent grounded theory to address the "what and the how" of EFP, and to clarify understandings of its associated phenomena in support of additional research on its validity as a therapeutic modality.

Research Instrument

In accordance with both phenomenological and grounded theory research methods, an interview protocol was designed (see Appendix C) which served as a guide for conversation as opposed to adhering to a rigid structure. This flexibility was chosen in order to (a) avoid loaded and leading questions and foster open-endedness; (b) to provide logical pacing of topics and direction; and (c) to provide a framework for obtaining rich data that allowed for participants' reflection on the research topic and which could capture their individual responses in as much or as little detail as they cared to provide.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected from interviews with individuals who have experienced the phenomenon of EFP in a practitioner role. These were then analyzed in accordance with Moustakas' (1994) systematic procedures for phenomenological research. Significant statements from the interviews were identified, analyzed for themes and coded.

Idiographic analyses of the data were conducted to generate detailed descriptions of specific phenomena significant to the research questions outlined above, with emphasis on the "what" and the "how" (i.e. the practice of EFP with clients, and its mechanisms of therapeutic action) as experienced by the study participants.

Then these data were subject to an aggregate (nomothetic) analysis in an effort to generate an understanding of the essential elements of EFP practice (i.e. what mechanisms of therapeutic action were common to most experiencers of the phenomena based on lived experience narratives of EFP practitioners). The same methodology was applied to the secondary research question, which sought a detailed, common understanding of challenges, barriers and limitations to the growth and mainstream acceptance of the field.

Compliance with Ethical Guidelines

This research complies with Antioch University and American Psychological Association (APA) ethics. Data were coded. No compensation was offered for any respondent. Respondents were informed in writing of the rights and risks associated with participation in the study. All participants interviewed consented to the study by signing an Informed Consent form (see Appendix A). All respondents were offered the option to refuse any of the interview questions and were advised that they could choose to withdraw participation at any time. Where direct person-to-person referrals were not possible, information about potential participants was derived from public-access links advertised on social media and other online sources (i.e., Facebook, Psychology Today).

CHAPTER IV: RESULTS

Previous chapters outlined a working definition of EFP, evaluated research currently available on the field and then provided a rationale and description of why and how this phenomenological study was conducted. In this chapter, results are presented from each interview in narrative form, beginning with a brief overview of each practitioner's background and approach, followed by key responses to open-ended interview questions, which have been analyzed, coded into phenomenological meaning units and organized by their significance to the study's primary and/or secondary research questions. As discussed previously, the method used in this study combined elements from phenomenology and grounded theory. Therefore, the results below are presented as idiographic analyses, but in order to accommodate the aim to define the mechanisms of therapeutic action of EFP, elements of grounded theory were applied in lieu of limiting the number of significant phenomena discussed.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Education	Practitioner Status	Type of Equine Practice
Maya	MS Counseling	LPCC	Equine Assisted Learning
James	PsyD Candidate	Psych Assistant	Equine Assisted Psychotherapy
Carol	BS Business	Coach	Equine Assisted Learning
Steven	MS Criminal Justice	Teacher	Equine Assisted Learning
Hannah	PhD Psychology	Psychologist	Equine Assisted Psychotherapy
Elaine	MA Psychology	MFT	Equine Assisted Psychotherapy
Jillian	MA Literature	Teacher	Equine Assisted Learning

Interview One

Participant One: Maya

Maya, who holds a Masters' Degree in Counseling, is a Licensed Professional Clinical Counselor (LPCC) who currently practices Equine Assisted Learning (EAL), but stated that she may change this designation to Equine Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP) after pursuing additional certification(s). When asked which populations are best served by her equine practice, she replied, "That's a tough one. I mean, I think everyone, anyone can benefit. But, recently at least, I've dealt more with, anxiety. But it's been caused by different events. We've had a lot of trauma. I mean, my clientele is primarily, all trauma focused. We've dealt with a lot with all the big fires here in the last couple of years. Our county's been very impacted, so there's a lot of people that have anxiety, especially during fire season and at that time. So, yeah, anxiety and trauma, have been some of the main ones that I've seen."

Maya described her decision to enter into equine practice as an epiphany of sorts, which occurred when she realized the important role that horses have played in her own mental health: "I've had horses in my life since, well, I guess since before I was born. They've always – just ended up part of me and they've definitely been my saving grace. Growing up, there were probably several instances when I should have been – could have gone to therapy, but I just went out to my barn, or to wherever my horses were. They've always helped me through. At that point I didn't really have awareness or the knowledge to understand what or how, or why they were so impactful, just that they were. Then later I went through a divorce, and again realized that I turned back to my horses to help me through that. I was in a kind of a midway point. I had finished my bachelor's in psychology and I had another bachelor's in criminal justice, and I just, I just – was kind of unsure what I wanted to do. And, you know, seeing how my horses helped me,

again, I realized ‘that's what I want to do.’ I thought, ‘You know, the horses have helped me. I want to help people with horses.’”

When asked whether her current practice involves riding, Maya shared that in her experience, offering her clients opportunities to ride affords significant and immediate gains in both confidence and motivation: “My practice does incorporate riding, for most clients, not necessarily for everybody. For me, it's just another level in terms of trust and communication with the horse. And it can really help sometimes even with, regulating for the clients. So even if they're not per se, at the point where they want to ride on their own, sitting on the horse and being led and focusing on their breathing, feeling the movement can help the client regulate themselves if they're anxious. So, it's just, it's just another, for me, a very important tool and role for the horse to be able to play, but it's not for every client, depending, you know, on their circumstances. But I do, you know, I do generally incorporate, after so many sessions, depending on where they're at, that there'll be the mounted time.”

She shared that experiencing movement astride a horse enhances her clients’ experience of both self-regulation and confidence: “One example is, I partner with our hospice services here locally, and we do bereavement camps and I bring the horses and those, they spend some time, but also, you know, they kind of get ponied around for the kids to sit on a horse. But even just, you know, from the first time, cause several of these kids have never seen a horse. And you know when they're first getting on a horse, you know, they're scared. They're nervous. They're already dealing with a lot of other emotions, but then even just by the time we do our little lap and they're getting off the horse, they're like, ‘Oh, I did it!’ And then by the next time they get on the horse, because they usually can get on more than once, it's like, they're almost like jumping on the horse, cause know they're able to do it and they know what they're doing. And then, the

rest of the day they're more confident in doing anything because they've already done accomplished a big, huge task in the morning."

This interview illuminated several statements significant to the primary research question of how EFP works. Maya's lived experience narrative as an equine practitioner contained descriptions of significant mechanisms which were coded into meaning units and organized under five phenomenological categories: observation, communication, mindfulness, embodiment and connection.

Observation

In Maya's description of a typical initial equine session, she spoke of a set of preliminary activities involving which were assigned the label *observation*. These take place both internally and externally, in concrete and abstract ways. As the session unfolds, observations can be prompted or may unfold naturally in synergistic simultaneous ways. First, taking place at the most concrete external level is observation of herd and horse behavior. Next come opportunities for internal self-observation, which can take place both consciously and unconsciously.

External – Herd and Horse

One significant mechanism within Maya's practice, herd observation, is external to the client, happens on an intellectual level and involves concrete learning related to horse behavior. It also lays a foundation for basic horsemanship and safety: "A typical initial session is [the clients] come and they get to meet the herd. I like to have them observe the herd, and see them out in a natural setting. I mean, it's still an enclosed like pasture area, but they're just kind of loose running around." Since horse behavior and herd dynamics can tend to mirror the interpersonal behavior of humans, opportunities for horse and herd observation offers concrete

learning opportunities around body language, non-verbal communication, leadership, hierarchies, assertiveness and boundaries which are readily generalizable to human dynamics.

Internal – Self Observation

Along with concrete, external observations, the initial phase of Maya's session also prompts internal self-observation, which assists clients to become more conscious of their affect states: "That way they can observe the horses and see what feelings come up… before they even go in to meet any of the horses, they can say how they're feeling, because their fear or anxiety – that right there can already be hard for some clients."

This initial phase of Maya's typical session includes opportunities for the emergence of internal observations which were previously unconscious. This happens through projection, which can yield significant insights about the client's inner world: "Once they're comfortable with that, they go inside and meet some of the horses and see their personalities. I ask what they're getting from the horses in terms of like, 'Who's kind of the one in charge?' or 'Who's the more playful?' just so they can kind of learn the different dynamics of the horses and so we can find out how the clients are seeing them." Though these internal and external, conscious and unconscious observations continue to unfold throughout Maya's practice, these first moments of herd and horse observation set the stage for experiences that can be transformative on many levels.

Communication

Another mechanism significant to Maya's experience of equine practice is *communication*. This includes not only learning how horses communicate non-verbally (i.e. through herd observation described above), but also utilizing them in group sessions for experiential exercises which offer novel communication challenges and metaphoric insights

which readily support team-building and development of leadership skills. Maya also noted experiences in her practice involving clients whose verbal communication improved spontaneously and significantly by working with horses.

Non-verbal – Group

One such exercise Maya called "the appendages activity," which she described as follows: "So, if there's at least two people, or three, it can be…then one gets to be the brain and the other one just responds to whatever the brain says. And they have to work together to go and halter a horse and then sometimes lead them through [a designated path]. If they're successful in the whole terrain, depending on what success means to them, then they'll sometimes lead them over a couple of obstacles. But the brain is the one who has to tell the other side what to do. And they're all attached at the arms. So… one person will use their right hand, the other one can only use their left hand. Same with their feet… Ultimately the goal is to get the halter on the horse and to be able to successfully lead the horse."

Predictably, this sort of exercise leads to a variety of emotional experiences for its participants, ranging from frustration to humor, and everything in between: "Things go sometimes a little, you know, funky. At first, they don't communicate very well. And so, we then maybe even give the option of switching, like, 'Does the brain want to give another person the chance to be the brain?' and see if they're more successful. And then looking at how they communicated, what helped, what was positive, what didn't work, and to kind of work through that."

Since experiences like this can yield rapid and lasting insights into both individual and group dynamics, they are broadly sought out as a team-building, in-service or continuing education activity by companies and organizations spanning the private and public sector. "It's

interesting when you get it, because you can get a group of like six people being one body and the brain is in the middle and having to relay the message out to the outer appendages. It can be with a big group, or it can be with, you know, two people. So. It's a fun and very enlightening exercise."

Verbal

Maya also described experiences of another important communication phenomenon frequently reported across all animal assisted therapies: how the presence of an animal can motivate otherwise mute, late-talking children to spontaneously begin speaking, and/or alexithymic children to discover a capacity for verbalizing feelings. One example she shared was a child with anxiety: "He's experienced a couple of deaths in his family recently and mom was concerned, cause she was like, 'Well, he's not talking to me about them.' And he told her, 'Well, I have horse time today, right? And she said, 'Well, yeah.' And he was like, 'Okay, well I'll talk with Bubbles,' who was the mini horse he usually worked with, he goes, 'I'll talk to Bubbles and Maya about it when I'm there.'" Among the many benefits experienced by this 8-year-old boy, he learned to use his time at the ranch to process difficult emotions. Per Maya, "and he, you know, it was great for him to have that resource."

Mindfulness

Another significant aspect of Maya's equine learning practice involves mindfulness phenomena, which her clients begin experiencing, in both guided and organic ways from the moment they're introduced to the horses. Four themes reflecting mindfulness were identified and labeled: *openness to experience*, *presence*, *safety* and *cognitive reframe*.

Openness to Experience

By Maya's description, simply entering the pasture and being introduced to the horses facilitates a level of openness to experiences of the unknown, with frequently uncanny results. In Maya's experience, after a period of herd and horse observation (described above) her clients "always seem to choose the right horse for them, and for what they came to work on." Or vice versa: "Either they pick a horse or a horse ends up kind of picking them."

Presence, Safety

Maya described introductions that are simple, present-focused and cultivate a sense of safety and peace. "Then we take that horse over to a smaller, round pen where they can spend some time just with that particular horse. And it can be… just being there. Or it can be brushing. It can be leading them around. But just kind of getting to know that horse a little bit better. We also focus a little bit on safety. And, just some basic horsemanship skills, to get them a little bit more comfortable in that situation." In Maya's experience, the benefits of a mindful presence in the company of horses can be observed almost immediately: "I do a lot of work with kids, and it's why I say one of the quickest things that I can see, even just in a matter of probably minutes is a little bit of their confidence change… just in their presence and how they stand or how they hold themselves."

Maya's description of a specific case illustrated the benefits of practicing mindful presence with horses as a form of exposure treatment: "Well… [this boy] started last year and he was very, very anxious. Very worried about being dirty and having to do things in, you know, exactly the right proper way, and just, you know, just high anxiety. He is 8.

"The very first time he came out, he was terrified of the dirt and the dust and the horsehair. It was one of those, our first day was like, 'Well, I don't know if this is going to work

for him because it's causing him so much anxiety right now being here.' Because he was worried that mom was going to get mad. That he was going to be all filthy. And, you know, so working and talking with both of them about how, like, 'Well, maybe we can help by having specific ranch clothes that he wears that day when he comes out. So that everyone knows that it's gonna get dirty.' So, they did that and, you know, he has his, like, outfit that he wears when he comes." These experiences at the ranch afforded the client opportunities to experience dust and dirt in new ways.

Maya continued, "So… initially, even trying to brush a horse was difficult for him because it was dusty. And leading the horse. He was one where he was really wanting to get the mini [horse] to move, and the mini was like, 'I'm not going anywhere!' And so, we were able to work on some deep breathing. And when you get nervous or frustrated and like if we tense up, you know, how he felt, and then relating that to maybe how the horse might have been feeling a little bit. And learning how to, you know, to calm himself down. And then the horse went with him. But the primary concern he came in with was – you know, his mom just wanted him to learn that it was okay to get dirty. That sometimes, it was okay to, you know, not be so anxious in general." During his sessions, this young client's distress tolerance increased as his efforts at self-regulation were rewarded by the horse's increased willingness to participate with him.

Cognitive Reframe

Over time, these opportunities to approach novel experiences involving dirt and dust more mindfully led to a cognitive reframe of these anxiety triggers for both the client and his mother. Maya shared: "So, a couple months ago he came out. And we were in session and the mini horse he really liked, when she would get really nice and calm and relaxed, she always likes to roll. And so, he was just watching her roll and, you know, that used to make him upset

because he'd usually just brushed her and got her all clean. But this time he was like, well, ‘Do you think if I sat on the ground or if I rolled with her, that she would keep rolling?’

“And so, it was like, ‘Well, I don’t know, let’s, you know, why don’t you try it?’ And so, he was able to get down in the dirt and roll around and the dirty himself, you know? So, for a kid who didn't used to be able to even hardly walk through the dirt, let alone, you know, poop or anything, to be able to get down in the dirt next to the horse, and they both were just lying on the ground in the dirt playing. Yeah, it was – it was huge. And then, you know, he got up and he was like, ‘Oh no, I'm filthy,’ but I was like, ‘Alright, well let's dust off. We have hoses. We can always wash off if we need to.’

“So, he learned the skills of like, ‘we can adjust things if we get uncomfortable,’ but to be okay with being able to get that dirty and not be so worried. When I told mom, at first, she kind of got tense and as we talked, but she realized, ‘I know I'm a part of what causes the anxiety for him.’ And so, to bring that awareness to her, kind of has helped both of them.”

Embodiment

Maya’s equine practice involves not just mind-based, or top-down processing mechanisms, she also noted significant body-based, or bottom-up phenomena. Much if not most of the learning which takes place during her sessions is experiential, with effects that can be noted somatically not just through mentalization.

Nervous System Regulation

In addition to the mindfulness phenomena described above, Maya’s descriptions of her lived experience as an EFP practitioner consistently reflect that simply being in the presence of horses affords embodied experiences of self-regulation through co-regulation. She stated that frequently her clients “instantaneously feel themselves calmed down as the horse calms. And

then same way with the horse, they're helping [the horse] calm down by focusing on, or feeling the horse breathe. So, it can help them regulate."

Maya also discussed her experience using physiological measures to encourage her clients' body awareness and track outcomes: "I've done sometimes where, you know, we take the blood pressure and see what their heart rate is. When they get more nervous or when they're getting anxious, to be like, 'Alright, well, let's see where our heart rates are right now.' And then, you know, at the end of the session, or even after a couple of breathing cycles with the horse. Most times when I've done it, their heart rates have decreased. They've kind of gotten more at ease, you know, more relaxed."

Connection

Another phenomenon significant to Maya's equine practice is something she calls connection, which, though difficult to define in words (vs. experience), is so important that it ultimately determines her clients' ability to effectively engage with an equine partner. Inasmuch as connection is required by her horses for participation, it is also something they teach, simply by their willingness to affirm or deny its presence. Sometimes referred to as "joining" or "partnering with," the process of connection works synergistically with the observation, communication and mindfulness components described above. By Maya's description, two of the most important aspects of connection are authenticity and validation.

Authenticity

"The horse has to at least trust. I mean horses are – their biggest concerns are, you know, ultimately their safety, and if there's food. So, if they don't trust you at all, I mean, you can pull and pull and pull on the horse and it's not going to buy it if it doesn't want to or doesn't trust you, you know? And even with the mini, you know, if she doesn't feel comfortable with one of the

kids or an adult, you know, just because she's small doesn't mean you're going to be able to pull her." Maya's clients learn from her horses that incongruent affect and coercive techniques are not effective ways of engaging, and the experience of gaining the horse's trust and cooperation can be transformative.

Validation

According to Maya, finding this ability to connect is empowering for her clients: "even being able to get comfortable being up around the horse and then, doing any kind of task with them. I do have a wide range of sizes, but with any of them, the full-size horses in particular… to get any horse to do what they want, you know, to partner with them and to accomplish any task – knowing that a 1200-pound animal is willing to do this because they simply ask? It gives them that much more power and confidence in themselves of being able to communicate something to somebody else or even just for themselves to know, like, 'I did it.'"

According to Maya these lessons about connection have lasting impact: "So, that knowledge for them to know that the horses won't do something if they don't feel connected at all or trust you enough to, you know, be there with you, helps them already know, like: 'Hey, this horse is – I'm not forcing. It's not out of fear. It's because they're wanting to, like, they feel something in me; they trust me,' you know? And so, to know an animal that maybe they just met can trust them to accomplish something? It's empowering for them, that I have seen, at least."

Secondary Research Question: Challenges to the Growth of the Field

This interview yielded three statements significant to this study's secondary research question, regarding perceived limitations and/or barriers to the growth of EFP. Maya shared her ideas about the measurability of equine facilitated practices and identified two other main areas of concern: financial hurdles and lack of cohesion among practitioners.

Measurability

When I asked Maya for her ideas about what measures might be used to accurately evaluate the effectiveness of EFP, she replied, “Yeah, when I was in school, we kept running into that as well. Research hasn't – you know – is poor in that regard. I mean, we know it works. But, I mean, yeah. We can use the simple kind of scales from zero to 10 when you start a session to zero to 10 when you're done, at least to be able to see any changes there. Also, physiological measures like blood pressure and heart rate. So, I think those are some ways that possibly could help in terms of tracking to see the actual impact.

“I know doing EMDR can be incorporated with the horses and [one modality] has the trainings in order to do that in a lot of the trauma work. And also, in the future, possibly doing neuroimaging to see if there's any changes in the clients before or after. Obviously, that's a lot more money and a lot more process. But that's just, maybe what could be done at some point…to see if there's any changes in the brain after working with the horses.”

Funding

Maya shared her perspective on the financial challenges inherent to keeping and working with horses: “I'm starting my own business and I'm trying to build my ranch and getting the facilities has been difficult. Especially with changes in weather and times of year, you know, having a place to set up when coming through a time of year where I don't have as many sessions because it gets rainier and I don't have a facility yet…I'm privileged to have other people nearby with barns and stuff that I can use. But money is a factor in trying to get established. There's no place here locally near me else that offers services, so to be able to compare, you know, even in my smaller county versus like I, you know, lived in [another, wealthier] county where they offer some services too, and they're a lot more expensive. But down there, more people can afford

more and there's no way I could charge that here locally with my clientele. So, I'm trying to find that balance of enough where, you know, that people can benefit, but that I can still survive and keep doing business – that's been a struggle."

Cohesion (Lack of)

Maya shared that although she has experience in several equine therapeutic modalities through the university where she completed her MA in Equine Assisted Mental Health, she has thus far chosen not to seek certification in any one of them due to her perception that they create as many limitations as they do opportunities. She shared that "in terms of the equine work and services, I think there's value in all of them. But some practitioners get so stuck in certain certifications that they've gotten… like, 'This is the best way. The only way. You can't do this and do another.' That you have to only be, you know, certified in one and you can't touch the others. You know, for me personally I think that, if it's really client based… you might need to pull from some of the other ones to really help the client. So [that has] kept me from getting certain certifications because I don't want to be forced to only be that way, or only use their tools and their modalities. So, as a whole, it'd be nice if there could be more open-mindedness to, like, collaborating and learning from each other. You know, to be able to just have more knowledge in general to be able to provide better and more services for our clients."

Interview Two

Participant Two: James

James (a pseudonym to protect anonymity) is a Psychological Assistant, currently working toward his doctorate in psychology (PsyD), with a plan to practice as a licensed clinical psychologist. He currently interns at a training site that offers Equine Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP). When asked which populations he feels are best served by this equine practice, James

replied, “we work with more or less healthy neurotics; well, I guess we do work with some personality disorders, but we wouldn't work with somebody who was in a psychotic state for example. We do work with pretty serious depression, pretty serious anxiety... I think, then, if I had to pin it down to who has most benefited, I think that it would be like, depression and anxiety that is resulting from trauma.”

When asked what fueled his interest in equine psychotherapy, James shared that it was a job as a trail guide at a popular tourist destination that started him thinking about horses being used in a therapeutic manner: “This was years ago, and there was still, like, a three hour ride available, which I don't think they do anymore, but we used to go from [town a] to [town b] to this restaurant and back. And it was pretty big deal across [large nature reserve] and it would be, like, total beginner riders riding these horses – and people would be terrified really. Like they'd signed up for more than they thought they could handle. And I was basically acting as their psychologist on the horse, like, coaching them through fears and different things. And then afterward I would see this huge change sometimes, a lot of times, just from having this experience with the horse and overcoming their fears. And so, I started thinking that there was really something to the change that can happen with people from working with horses.”

James made similar observations later on while working with horses and their new owners: “I was exercising people's horses for them in [town]. And they would think that I was, like, training their horses, when, really, I was just getting their horses fit, because they needed to be happy so that they could ride them on the weekend. And, but then I would notice that people were afraid to ride their horses because they had all of these ideas and blocks and stories about stuff that really had to do with themselves. So, at that point I was like, wow, this is really rich for, basically, psychological analysis.”

When asked whether his current practice involves riding, James replied, “my way does not, mainly because, the horses that we use – the herd are all rescues and they all have some sort of injury or something, where they're no longer rideable basically. Which I think is great because I think it does bring, sort of, the ‘wounded healer’ idea. I think it does make them even better healers.” He went on to add that under the right circumstances, learning to ride can be therapeutic: “personally, I would love to use horses for some kind of riding, because I think there is a lot of therapeutic value to being in the saddle. I think it can really restore self-confidence, and sense of self and help with trauma.” However, he also pointed out that including riding can introduce unnecessary limitations: “I also think for most people it's better that we just do groundwork because that's really available to anyone. There’s a lot less fear and anxiety to overcome, and it's less to manage as far as the horse and rider goes. Like, so, we offer 50-minute hours and 90-minute hours and there's no way we'd be able to do a ride in the 50-minute hour.”

When asked his views on whether EFP should be an adjunct or standalone practice, James weighed in that both EFP and traditional clinical work are valuable: “I think both are great. Honestly, I think it depends on the individual. Some people want to just talk, you know? Some people need to have their stories told and that can be helpful. And I've had clients where basically they want to tell me their stories in the presence of horses. Now, which is fine, but this is more expensive. So, I think both are great.”

James’ lived experience as an equine practitioner revealed several themes relevant to this study’s primary research question which seeks to understand the mechanisms of action that create change for the clients in his practice. I have organized these phenomena under five categories: observation, mindfulness, connection, exposure and communication. In an effort to

clarify and understand the specifics of these categories, I have further enumerated subcategories within each one.

Observation

As with the previous study participant (see Maya above), observation lies at the foundation of James' EAP practice. This takes place both externally and internally. In James' practice, it appears that all opportunities for observation during the session, from simply noticing the horse's behavior to identifying with the horse in deep unconscious ways, are ultimately invitations for better self-understanding. As he put it, "some people say horses are like giant biofeedback machines. But, of course it's more than that. Just by watching them, we can see so much. About everything. From, like, group dynamics, to really specific information about how we're showing up in the world. So, there's – so it does work on lots of different levels."

External – Herd and Horse

According to James, horses can model self-regulation: "horses are really good at calming back down. So, a horse can be startled and jump away or even run a little bit, but then they're willing to stop, assess; they know how to engage that parasympathetic nervous system. So, when you watch them, they take these deep breaths, they shake, they roll, they do all these things to correct; to achieve, like, physical balance. So, all of that can be helpful as learning." This is just one example of how observing a single horse, or an entire herd, can offer models for behavior and experience that, once aware, clients can begin to notice and apply in their own life and relationships. Simple invitations for external observation open the door to, and are interwoven with all of the other phenomena described below (see specifically Mindfulness, Connection).

Internal – Self Observation

James' description of his practice illustrated how time working with horses also prompts internal observation: "they don't care what you look like, what breed you are, what sexual preference you are. What they care about is if they can trust you – if your insides match your outsides." Horses are highly attuned to the internal states of other beings in their presence. Since working therapeutically with them involves gaining their trust, their response to our presence offers a quick and truthful assessment of our internal feeling states.

In James' experience, EAP offers clients unique and immediate opportunities for internal self-observation, i.e., becoming conscious of discrepancies between outward affect and internal feeling states. He has found that this ability is developed very quickly since it is essentially prerequisite to the horse feeling safe enough to work with the client (See also Congruence below).

James' practice also invites a form of internal observation that reveals aspects of his clients' unconscious. During the herd observation phase of his sessions, he shared: "I'll sometimes just have a client tell me what they think the herd is doing, or how is the herd feeling, or what is the horse doing now? And then based on the story that they tell you, like, 'Oh, that horse is really sad,' or 'he's away from his friends,' or all of these things, it provides this rich material." By having his clients sharing what they imagine as they gaze at the herd, James' clients offer a window into their internal world through projection, which allows for unconscious content and processes to be observed.

Mindfulness

Several phenomena that figured largely within James' his EAP practice narrative can be considered as aspects of mindfulness, or mindfulness practice. These are: intentionality

(sometimes referred to as “setting an intention”), presence (i.e., a practice of “being in the moment”), and nervous system regulation (i.e., cultivating calm through self-regulation and/or co-regulation).

Intentionality

James’ description of a typical EAP session involves an aspect of mindfulness known as intentionality. He shared that after a check in “either in the presence of horses, or in another area outdoors” (i.e., to integrate experiences from past sessions and share anticipatory thoughts about the current session), followed by a review of safety rules, “there'll usually be some kind of activity that has to do basically with assigning meaning to a task that you're going to bring the horse through, and sometimes assigning meaning to the horse. So, for example, we could have cones set up that mean different goals in a person's life. And then I'll ask the client to assign meaning to the horse, and then I interpret the horse for them.” The convergence of these assigned meanings with the horse’s behaviors are then subject to collaborative, open-ended interpretations. “So, if the horse stops at different places or is starting to get annoyed, or digs in, and kind of breezes past something; we don't consider anything to be accidents or coincidence. We use it all as information, and so we use it as metaphor, but we also use it as actual feedback from the horse.” This mindful combination of intentionality and openness sets the stage for the emergence of unexpected insights at both conscious and unconscious levels.

Presence

The concept of presence is another aspect of mindfulness practice which figures largely in James’ lived experience as an equine practitioner. When asked for his direct opinions on how EAP works, he replied: “So it does work on lots of different levels. I guess we'll start with the physical level. There's a calming presence because horses live in the present. They're always

ready to act, but they're not going to waste the energy, like humans do, future-tripping or dwelling on regrets. So, they're always right where their feet are, which can be really relieving. Especially in our culture since we're always focused on forward motion and getting things done, with our to-do lists. So just to be in the presence of other beings that actually know how to be present, is therapeutically beneficial, I think."

Embodiment

As with Maya (see above), this interview yielded a significant reference to bottom-up, somatically based phenomena. These closely coincide and work in tandem with the mindfulness phenomena described in the previous section.

Nervous System Regulation

Along with the mindfulness phenomena above, James also described self-regulation through co-regulation, which in his experience tends to occur naturally in the presence of horses. He shared, "Some studies say that our cardiovascular system can actually link up with the larger animals. That, because when we're babies, basically we're regulating our heartbeat through our mother's heartbeat. Then, there is still some of that – so, when we're standing, like, heart-to-heart, which is also kind of, from your previous question, the philosophy of eye-to-eye and heart-to-heart rather than a person being on top of a horse that it can actually help to regulate your cardiovascular system and engage the parasympathetic nervous system and come down from the fight or flight."

Connection

James' EAP practice offers opportunities to experience connection in ways that are both intrapersonal and interpersonal. This happens via two significant phenomena which were assigned the labels *congruence* and *partnering*. Congruence (i.e., of internal mood and displayed

affect) can be understood as a mechanism for exploring connection to oneself (see also Internal Observation – Conscious, above). Partnering is a means for exploring connection with others. James' description of his EAP practice illustrated both.

Congruence

According to James, one way horses teach connection is by requiring awareness of our own internal emotional states. Incongruence of mood and affect is a form of intrapersonal disconnection which horses find intolerable: "What they care about is if you're congruent, meaning if your insides are matching your outsides. And they need that because they're prey animals. So, they need to be able to size up the predator, which is us, and know if we are hungry and just pretending to be full or, you know, actually full. Is it safe to walk past us and go to the watering hole, or are we going to turn around and hunt them? So that's where that ability that they have comes from, to really see if our outsides are matching our insides. And to feel that, they read us physically, but there's also this other energetic component; they're like giant biofeedback machines because they're operating on these other levels that we can't detect." Since congruence is essentially prerequisite to engaging effectively with the horse, it is a function of James' EAP practice which presents itself early and often. Since they are learned experientially, lessons from horses about congruence are memorable in embodied ways.

Partnering

By requiring congruence for participation, James' horses also teach humans when internal barriers exist which to may be preventing authentic connection with others: "So, if we are pretending to be brave or something like that, when we're actually nervous, they're not going to walk with us. They're not going to participate with us, because we're not a safe partner. So, for us, emotionally, that lets us check in with ourselves and see what's really going on. Or it lets the

therapist cut through a lot of defenses quickly and say, ‘Sorry, I'm just not believing you because your horse doesn't lie, and he is saying no.’" Whether successful or not, opportunities for partnering with horses can offer lasting insights into a client’s availability for connection.

Oblique Exposure – Metaphor

James’ case description of a client, Peter (a pseudonym), offered an illustration of how metaphor can be used within EFP as a form of oblique exposure, i.e., a way of addressing traumatic material without having to directly retell it. James shared, “So, this client is a young male between the ages of 22 and 30, let's say. And he was, violated – sexually abused by his doctor last summer. And ever since that happened, he has had really bad panic attacks, hasn't been able to work. And his self-esteem is, like, gone. His relationships have suffered. It's been a real issue. And he is also in regular therapy. His regular therapist suggested EAP as an adjunct. So, this is like the perfect example of where it can be helpful because sometimes it's not helpful to retell our stories because it retraumatizes or causes complex trauma.

“And so, this is a way to work out the trauma physically and creatively and get support, get emotional support from something that is nonthreatening, since he has been threatened by humans. So, what happened that was sort of remarkable was – he came saying, ‘I don't want to have to retell my story.’ That's fine with us because it's really between him and the equine. (…) So, I asked him to assign meaning to her and said that he didn't need to tell me, and then also to assign meaning to this little obstacle course that we had made.” By assigning meaning to the horse and the activities they were about to complete, Peter was offered the opportunity to process his trauma indirectly. Since in this case the phenomenon of oblique exposure through metaphor is interwoven with other significant phenomena, its complete illustration continues below.

Communication

Communication was another mechanism that emerged through significant statements within this interview. As with the previous narrative (see Maya above), the primary focus was on communication from human to human and/or from human to horse, however James' narrative offered a deeper look into another type of nonverbal communication: from horse to human.

Although horse to human communication typically happens overtly, through the horses' body language and/or behavior (see External Observation above), it can also take place on deeper levels, in subtle ways that can sometimes defy material explanation. According to James, "there's also this other energetic component… because [horses are] operating on these other levels that we can't detect." James' case description of his client, Peter, contained examples of nonverbal communication from horse to human appeared in both overt and deeper, more nuanced ways.

Nonverbal – horse to human

As James continued describing the case of Peter, he stated: "So, I asked him to pick an equine and he picked one we would sometimes consider a more advanced mare, as far as she can be testy and isn't quick to; it takes quite a bit to form a relationship with her, basically. But he wanted to work with this mare, so I said okay. He wasn't really able to touch her without her getting like her ears back a little bit. Saying like, 'no, thank you.' But she was happy for him to just stand next to him. So, a couple of seconds after that, the mare starts pawing at the ground. So, I say to him. Let's unclick her from her lead and give her the freedom to roll. Because she was telling me she wanted to roll by pawing the ground."

This part of James' case description demonstrated how, with the help of the therapist and/or equine specialist, clients can learn to interpret horses' communication about wants and

preferences through body language, which, as discussed previously is necessary for safety around horses, and can assist the client in developing generalizable interpersonal skills. However, as James' case description continued to unfold, it soon revealed a type of communication from the horse which happens at deeper, more subtle levels. James continued: "So, [the horse] starts to just drop down right in front of us and I'm commenting that it's, you know, really trusting of her in particular because of her personality, but of any prey animal to lay down on their back and start to roll with a couple of predators standing around because they're completely defenseless in that position." While James interpreted this fairly remarkable, thorough concrete behavioral communication of trust from the mare to the humans in her presence, he soon realized that something else was also happening for the client:

"So, my client starts to cry. And I think it's just because this is quite a beautiful sight, for this really large, majestic black horse to drop down right in front of us and start rolling. But then he says, 'I just can't believe that you said, "Give her her freedom." Because that's what I assigned to her; her meaning was freedom. And as soon as I thought that, she started pawing the ground, and then you said, to give her her freedom.'" This pivotal moment in Peter's session illustrates a phenomenon which, per James, occurs frequently for his clients; one that lies at intersection of observation, metaphor, and communication.

The rest of James' description reflects how these three interwoven mechanisms unfolded for Peter, in this case with uncanny results. James shared: *"*So then, [the horse] gets up and shakes it off, he clips the lead back onto the halter, and then as he takes her through this obstacle course, she keeps stopping, basically at every station. So, like, he had these different, just little like things that he made up – just little cone markers that he chose to represent these different things. She kept stopping and then, all the other horses actually started to make this fuss. And as

the clinician, I'm thinking, ‘shut up other horses because you're interrupting the session,’ right? They're like – but we always forget what teachers they are.

“So, [Peter] finally comes back around again. He's got these tears in his eyes, and I asked him if he wants to share, and he said, ‘you know, at every obstacle, she stopped and then she was looking over towards the other horses who were like, playing,’ and he said that he’d assigned [to the obstacle course] the meaning of – getting through having to retell the story with lawyers. And at every obstacle he had to reassess if it was worth it to go forward. And she kept stopping, and he would have to coax her forward. And then she was like, when the other horses started playing and stuff, he started crying because he feels like everybody else in his cohort is off playing and having this great time and he's there having to constantly, like, be coaxed into moving forward with the story and the thing that he's going through.” Clearly the client was moved by the session, particularly from the embodied experience of feeling seen and understood as indirectly communicated by the horse’s responses to the task at hand.

Secondary Research Question: Challenges to the Growth of the Field

During this interview two ideas emerged which were significant to the secondary research question which asks what factors pose challenges barriers to the growth of EFP. James referenced financial issues and a lack of cohesion between certification avenues as two main inhibiting factors.

Funding

James referenced insurance, boarding costs, and transportation as three major financial challenges relevant to his specific practice: “Insurance. Especially in [my state], it factors into how expensive it is to have a facility or offer equine assisted healing. And then there's the cost of having horses and rent. Hay and all that. And transportation. Like, for example, in the fires,

we've had a 12-horse trailer on the ready. Like my spot can barely pull it off and they charge between $150 to $250 a session. So, yeah, there's a lot of obstacles to overcome."

Cohesion (Lack of)

In his interview, James spoke about limitations associated with both the psychological and the horsemanship aspects he encountered when exploring different certification paths: "So, I chose EAP, basically because I didn't want to get roped into [two major certifying organization] … I checked [them] out at the time and neither seemed to have the psychological depth that I was interested in, like really getting to the root of people. The stuff that people, basically, the stories that people tell themselves that prevent them from engaging in better relationships. And then I also didn't, since I guess I'm being perfectly honest, at the time, respect the horsemanship aspect of either organization. I thought it was kind of non-horsey people and non-therapists, trying to do both."

James also expressed opinions about what he views as problems created by the proliferation of different certifying organizations. He shared, "I think it's really dangerous to continue to make these specializations. I think it cuts out a lot of the population who could be great healers, but maybe they're not school people. Maybe they don't have money for certifications. And I think it also cuts out a lot of the population because then by the time you go to school and all of that, you have to charge a lot of money. Yeah, I think, I don't think that those [organizations] specifically are a barrier, but I think if it became mandatory to have – like if it became where if you have a horse and you want to see a client, you have to either have [one certification or another], I think, you know, there are benefits of course, because it protects the consumer in some ways to know that there's oversight. But on the other hand, I think that it's becoming too proprietary."

Interview Three

Participant Three: Carol

Carol (a pseudonym to protect anonymity) is a wellness coach who practices Equine Assisted Learning (EAL). When asked what populations or diagnoses she typically works with, Carol replied, “I'm not a therapist, so I'm not actually acquiring that kind of information. So, anything I have is really more of just kind of my observation. And I think that I tend to get people with chronic health issues. I get a lot of people with anxiety, that are stressed. People trying to figure out their life and what's going on and what their options are. You know, when people come to me for private sessions, they are usually coming for a health issue, or relationship issue, or a work or career issue. So that's typically the categories of things that people come to me for.”

When asked about how she decided to go into this field, Carol shared that early in her career, she worked as a life coach and had assisted in founding a wellness coach training and certification organization before leaving that field to pursue other work. Then, she shared, “I had gotten out of that line of work and I wanted to get back into it… I was going through, kind of, another different certification for coaching health and self-healing. And, I got completed with that and was ready to get started building my website and marketing and doing all that, and like, I stalled. [laugh] Something just didn't feel right, and I didn't know what it was.”

Then a therapist friend asked if Carol would like to participate with her in a course of training from one of the main certifying agencies. “She had asked me if I would do the certification with her because I have a lot of experience in horses and she wanted me to be the equine specialist. And so, she asked me to take a look at it, and I did. And I was blown away because it was just absolutely, like, my calling. So yeah, I called her back. I told her I'm

absolutely interested, and then, you know, just before the certification, she bowed out. And I was really disappointed, but then I researched and found all the other ways that you could work with horses in coaching and helping people, so, that was a catalyst."

After this experience, Carol achieved three equine learning certifications from two different national organizations which she used to create her own method, which she described as follows: "It's kind of, actually, I think there's a little bit different than what was being done at the time that I introduced what I was doing. And I've gone on to present what I've done to help other people at a couple of conferences because it was a very, kind of easy way to start up. And I have helped other people with developing programs that are kind of based on what I've done, which was a little bit different at the time."

Carol's description of her lived experience as an equine practitioner yielded three phenomena that proved significant to the primary research question which seeks understanding of "the what and the how" of EFP. These fell into three of the categories previously defined within this chapter: mindfulness, observation and communication.

Mindfulness

When asked to describe a case that stood out in her mind, Carol's response reflected mindfulness as a mechanism that is significant to her practice. This takes place both intentionally, as in a meditation circle, and implicitly, in that this activity sets the stage for unexpected insights to emerge: "You know, when you ask that question there's just one thing that pops into my head. And I don't know if it's exactly the kind of thing that you're looking for, but I had what I call a healing horse circle. It's a meditation circle I do with horses and with a group." As unfolds in the following example, this deliberate practice of mindfulness can yield very rich insights for Carol's clients.

Observation

When asked about how change comes about for her clients, Carol described observation as her main job. She observes the horses' external behaviors in session to facilitate her clients' process of internal self-observation. "It's experiential," she shared, "…I see it as, my job is to ask the right questions to help them self-discover. What's going on, what's working or not working for them. And, then my job is to utilize the horse and the feedback the horse giving me, to help guide my questions and what I'm asking and probing for." This takes place on multiple levels, the first of which is simple, external observation of horse behavior.

External – Horse Behavior

Several examples of external observation, by Carol as well as her clients, are contained in her description of the specific healing horse circle (referenced above). However, one external observation of horse behavior during this activity stood out. Carol shared: "I had a horse that went over to a woman. She had a vest on, and he horse kept swishing its nose back and forth and back and forth and back and forth, like in a specific kind of area on the right side of her chest and ribs… that's the kind of behavior that, I mean, I know my horses well enough to know that my horses just don't do that for just no reason. So, there was something going on."

Internal – Self Observation

Noting the horse's unusual behavior, Carol engaged the client in an opportunity for self-observation: "I actually asked her if there was anything in the pocket and she said no. And the horse just continued like that. I mean, it wasn't just obvious to me. It was obvious to the entire group that something was going on. And, finally I just, I had an intuition that the horse wanted her to open the vest up. And so, I asked her if she felt comfortable opening her vest. So, she

opened her vest and the horse put his nose really close in on her and then just stopped and breathed. It was really fascinating."

Communication

This case description reflected another mechanism that holds great significance Carol's practice: communication. During the meditation circle, at first the meaning of this horse's unusual behavior was puzzling. However, soon enough it became clear that what had taken place was a form of communication. In this case, direct, non-verbal communication, from animal to human.

Nonverbal – horse to human

Carol shared, "and so, after our meditation, in my debrief, I asked [the client] a few, a little more probing questions about what might've been going on with that. Why she thought maybe the horse was doing it. And she could not for the life of her give me any reason she could understand why the horse was doing that. And even the group tried to participate in brainstorming and their impressions of what was happening. And so, we had that, kind of, debrief, and really didn't come up with anything specific.

"So, then we left the arena, and I have people fill out a self-evaluation of what happened. After they finished that, we continued to talk about what surprised them and what happened in that session. And this woman who, the horse had been at her chest, said, 'you know what?' She goes, 'I just realized that – I had lung cancer right where the horse was probing, and I had a lung removed. And I had tubes coming out where the horse was down on my ribs' and she said, 'so I think that must've been it.' And everybody just kind of got goosebumps, you know, on everybody's arms, because [laugh] yeah." Suddenly it became uncannily clear to all involved that

the horse had in fact been communicating something he had apparently perceived through sensory abilities that human beings, left to our own devices, tend to lack.

Upon reflection and discussion among the group, the idea also surfaced that the horse's persistent behavior during the meditation circle also communicated an important metaphor for the client. "So, then we just probed a little bit further. And, and the fact that she didn't even think of that, was interesting. And then she said that she was really…not wanting to think about those things. And she'd really pushed that information in her mind down and didn't want to really acknowledge it. She didn't want to really deal with it. So, I asked her if it might've been symbolic, what the horse did, asking her to open up her vest. And she – it was just like this light bulb went up, went on for her." The depth of insight afforded by this horse's communication was unforgettable and resonated deeply for the client.

Carol continued, "I ended up seeing her a couple of months later and she said that experience was just a real 'aha moment' for her, about how she has dealt with her cancer and tried to dismiss it and now she was much more willing to open up and talk about it and, and let it go. Yeah, it was really pretty, you know – I mean – like I said, it was just – everybody was witness to it too, so it was like – it was remarkable. The horses can sense these things and it's just amazing." Though difficult to quantify, it was clear to all who participated in Carol's horse meditation circle that day that the horse's presence afforded deeper insights than a similar activity involving only human participants.

Secondary Research Question: Challenges to the Growth of the Field

Carol's responses during this interview described four phenomena significant to this project's secondary research question about factors that may inhibitory factors to the EFP field.

Her responses reflected measurability, finances, public awareness and cohesion as significant hurdles.

Measurability

When asked whether she had any ideas or opinions about how EAL practices or outcomes might be made more consistently measurable, Carol shared that she gathers self-report ratings from clients before and after sessions: “You know, I've had probably now maybe a thousand people go through this one program. I have them, right before they go in, self-report their level of stress on a scale of one to 10. And I have them self-rate their level of pain. And then afterwards I have them report back again. And so, I have statistically recorded that over a long period of time. And I think that it's a super, super simple way.” Although she finds these simple self-report outcome measures adequate for her purposes, Carol also shared her opinion that “there's a lot that we have yet to learn, that we need a lot more research on, you know, real traditional type of research, on the benefits of equine therapy or learning.”

Funding, Public Awareness

When asked her opinions about the limitations or barriers to the growth of the field, Carol cited the high cost as one primary issue: “it's financially challenging...The primary reason I started doing groups the way I'm doing it is because of pricing; because of the cost. So, I think that there's been a lot of hurdles.”

In Carol's experience, this problem of high cost is compounded by a lack of public awareness around perceived value: “first off, just people don't understand the work...so when you have people that aren't familiar with it, and then you have a high price to it, and then originally people were asking for people to commit half day or full days to these types of programs, I think it was just very difficult to sell. So, I think that we've had to find ways to reduce the price.”

Carol shared her proactive approach for addressing both problems: “I do this group program so people can come in, they can experience it, they can see a little bit more about what the horse is doing and their value to the program and gain confidence in the person who's facilitating. And then they might be willing to come back and do a private session. Because that's when it gets more expensive. So, I think that the cost has been a hurdle. The understanding and an awareness of the value of the horse has been a hurdle.”

Cohesion (Lack of)

Carol indicated a lack of cohesion as another limiting factor to the growth of the EFP. She stated, “I think that there's so many different certifications and training programs out there that it's overwhelming. A lot of people will come to me and just want help about where they should go.” Carol shared that, in addition to an overwhelming number of different certification programs, each one has its own requirements, some of which add to the financial challenges mentioned above: “The [redacted] model is a two-person model, and that even further escalates the price.”

Along with the overwhelm and confusion related to so many specific training and certification programs, Carol also commented on the variety of equine therapeutic and learning practices available: “there's so many different ways that the horses are being used, there's on the ground, on horseback, therapy, non-therapy.” Finally, she commented on how differing views on horsemanship contribute to this lack of cohesion: “there's just a lot of confusion about how to handle horses and how to ride horses.”

Interview Four

Participant Four: Steven

Steven (a pseudonym to protect anonymity) is a former Private Detective with a BS in Criminal Justice. He is an expert horseman who currently practices Equine Assisted Learning (EAL) at an organization which he founded and runs. When asked to describe his program, Steven replied: “for the most part, it's what we call an inter-species communication course. And I'll tell you that the history behind that is that, well, for maybe the first year that we operated [redacted name of program] as a formal program for PTSD and emotional struggles, we were operating as an EAP. And what we were finding was we were discouraging a lot of people from participating. Because it was psychotherapy. And particularly veterans, law enforcement, quick responders, guys like myself, as I was a private investigator for years... the last thing we want is to be psychoanalyzed again and again, and again and again. And so, what these guys are looking for is they're looking for some relief from their struggles. And, you know, I can tell you that there's so many people that have walked in my door or that I've come to my presentations and said, ‘You know, if this is going to be more counseling, count me out. I've done that. Been there, sat on plenty of couches and I'm not doing it anymore.’ You see? So that's why we offer it both ways. And I have to say that the majority of our work is as an interspecies communications course.”

When asked about his entry into the profession, Steven shared: “I've been a horseman all my life. From the time I was a little kid. I got married in 1976 and I had my horse that I'd had for some time. And, a job took me away from my hometown. So, my wife and I moved and I took my horse with me.” Here, Steven shared his story of being in a new town and meeting a local

child who befriended him and his horse. That child, unbeknownst to him, had been previously mute. This experience (see Communication below) foreshadowed his current equine practice.

But first, Steven shared: “I became a private investigator. And, during that course of 38 years as a private investigator, I had numerous cases where I had kids that couldn't speak because of trauma, I had parents were threatening suicide because their child had been killed or had committed suicide. You know, just all this trauma. My private investigation practice was a lot of homicide and suicide investigation, broken families and just — lots of trauma. So, I found myself again, kind of unconsciously, bringing people out to my farm and having them spend time with my horses to relieve them of some of the trauma that they were dealing with. And then there was a period of time during that, that I also, because I was a long time horseman and I was giving these clinics, these training clinics, to people with horses. And I had people coming to me saying, you know, ‘we thought this was just a horse clinic, but wow. This has changed my life.’

“You know, I had two couples, two different couples that said they came here for a clinic after they had filed for divorce, but they didn't want to lose their money that they spent on the clinic, so they came anyway. And by the third day in the clinic, they're coming to me, saying, you know, ‘based on what we've learned about ourselves through this program, we're going to give our marriage another shot.’ You know, and both of those couples are still married. You know, nine years later. At that point, like about 2010, 2011, I realized that, and I had people saying to me, ‘What you're sharing with us as horsemen, you gotta be sharing with other people.’ That was kind of the birth of the human and equine inter-species communication course.”

When asked whether his practice involved riding, Steven shared: “Our program does not involve riding. It's all groundwork. And, the reason for that — there's two reasons. The first one is that we would discourage a lot of people from getting the help that they need if they thought

that they were going to have to ride a horse. In the past six years, we've put 200 to 250 people through this program here at our barn. And, I would guess that probably, 80 to 90% of those people would have not gone through the program if they thought they were going to have to ride a horse. A lot of them were simply afraid of horses. To where they'd come here and say, 'I don't like horses.' And so, they're not about to come to a program where they think they're gonna get put on a horse and get bucked off. People who are afraid or think 'they're just going to buck me off or kick me or something.' So, we provide this as a non-riding, all groundwork program so that we don't discourage people who are afraid of horses. Secondly, too many people are putting people on horses without the adequate groundwork in there. Without the adequate connection with the horse. And that elevates the danger factor, the risk factor."

Although Steven's therapeutic practice does not involve riding, he stated that students who have completed his program often continue on to pursue an interest riding and horsemanship: "Oh, and so then when they've completed the [redacted] program, the groundwork program, many of them come back for riding lessons. Or they go to somebody else's barn and they take riding lessons where they can use what they've learned to pursue their riding lessons. We even have students that have gone and bought their own horses, and now have their own horses since the program."

Steven's descriptions of his lived experience yielded several significant statements relating to this study's primary research question. These reflected themes of mindfulness, embodiment, connection and communication.

Mindfulness

Two mindfulness phenomena held significance within Steven's interview about his equine learning practice: openness to experience (activities to set the stage for receptivity) and self-reflection (activities to mindfully integrate lessons from the horses).

Openness to Experience

When asked to describe his program, Steven shared that he begins each session of his six week program with classroom work, which incorporates a series of mindfulness based activities and theory to set the stage for insights from working with the horses. He shared, "first week, they come for the first two hours. We have an upstairs classroom that overlooks our arena (…) we set it up in a circle: what we call a talking circle or an expression circle. We sit on down and we kind of get to know each other. Everybody, maybe, tells their story, or listens to other people's stories about their life and, you know, why they're here. And once we do that, we do a meditation. It's really not a typical meditation. It's kind of a variation of meditation that's comfortable for everybody because not everybody's comfortable with meditation. Once we do that, we do some intuitive writing, and do some inspirational work, about their intuitive writing. We sometimes do some yoga or some tai chi, as part of a relaxation program and self-awareness program. And then we go downstairs and we meet horses. And that's kind of the first session."

Self-Reflection

James shared that, although emphasis on these classroom activities decreases as his group (of five or 6 participants) proceeds through the program, they bookend each equine session, to offer clients important opportunities for both preparation before and reflection afterward. Steve finds this practice of self-reflection assists his clients to integrate their learning and generalize their experiences with the horses: "so then, that next session we do some of that classroom work,

and then we're down with the horses quicker. And we spend more time with the horses. And progressively, as we go through the six-weeks we do a little less classroom work and more horse work. But we always end up in the classroom, kind of processing what happened with the horses, and how we relate the things that — the philosophies and methods that we work on in the classroom about ourselves and about life — how that equates to what's happening with the horse and how the horse is responding to us. So, it's real hands on. One of the professors of neurology told me, she said that it was probably the best cognitive exercise she's ever seen in a program."

Embodiment

Steven's EFP practice actively integrates top-down (cognitively based) and bottom-up (somatically based) learning experiences by alternating the mindful, intentional work described above, with opportunities for embodied sensorimotor experiences with the horses, "because," as he stated, "we're not just talking about how things can change. In the classroom we talk about the way we can change our perspective on life, and then we go down and it becomes real with the horse. You're experiencing a sensation. You're not just experiencing an example of something you're experiencing a sensation."

Nervous System Regulation

Steven shared that a very important aspect of his work involves teaching clients to become conscious of their bodies' internal states and processes before, during and after working with the horses. This includes opportunities to notice and cultivate self-and co-regulation in their presence. He stated, "we work a lot with variable heart rhythms and vibrations. The way we resonate. So, we start learning how to recognize that And, you know, I follow the Heart Math Institute's work, and I try and apply a lot of that to what we're doing. Because it's pretty evident that the horses are changing the way — they're changing us metabolically.

"You know, I have people tell me, you know, 'my anxiety level's down,' 'my blood pressure's down,' you know, 'all these things I've noticed in me spending time with the horse,' you see. So, the process is classroom and horse work and then classroom and horse work. Back and forth. And, you know, the two go together. And at the end of the [program] it all kind of comes together and it's like a big light came on."

Connection

When asked to elaborate on change comes about for the participants in Steven's program, his answer emphasized connection as the antidote to isolation. Connection, in his program, centers on emotional safety, valuing oneself and having the courage to "lead the herd."

Safety through Connection

Steven shared that many of his clients are returning soldiers, who, in their attempts to find safely, have learned the unsafe coping strategy of self-isolation which perpetuates a cycle of disconnection, loneliness and rage. Working with the horses in his program offers these clients opportunities to experience safety through connection to the horse, which is ultimately achieved through recognizing their own value and thereby connecting to themselves. James stated, "One of the first things we work on in the arena with the horse — after teaching some of the philosophies and behavior, equine behaviors versus human behaviors — that kind of thing. One of the first things we share with our students is how to become that horse's safe place. And there's particular methods that we use to do that. And philosophies that they've learned in the classroom that help them get there. And it's really important, particularly for somebody who feels disconnected with society, our soldiers being a really good example of that. A lot of our veterans come back and they're trying to reintegrate into their communities and their families, and they feel really disconnected. It's really important for them to understand how valuable they

are in this relationship, what we call, you know, a herd of two. And they become the leader of that herd of two. And so, when they experience the value, of being this horse's safe place, it changes their perspective of themselves."

Connection to Self

James continued, "So, I had a young Marine who came to the program. And the first night he told us he didn't even belong here, that he only came because his wife and his counselor or therapist insisted that he try this. But he said, 'you know, I have my own method of doing things with my PTSD' and he said, 'I don't really need this.' So, and that method was locking himself up for a period of time every day to keep from going ballistic with his family. And so, he goes through the program and about the third or fourth week, I think it was, he came in and he wanted to talk to me privately.

"And so, we went and talked. And he is a guy who had attempted suicide and it was — everybody knew it. It was a big deal and they barely saved him and all that kind of stuff. So, he came to me and he said, 'you know, that thing we've been learning here about the safe place.' And I said 'yes.' And he said, 'I just want you to know that I'm not going to commit suicide. You don't have to worry about that now.' And he laughed.

"He said, 'last week after this, after our class, I went home and I realized that I'm my wife and my little girl's safe place. And I need to be there for them. I can't imagine taking my own life now. I really learned that with that horse. That horse really helped me understand how important I am to my wife and my little girl.' So that's the kind of thing we see on a regular basis, you know, they're taking these philosophies and these methods and they're taking the experience with the horse and they're applying it to their life and its working."

Emotional Connection

While emotional connection as a therapeutic mechanism of action is difficult to describe in concrete terms, it can be demonstrated in terms of lived experience. The following case example illustrates how horses can teach humans experiential lessons about emotional connection. “I’ll tell you another little story about a chaplain. Who, he's a chaplain for law enforcement, whose everyday work is going and knocking on someone's door, telling them that their loved one's been killed in a car accident or homicide or suicide or whatever. And he came to the program and, you know, several of the other people in the program knew him. And they were telling me like, ‘wow, he really needs this because of what he does.’

“So, in the talking circle, he talked a little bit about how traumatic it is to knock on someone's door and tell them that their child had been killed, but. And he told us that he and his wife were working on this other program, but it wasn't going very well. And he kind of alluded to that, you know, he and his wife weren't getting along very well over this whole issue, but it didn't get into it very deep. So, the second day of the program […] I'm teaching them how that horse responds to the energy level that we have, what we project from our heart center and how we say thank you from our heart and not from our left brain, see. So, I have this process that I have them go through and I'm asking them to ask their horse, these questions. And his horse answered his question twice and then stopped. And wouldn't do anymore and got frustrated. And so, went over to him and I asked him if I could help him. And he said, ‘yeah, this doesn't work for me,’ he said, ‘it worked twice, but now it doesn't work. The horse doesn't want anything to do with me.’

“So, I showed him. And I explained to him, I said, ‘remember we learned in the classroom about, you know, thinking with our heart and not with our head? And answering the

questions and showing appreciation from our heart,' you know? And I said, 'so what I'm seeing here is this horse responded to that. He answered your question twice. But you didn't thank him from your heart, you thanked him from your head. There's no appreciation coming from your head. It has to come from your heart.' And I said, 'so when you thank this horse with your heart, he will respond to you. Because now he can trust.' And so, I sent him back at it. And he was kind of in tears and pretty emotional about the whole thing. But he went back to it. And it worked. All of a sudden, this horse was just glued to him." This example illustrates how Steve's horses can teach humans when we are not connected to our feeling states and the different experiences that can be both given and received when we are able to connect to ourselves.

Regarding the effect that this day of working with the horse had on this student, James shared, "and so, we finished up the day. That was a Saturday. And Sunday morning he came and he, and he asked to talk to me. And he told me, he said, 'You know, that thing that happened yesterday with the thank you?' And I said, 'yeah.' He said, 'I realized when I went home last night, that in 23 years of marriage, I have never given myself to my wife like you had me give myself to that horse. So, I did last night. I went home and I gave myself to my wife. Like I gave myself to that horse.' And he said, 'We had the most amazing evening of 23 years.'" Prior to this experience, the student had been unable to differentiate when he was available to connect emotionally versus when he was not. After practicing this new skill, the client was able to bring the lesson home with him.

In reference to this case, Steven concluded, "so that's, you know, that's the kind of thing we're working towards. That's the kind of thing we hope our students accomplish. Self-discovery, awareness about their presentation in life, and, you know, how to ask questions and hear the answers to their questions. How to appreciate the answer to those questions. Sometimes

they're not exactly what we hope the answer is going to be either, but we learn to appreciate that answer."

Communication

Communication is clearly the mechanism of therapeutic action most significant to Steven's equine practice. He refers to his equine learning program as an interspecies communication course. In this course, the form of communication emphasized is largely non-verbal, between horse and human. However, the inception of his program contained an example of how working with horses can promote verbal communication as well.

Verbal

Steven's narrative about how he came into equine practice included a description of pivotal experience in which he and his horse inadvertently facilitated a nonverbal child's access to speech: "I ended up, really unconsciously, helping a little boy who hadn't spoken for three years, talk again, with my horse. His dad came to me in tears and said, 'you know, I got to have that horse because my son's talking to him.' And I didn't even know this little boy couldn't talk, cause he talks to me and my horse. And for weeks I'm giving him pony rides and he's talking to me like any other little seven or eight year old kid. And his dad comes to me and says, 'we've had him to every therapist in the [region] and he's been mute. You know, this horse has, has changed our lives.' And so, I ended up selling him my horse, and working with that little boy for about the next six months that we lived there. So that kind of — that kind of opened the doors for me. As far as, you know, what my horses had been doing for me as a child, and as I grew up with them, I realized that, you know, there's just a lot of little kids, a lot of people, that don't have that opportunity."

Nonverbal – horse to horse, human to horse

When asked to elaborate on what he refers to as interspecies communication, James shared about his own experience of learning to communicate with his horse. “Well, we speak with our eyes and the horse understands that language better than we do. My horse, Sam was the one who taught me how to communicate with my eyes, with a horse.

“I watched him communicate with my little herd of horses at feeding time. And after all the years, the lights just kind of came on and I said, ‘Wow, he's doing something I have never done.’ So, I practiced that with him. And, when I finally connected with him with my eyes, he came back to me with, like, ‘You finally get this pal,’ you know. And so, we learned to communicate with our eyes. And we can, we can ask them questions. We can answer their questions, we can move their body parts, whether we're on the ground or on their backs, we can be their leaders through our eye connection. Through our eye communication. And that's really important. I tell my students that all the time in the class.

“One of the things I equate this to is — you know, we've all seen these wildlife programs where there's a lion and a zebra at the same watering hole, you know. And the reason for that is, you've got a predator and an animal of prey. But they will both know that they're there for water. They communicate through their eyes. And the minute that lion's eye changes from, ‘I'm just getting water, for my survival,’ to ‘That zebra is a possible lunch,’ the zebra knows it. In — in a microsecond. And he's out of there, you see. Just by that lion's eyes. The way the lion looks at him.

“And so, it's true with horses. We're predators and they’re prey. So, they're constantly looking for our eye. For trust, for direction, and for the safe place. So. You know, I try and teach my students how important it is that they offer the horse their eye, and they communicate with

that eye. And then the next part of that is, the eye can't lie. Our mouths can lie, but our eyes can't lie. And so, you know, other humans read our eyes as well as horses.

"And we don't always understand how much we're reading somebody else's eye. Until — they have a pair of sunglasses on. We're all uncomfortable talking to somebody with dark glasses on. When we can't see where their eyes are. And so my students become really aware of that. When they realize how important your eye is. To this, this animal of prey."

Secondary Research Question: Challenges to the Growth of the Field

This interview yielded four responses significant to this study's secondary research question, regarding perceived limitations and/or barriers to the growth of the field. Steven shared his ideas about the measurability of equine facilitated practices and identified three other areas of concern: public awareness, funding, and the lack of cohesion and clarity among practices and practitioners.

Measurability

Steven's response to the inquiry into his ideas about the measurability of equine practices, reflected keen interest: "we're working on a program right now to start measuring vitals. And long-term effects. So, one of the projects is, we'll be putting monitors on some of our students that volunteer, and monitors on the horses as well. To demonstrate what metabolic changes occur with their heart rhythms and frequencies and heart rates. And sleep is a big deal.

"I've got a company right now that I'm talking to about a bracelet that my students will wear 24/7 through the six-week period. So that it'll also measure their sleep activity. Because one of the things that's come back to me by some of my students – in particular veterans – you know, they'll say in the fourth or fifth week of six weeks, they'll say, 'wow, this is the first time I slept

all night since I was discharged,' you know? And I think that that's a huge thing because a lot of physical health is directly related to our sleep quality.

"You know, I'm having people ask me all the time, 'Is this a health benefit?' You know, 'Obviously it's a mental health benefit, but is there a physical health benefit?' And without the data, today, I still say it is. Because I'm getting so much feedback from students saying, you know, 'I sleep better,' you know, 'I'm not waking up in the night,' and 'I'm not having the bad dreams I was having.' So, I'm kind of anxious to get that data collected. I have two different universities interested in helping me do that."

Public Awareness, Accessibility

One challenge Steven referenced is public awareness about equine therapeutic programs, which intersects with accessibility, which he views in relationship to overcoming stigma: "Awareness is a little more complex than just that term, but you first have to make sure that your communities know that it's available. And the second part of awareness is you've got to make it comfortable for people to engage in it. Because most of us who've got PTSD or have struggled with trauma really don't want to stand up and wave our hand, say, 'Hey, I got PTSD' or, 'Hey, I need help.' So, the awareness is kind of multifaceted. You're making the communities aware that you're there and then making it possible for them to be comfortable coming. So that's one roadblock or one struggle."

Funding

When asked how he approaches this hurdle, Steven replied: "Some of it's been word of mouth, and we just recently began applying for some grants and, you know, just knocking on some doors and trying to get some people to support the program. And I'll say this: I've kind of made the mistake, of trying to get local governments behind us. Because, you know, local

government, usually more money goes into administration and waste than whatever hits the ground. So today, you know, I'm trying to stay away from government agencies as much as possible and promote private foundations and individual benefactors support the program."

The third challenge Steven referenced is perhaps the most obvious: "And the other struggle of course, is finances. Because in my program, we don't charge people to go through the program. We provide this program free of charge. So, we rely on our fundraising abilities and my ability to generate income, to pay for it. So, during the period of time that I was that I was a self-employed private investigator and made decent money, I could fund this program for the most part. Now I'm retired from the PI practice, so I have no income. I'm relying, now, strictly on donations and benefactors that want to help support these folks that need the help. Well, fundraising is a big issue."

Since Steven mentioned veterans as a significant population served by his program, I asked whether he has ever worked with the VA. He replied: "Only in the sense of referrals. The local VA refer veterans to us and the VA also give us approval to certify instructors. So, we're a VA approved school for instructors. And that's — my goal right now is to duplicate what we're doing here at [redacted ranch name] all over the nation. We've got programs going in South Carolina, and then several cities here in the state of [redacted], and I've got requests to go to several other States around the United States and start the program. You know, my big growth step here is training other individuals to be instructors of the [redacted name of] program. Our goal is to spread as wide as we can, but I have to have more people doing what I'm doing in order to do that. I mean, it takes money, you know?"

Cohesion and Clarity (Lack of)

Steven's responses to interview items pertaining to inhibitory factors to the growth of EFP also addressed a lack of clarity and cohesion among the various practitioners and programs as a significant challenge to the field. He stated: "You know, we're different than, I would say, 99.9% of the equine programs out there. I have been solicited by several different equine programs. I think it was probably one of the reasons I developed [this program] when I did. Because there are a lot of equine programs out there. And while they're good, I thought, 'Well, why can't we do this? And why can't we add that?' And, and so I thought, you know, the way to do that is to create my own program so I can have all these things.

"You know, without mentioning any names, I can tell you that I have people come to me and say, 'Well, I went off and got certified under such and such a program.' And, their certification is involving, riding techniques, and high level riding techniques that mean nothing to the person with PTSD or emotional struggles. You know, I don't know how to get a horse to do a flying lead change or, ah, a piaffe, or dressage or how to, you know, get horses to do these things. But that isn't going to help someone heal who feels like, you know, they're a monster because they were involved in combat, or that their daughter hung herself. No, that's not really of any help at all. And so, I'm not interested in certifying people to be wazoo competitive horsemen. I'm interested in people getting into the hearts of people and the hearts of the horses. And connecting them."

Steven continued to elaborate that just as practitioners who are overly focused on horsemanship can be problematic, so are those who do not know enough about it: "One of the issues with EAPs is, you know, I know several people that are doing equine assisted psychotherapy, and they've gone off to this — um — school to become certified horse

specialists, they call them. And they come back and they say, ‘Well, now I'm a certified horse specialist. It was the first time I ever touched a horse, but in, you know, a week I became a certified horse specialist,’ you know? And so, they don't really understand, you know, the depth of the horse, and really, what's happening. So, I've gone and audited other programs where psychotherapists are using horses for therapy and — and it's sad to me because I sat there and I watched this disconnect between the horse and the human. And it makes me realize that many people think equine therapy is having a horse in the room. Like a piece of furniture. They're missing the value that the horse has to offer, see.

“And then, I've run into a number of people doing equine assisted therapy because they're, you know, a nationally recognized competitor in dressage or rodeo, or you know, some discipline. And – I was a competitor for years. I played polo for 25 years and I was kind of an over-the-top competitor. I had to reel myself back in because you know, I got wrapped up in the competition and I was being abusive to my horse. And so, I know from a past competitor's perspective that there's no room for competition in healing. You have to put that aside and you have to put that behind you. In fact, if anything, it's one of the experiences that you have in life that brings you to a new place of recognition and awareness of, you know, how we all fit in this oneness of creation. You know, and I guess that's the other thing I needed to — or failed to say about [Steven’s program name redacted]: it's not a religious program, but it is very spiritual. And it's, you know, a lot of people want to discount it or say we can't have that to be part of what we're doing because it's anecdotal. It's very, very important. Because humans are spiritual beings. And so are horses and dogs... and every living thing on earth is a spiritual being. And until we learn how to recognize that, and accept it. Then we struggle. So.

“See and, that was a big transition for me as a private investigator. I used to tell people in my career, ‘listen, if I can't measure it or photograph it, it doesn't exist.’ Because I knew I had to go sit on a witness stand and I had to convince a judge and a jury that it's real because I got a measurement of it or I got a photograph of it. You see? And so, I was stuck in that world for many years that, even though I was raised in a spiritual home, and with a spiritual background and a spiritual center, I found myself putting all that aside for this world of facts and figures. Science.

“But since then, I realized, you know, science is really about 300 years old and — and life is over 5,000 years old. So, you know, which one do we do we really want to rely on? Not to say that science is not good. Cause science has made some amazing discoveries. And we talk a lot about science in [Steven’s program name redacted]. The science of variable heart rhythms, and vibrations, and the molecular changes within ourselves – in the firing and re-firing of neural pathways that occur because of the change in energy and the change in variable heart rhythms – is all scientifically proven. And it helps us understand that there's more to this than anecdotal results.”

Interview Five

Participant Five: Hannah

Hannah began practicing psychotherapy in the late 1980s as a Marriage and Family Therapist (MFT), but then went on to earn her PhD, and has been practicing under a clinical psychology license since 1992. She began her Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy (EFP) practice 5 years ago. When asked about her entry into the field, Hannah shared, “Horses have always been an important part of my life. So, several years ago I heard about [one of the major equine certifying agencies] and became one of the first people certified through them back in 2003.

When I went through the training, I said, ‘Okay, this is perfect; this combines my two passions.’ But then, life happens, work just kind of took me away from that path. So then about five years ago I was just, you know, getting a little burnt out on my job that I was doing. And I said, ‘you know, I'd like to give this a try. This is something that I'm passionate about.’ So that's when I decided and gave a three-month notice and then, jumped right into doing solely equine therapy.”

When asked what populations or diagnoses she typically sees in her practice, Hannah shared, “That's a hard question. It's a hard question because I work with so many different populations, so many diagnoses, all age ranges. I work at actually three different places. The first one is a nonprofit organization that works with school age kids, mostly on social skills. And then I have my own private practice, where I utilize a horse rescue. It's at a private home with horses on the property, which makes it ideal for therapy. And then, I also work at a group practice for families. They have kind of a holistic approach, so they've got psychotherapy, speech therapy, psychiatry, nutrition, you name it. They have a horse too, so I provide the equine therapy component for their kids, out at a facility in [town name redacted].

When asked about the EFP modality she practices, Hannah replied: “So, yeah. [major equine certification agency]. I, you know, I don't know how I ever came across them in the first place. So that's obviously the route I took. And then just within the past couple of years, I've been looking at learning different modalities. Obviously [that organization] is the largest and most well-known, but I've been kind of branching out from them over the past few years.”

“I guess in general, I follow the private practice model, where the first session I do a full psychosocial assessment. You know, case conceptualization and treatment planning, all of that stuff. Then a typical session for me would be, you know, everything outside. So, we have a place where we circle up for a few minutes just to touch base about any progress, any changes. And

then I do ground based work. Even though I use some other modalities, it's still all ground-based, really looking more towards a mindfulness perspective. My youngest kid I've worked with is three and the oldest has been in her eighties, so, yeah. Really kind of varied. So, it's hard for me to say an exact one."

When asked her opinion about the populations that benefit most from equine work, Hannah shared: "I do work with a lot of residential substance abuse programs where they bring out their residents weekly. So, I'm kind of thinking about that population and the trauma population. My practice seems to be a little heavier in that regard, in terms of more of the trauma work, the substance abuse work. And I think they do get a lot of benefit, again, because – from the mindfulness perspective. People who are dealing with substance abuse, you know, they're disconnected. They know the talk or know what to say, so just being able to engage with the horse and take off that pressure or resistance to therapy. I've done [worked with] a sex trafficking recovery group, and again, that same thing: just kind of building trust again, building connection. Being able to be in the moment with that, that trauma work.

"But yeah, the only population I won't see are people who are on the psychotic spectrum, obviously because of the, you know, projective nature of it. And, children who are more severe on the autism spectrum, I think they need more behavioral therapy. But if they have like a secondary mental health issue, like anxiety or depression or something, then obviously I can, I can work with them. So, but yeah, I work with a mix of adults and kids, a mix of diagnoses, but I think trauma probably stands out the most for this work."

When asked whether her practice involves riding, Hannah shared: "It's very interesting because my first [major equine certification organization] training back in 2000 actually did have a riding component. And, actually, during the week-long certification, we actually rode the

horses too, and practiced some things on the horses. So, in my mind, yeah. You know, [that organization] has evolved many times over. But that was when both [founding partners] were teaching the classes. So, after hearing their different perspectives, you know, I think riding can be, very beneficial. For me, since the place that I work at utilizes rescue horses, that's just not an option in terms of their physical health. But, in terms of theory, I think in some circumstances, that riding can be therapeutic and brought into the therapy session.

"I like to think about it in terms of trauma work where, the rhythmic riding, the rhythmic pattern could be utilized. I don't want to get into how to ride a horse and all, you know, different types of tack and you know – cause then you've got kind of that power differential between you and the horse and it kind of gives the person an agenda, like, 'Okay, I'm going to do this with the horse or that with the horse.' But I think, in terms of the rhythmic riding, the trauma work, it's good. You know, I've actually prescribed a lot of therapeutic riding for some of my autistic kids. So, I think the two in combination can work really well."

When asked whether she feels EFP is more effective as standalone modality or as an adjunct to traditional therapy, Hannah replied: "I definitely think there's both. I've had situations where I've had parents call up where they've had a suicidal child. Child's been to 10 million therapists, refuses to go to therapy, but they'll try equine. So, I'll make a deal like, 'Listen, this isn't traditional therapy.' You know. There's pros and cons. And kind of making a deal. It's like, 'okay, I'll see you a couple of times on the condition that you'll then go to a therapist in addition to me.' So, you know, because parents are begging like, "They need help, but they won't go. I can't get them to go.' And that's kind of the, some of the premise of equine therapy is being out here for people who want to try a nontraditional approach, but balancing that with the clinical needs of a client. Obviously the more severe clients, a lot of them have to have a regular therapist

and whether we both see them the same week or every other week, it depends. I do a lot of collaboration with outside therapists. But I think for people who are highly functioning, who are doing more of the self-growth, learning how to set boundaries in their life, goal setting, stuff like that. Where they don't want to do traditional therapy, this works out just fine as a standalone service. So, obviously the severity to me is what will dictate what is necessary."

Hannah's narrative yielded several statements significant to this project's primary inquiry into the mechanisms of therapeutic action present within EFP practice. Hannah's lived experience as an equine practitioner reflected four significant phenomena: mindfulness, embodiment, observation, and communication.

Mindfulness

Three types of mindfulness phenomena appear significant to Hannah's equine psychotherapy practice. These are: presence, openness to experience, and self-regulation.

Presence

When asked to describe how her EFP practice works, Hannah replied: "Hmm. Probably hundreds of things. It's difficult to try to narrow down and quantify it. You know, I think the core of this is the experiential nature of it. You can have clients who've been in therapy for, you know, forever, who can tell their stories and it's more detached. But using that mindfulness perspective of them being in the moment with the horse and they have to engage, things just come up whether they want them to or not. So, I find that a lot of issues do come up faster [around horses] and people do, you know, people kind of have their own answers."

Openness to Experience

When asked to describe a case that stood out for her, Hannah shared about a child for whom EFP offered a level of openness that he hadn't been able to access through traditional

therapeutic modalities. She stated: “One boy I've worked with, who was probably around 10 or 11 when he started. Severe trauma history, born addicted, was in foster care, recently reunited with his mother and didn't know that his mother was actually his mother. The grandmother adopted him. And so, he still thought the grandmother was his mother. And had severe, severe ADHD. And, due to the substance abuse issues the mom had in the past, she did not want to do medication. So, he had no emotional regulation skills, so much so that he was taken out of public school and put into a day treatment school. Because of biting, stabbing kids with pencils. Just – just outbursts. And no friends, cause he's just – you know, the social skills weren't there. And he'd been to therapy, you know, so he knew about the deep breathing, knew about this or that, but they couldn't get him to stand still for a second, or want to engage in therapy in any way. So, very resistant, obviously. So, he wound up really liking this one horse that we had who – you know, there are no coincidences – this horse had a severe trauma history, where it, the horse was beaten with a two by four. So, because of that, the horse is very reactive and, you know, hesitant around people. So, something – whatever – attracted him to that horse.”

Embodiment

In addition to mindfulness-based phenomena, Hannah’s case description (continued from above) concluded with an example of embodiment as the mechanism which proved most important.

Nervous System Regulation

The child in the vignette above had been taught mindfulness skills for self-regulation through traditional clinical psychotherapy, but had been unable to apply them until he experienced EFP. Hannah’s description of the case continued with an illustration of how the horses provided both the motivation and the positive experiences he needed to access them:

"And of course, with his presentation – all of his energy, his body language and stuff – the horse would just keep, like, bolting away from him. And this went on, on and on. So, it was kind of getting to the point of like, 'You know, what do you think the horse needs in order to feel safe? What do you think, how could you do that?' Trying to bring in some of those coping skills again, about him learning to regulate himself. To make a long story short, he learned to connect with that horse. And eventually was able to halter the horse, take the horse for a walk… and then actually manage his behavior in school better. So, he was actually returned to public school. So, you know, it was a pretty intense case and we worked with him for, this was probably over the course of at least a year and a half. So, obviously long-term work, but it was really great to see. Cause it was about the horses. It wasn't about talking to me or – you know, per se. It was really his desire to connect with the horse that gave him that motivation to change."

Observation

Another significant mechanism within Hannah's practice is observation, which takes place both externally, in the form of herd and horse observation, and internally, in the form of opportunities for self-reflection.

External – Horse Behavior

Hannah described how observation figures largely in her role as an equine psychotherapist. She shared: "As the therapist, the first part of my job is to observe the interaction between a horse and a client and put aside judgment. So, I'll observe the horses, what the horses are doing, and observe the clients and what they're doing, and comment on what I see using words that have no judgment whatsoever. So, I'll describe, you know, 'one horse is in front of the other.' There's no judgment about that. So, an EFP session sort of suspends the element of judgment, which we all do in conventional on-the-couch therapy. And then, typically there's no

directing the client on what do other than I'll give them exercises to interact with the horses. And the philosophy is that the patients have their own answers, more or less, and my job is to guide them, with the help of the horses, to tune into themselves in a nonjudgmental way so they can know and understand themselves better."

"So really just kind of allowing that space where people can physically to work out issues and discover solutions. I think where the change comes is, having that visual and seeing how the horse reacts, really gives people feedback that they, maybe, can hear better than when it's coming from a therapist. Cause there's some sessions where we don't talk at all, but they obviously get a lot out of it. Obviously, it varies. But yeah, I think really the experiential nature of it is kind of the key."

Internal – Self-Observation

In Hannah's experience, working with horses naturally facilitates access to unconscious material, and frequently her role is to assist in bringing that to awareness without judgement, so that the client can observe and interpret their own experience. She shared: "What I'm doing is just tapping into the horses in their free environment and the clients' unconscious just by interacting with the horses; that's what they do. They're very attuned to the unconscious. So just being in that natural environment can bring things up. And when [the clients] come out of the session, having interacted with the horses, I'll ask 'What was that like for you?' Not getting into, you know, 'What's wrong with you and what are your problems?' or anything like that.

"The idea is to help people talk about their emotions in a constructive way. And so, we'll say things like, 'What was that like?' And it turns out that just interacting with the horses draws out emotions in the client. Because there's no place for judgment in the equine therapy. It's a kind of, almost a spiritual thing. We try to remove ways in which our judgments or – our own

obstacles or emotions would get in the way of helping a client. We want to remove as much of the countertransference as we can, so there's a pure interaction between the client himself and the horse. The therapist just helps them observe."

Communication

Hanna also shared about the importance of direct communication from and about the horse, which becomes particularly important in cases like the boy described above, "I think, you know, [redacted name of major EFP certifying organization] being so – open? That works for some people, obviously, but I think some people need more direction. So, in terms of understanding horse behavior – like, if the horse's ears are pinned back, [one major certifying organization] would just ask the person, 'What do you think the horse is feeling?' Whereas [another EFP organization] would say, 'You know, this indicates angry behavior.' So, I think having that knowledge works with some people too versus the complete, you know, projection based model."

Researcher: "So it sounds like they take it to a different level into, like, actual communication by body language."

Hanna: "Exactly. Yeah. Body language, and the energy. Yeah, it's amazing. There's just – yeah, tuning into that. And when you have a horse that's, you know, when the client's obviously agitating the horse and they're like, 'Oh no, the horse is happy,' or 'The horse is liking me,' and then you see the horse [indicating agitation], it's like, uh! You know? I don't think the person has that level of awareness even. So, that's when I'll say to myself, 'Okay, this projection type stuff isn't going to work in this case.' Typically, these will be the clients that need a little more understanding to be able to read people's emotions. So, learning about how horses communicate their emotions, kind of gives them that clue, in a way."

Secondary Research Question: Challenges to the Growth of the Field

This interview yielded three responses significant to the secondary research question of this project, regarding perceived limitations and/or barriers to the growth of the EFP field. Hannah shared that based on her lived experience, she identified three areas of concern: measurability, the lack of cohesion and clarity among practices and practitioner training, and finances.

Measurability

When asked for her ideas or opinions about how EAP practices could be made more consistently measurable, Hannah replied: "I think – good question. I mean, as for me, working with the nonprofits and stuff, I've always done outcome measures. I use the PHQ-9, the GAD-7 and the YOQ to give some sort of objective data, versus the wonderful subjective data that we get. And to get, the different validity to, 'hey, you know, they're not just coming out here petting horses, there's change going on.' I think to lend more credibility to this field, I think we'd need more professionals, more data, more of that standardization to eventually get it to a place of an evidence-based practice. But with so many different people doing it and so many different styles – and I would love for it to be. But I'm really not sure how we would get there."

Cohesion and Clarity (Lack of)

Hannah's significant statements reflected experiences of absent cohesion among programs and practitioners and a lack of clarity in terms of best practices: "My one concern for this growing exponential field is there are so many different 'certification programs.' There are so many different modalities and you know, using the word therapy and therapists, where a lot of these people don't really have any mental health background per se; they're using things from coaching or, things like that. I think it lends itself to such a wide range of quality. And I know

[major EFP organization] is trying really hard to crack down on that. To have that uniform and that standard... But I really don't know how that can be done.

"You know, I've worked with a couple of people and it's like, Oh gosh – [audible sigh]. And then on top of it, especially with [major EFP organization], I think the hard thing I have with them is the equine specialist. If you have a very savvy person who has, maybe, gone through their own work or have had that level of insight, I think they could be very valuable. But I've seen a lot of equine specialists who are way... overstepping. Boundaries. And going, you know. They – for them to be working in the mental health field and have absolutely no mental health training–. And I know they're supposed to just be focusing on the horse and the horse's behavior, but a lot of them don't. A lot of them, you know, will start asking those digging questions or making more reflective statements. You know, where obviously, if you have a mental health professional, there's some level of certification behind that. But with the equine specialist, it's just, you know, 'have you worked with the horse for so many hours?' So, I think that's one thing that has made it hard.

"I've worked with some really great equine specialists and I've worked with some people who I'll have to tell them, 'just stand over there.' It's just like, oh, when they say something that's – uh! Like, I worked with an eating disorder group and they had a person out there that was an equine specialist, and she was wanting to talk about weight and the horse's weight and this – and I'm like, 'Oh God!' you know, it's just – you just flinch, because it's, not nice. It's like, you know, you're in the middle of the group. You can't really address it, but having, you know [sounding pained]. You know. I know for [major EFP organization] – that's just – the basis of their program is having that team approach. But I think it would be – it's very, very hard to standardize and look at a quality standpoint for that. Yeah, so, that's a concern. And I mean,

they're obviously coming from good places, but we as professionals know our roles. This is all foreign to them. The equine specialists don't have rules and ethics and laws and everything. So, I think throwing them into that world, you know, can cause some issues."

Funding

According to Hannah, another significant challenge to the EFP field is financial. Hanna shared: "There's really very few people that do this full time because of the cost. I think the trickiest thing is, you know, obviously the horses, the care, having some type of equine specialist – to be able to cover the cost of that, where the insurance companies still aren't paying for the service. So, I'll do super bills a lot of the time and just fill it as traditional therapy because to me it is, it's just the modality is a little bit different. But then if they ask for the notes and paperwork, the second they see equine, they deny the claim.

"So really, I get a lot of calls, but I just take straight cash pay. Where obviously, a lot of people would like to go through their insurance and I think it would be great for them to go through their insurance, but having that barrier of the insurance companies not covering it, I think is a huge detriment to people being able to participate in it. I think most people, you know, organizations will have the nonprofit side so they can get around it and just see whatever clients they want to see without worrying about the payment aspect of it. Yeah, I think really – the cost. I think more and more people know about it, especially because I think of all the publicity that the veterans' programs are getting. So, you know, my calls and everything have definitely gone up, but that barrier with the cost and with the insurance companies, it's really kind of the biggest limiting factor."

Interview Six

Participant Six: Elaine

Elaine (a pseudonym to protect anonymity) is an EFP practitioner who has been a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist since 1996. When asked whether she practices under a certain equine certification, she responded: “I was certified [major equine certifying organization], but I did not keep my certification current. I was looking for a model that was more flexible. And, and so, I developed my own program. So that the, the practice of equine assisted therapy, or growth and learning, could keep expanding to be able to fit a client's needs better. And my problem with [major certifying organization] was once they developed a model, you had to do that model and it was if that was the only model. When it isn't. And I think as a therapist, we are mandated to do what is best for the client, which is why there are so many models of psychotherapy. And it should be the same for equine therapy.”

When asked about the path that led her to become an equine practitioner, Elaine shared that it was profoundly transformative experiences around horses inspired her to share them with others. She stated: “When I left the [previous career] industry I wasn't sure what I wanted to do with the rest of my life. I thought about running off and being a cowgirl, even though I knew nothing about horses. And then I saw an ad that said, ‘come sleep in our barn for three days and we'll teach you how to gentle a wild horse.’ And for some reason I thought that was a smart idea.

“So, I went to work for a wild horse rescue. I slept on some bales of hay and they put me in a 60-foot round pen with a helmet and a wild horse and a wild horse trainer who said, ‘So we don't break horses. We gentle them.’ I was told that the horse would trust me when I was congruent: when my thoughts, my feelings, and my actions were the same. He taught me that it wasn't about control, it was about connection. So, it started with breathing, and connecting to

what I was feeling. I learned that I was putting a lot of pressure on myself with very little release. Things shifted for me when I learned how to put a little bit [less] pressure and a lot more release.

"So, I practiced that. And then I kept practicing in that round pen. And over those three days I got a little bit better at calming myself and gentling myself. And finally, *I* was gentle. So that the horse felt safe enough to approach, smell and touch my outstretched hand. And I burst into tears. I realized that all of my past trauma, which I had been running from for 40 something years, came up like a tidal wave and then settled. Much like at the beach when a big wave crashes on the shore. That moment was so profound for me. And it lasted. All those wellness practices of breathing, of making sure I was authentic, of not trying to control the situation, and to be trustworthy, that's what helped me start my own healing. And from there I figured I could either spend $36,000 to get into therapy, or I could spend that money to become an equine therapist. I wanted to work with people and horses. So, I chose equine therapy. And that's how I started. About 14, 15 years ago."

When asked what populations or diagnoses she typically sees in her practice, Elaine replied: "Well, for the last three and a half years, I've worked a lot with combat veterans and first responders and I've sort of devoted myself to that population. But before that, I did a lot with, people struggling with substance use and abuse. I've also had lots of kids out to the ranch that are on the [Autism] spectrum. And, I always joke and say it's the people that respond the most or the best, not the diagnoses that they have. It's not about diagnosis.

"Because we actually don't bring the diagnoses into the corral; we actually bring the person in. So as far as I'm concerned, I may know that they have a diagnosis, but that's not what I'm introducing to the horse. The horse doesn't know you have a diagnosis, so it doesn't care. It doesn't care; why should we? And so, what I do with people who happen to have a diagnosis,

that's actually irrelevant to me for the most part. And we go in and meet the horses, as a human first. That way, I haven't found anybody that doesn't respond, or gain some wellness practices from being with horses. I've just not met anybody. And I don't care if you just brush them and hang out with them, or whether you go through some very extensive activities with them.

During my interview with Elaine several significant phenomena emerged which were relevant to the primary research question of this project. These can be understood under the categories of observation, mindfulness, embodiment and connection.

Observation

Elaine's description of a typical initial equine psychotherapy session indicated observation as a significant mechanism within her practice. This first happens externally through herd and horse observation, and soon shifts into a form of internal, self-observation which, in Elaine's experience, tends to unfold in uncanny ways.

External – Herd and Horse Observation

Elaine's narrative of a typical initial session included a description of how she incorporates external observation into her informed consent process. She shared: "The very first thing is to meet them outside the round pen or outside the corral or the pasture, and to have a sense that this modality is something that the client wants to do. We go through all the things that you would do with any therapy, disclosing your fee, the consent for treatment, explaining confidentiality and everything else, having them sign all the proper forms." Then, each session begins with a relaxed, unstructured period of observation. She stated, "Once [consents and disclosures are signed] and the client is clear that they would like to do this, the very first activity is to stand outside the pen and to have the client watch the horses. And as the client is watching the horses, we ask them to just see what they're doing. And they don't have to know anything

about the horses to just watch and to be observant. Once they observe the horses for a few minutes, we go in. And then, [they can] either approach the horse or not, and let the horse approach them or not."

Elaine's initial session continues with an external observation activity that is more directed and specific: "So while [the clients are] in there, they must choose one horse that is most like them based on at least one behavior that they have seen the horse do. So that could be a herd of maybe four horses all the way up to eight horses. Once a client has met me and they say to me, 'Yes, I've chosen the horse that I think is most like me,' I ask them which horse it is. And I'll say, 'What was the behavior the horse exhibited that made you say it was more like you than any of the other horses?'

Internal – Self-Observation

One way Elaine facilitates change for her clients is by utilizing impressions gained from their external observations of the herd and the horses to encourage internal, self-observation. In her description of a typical initial session (continued from above) she shared that after asking her clients what, from their external observation, was it that led them to select the horse they did, she shared: "They will oftentimes tell me something like, 'You know, that horse walked right up and said hello to me and, and wanted to be right there with me. And that's what I do when I come into a room I just walk right up to people.' Or it could be the opposite: "I walk into a space and I'm always to the back and I always kind of observe before I go and I meet anybody.'" So, for Elaine's clients, their external observations of herd and horse behavior frequently lead into self-observation. Opportunities to identify with a particular horse and/or project their internal world onto a chosen equine partner frequently yields significant personal insights. The depth of which

might best be understood within the context of another phenomenon significant to her practice: mindfulness (see below).

Mindfulness

Elaine's interview indicated openness to experience as a significant mechanism within her EFP practice. For purposes of this project, this is considered under the category of mindfulness phenomena. Since her personal experiences with horses involved spiritual awakening and transformation, Elaine's EFP practice encourages openness to personal experiences of subtle phenomena like intuition and energy perception.

Openness to Experience

Elaine's description of how change comes about for her clients included significant statements reflecting mindfulness phenomena for which I have chosen the label *openness to experience*. In the case of Elaine's equine practice, this openness refers to her horses' ability to mirror and facilitate client experiences of long forgotten instinctual capacities which she describes as innate. She explained that horses are born with intuition as part of their natural instincts and perceptual abilities and that, throughout their lives they remain exquisitely attuned to the subtle energy shifts that inform it. This is because their survival as a species depends on it. According to Elaine, humans are born with the same intuition and perceptual abilities, which we quickly become socialized to ignore, "but the horses can help us remember."

Her description of the typical initial session (from above) concluded with the following significant statement illustrating the importance within her practice, of openness to experiences of intuition and energy perception: "And then [after the client has identified the horse that they feel is most like them] I say, 'Let's find out if the horse's backstory is anything like your story.'

And I proceed to tell the client the entire history of that horse: where it came from, what its trauma has been, and how it's been used, where and what is its place in the herd here.

"And here's what happens. Every. Single. Time: That horse's backstory, its place in the herd, and way of being with the herd will be exactly like the person's experience in their life. Right down to if there's any child abuse, if there's any injuries, if there was any, say, neglect, whatever it is. It's for a reason that I do that first. And the reason *why* this activity is so important is because horses are energetic. And so are we.

"When we're little, we naturally notice when one of our parents is upset. We say, as the child, 'Are you upset?' And the parent looks right at us and lies and says, 'No, I'm fine.' And we stop using that ability. To be able to pick up energy, not just read body language. It's really just energetic. And why I do that is because it proves to [the client], regardless of their diagnosis, regardless of what's happened to that human being, their intuition is completely intact. They just have to re-learn it. So that's the first thing I do because [name of Elaine's model redacted] is based on wellness practice. It's based on the idea that regardless of how you've been trained or the trauma you've experienced, you can practice a way of being in the world that helps you create the person you want to be and the life that you deserve to live."

Embodiment

Elaine's narrative included embodiment as a significant mechanism of therapeutic action within her practice, which, intertwined with the mindfulness phenomena described above, offers her clients synergistic insights originating at the somatic level.

Movement Based Reflection

When asked whether Elaine's practice includes riding, her description of how she incorporates it included a significant embodied phenomenon which is movement-based, and

promotes client reflection, in physical ways, on their notions of trust and control. Elaine shared: “When I was certified in [major EFP organization], we did have mounted activities and I thought they were so powerful, I kept them in my model. So, my clients actually might get on the horse bareback – and I'm holding the lead rope now. And obviously I have two or three people there helping me, and we might lay on the horse. We might have the horse move and we call it ‘moving with the horse,’ not riding.

“You can't ride a horse. You can ride a bicycle, you can ride a motorcycle, but you can't ride a horse. A horse has its own ideas about what's going on, so you can move with it, you can partner with it and connect with it, but you can't control it. There's no bit, not that we use them, there's no bit that can stop a horse that wants to go and there's no saddle that'll keep you on if it wants you off.

“So, we can choose to use that. And so that person gets to feel the entire movement of the horse's body. When they are moving and being walked around the arena, I’ll ask them to talk to me about some of the things that they would like to see in their life. Some of the changes they would like to try and practice. And what's interesting is, I’m telling you, it's like EMDR on steroids. They are doing a bilateral movement: themselves moving with this horse. Talking and moving, all of their feelings and actions through their body and being connected not only to themselves, but to the horse as well.

“I think that, you know, that's one of many things that we do. We actually lay down on the horse. So, we’ll sometimes [have the client] lay forward and, if it's a person that believes, because of their trauma, their training, that they have to take care of everything, and that no one but them can, one of the first things we do when they get on the horse is, they have to ask for help. So, most of us don't know how to do that. So, it's best to have – I don't necessarily have

stairs. They have to ask either family members or us to help them get up, so that they understand that this is all about working together.

“I ask them first to lay down on the horse face first so that they will put their cheek in their head on the horse’s neck. They will have their arms on either side of the neck and they are completely relaxed and they give the horse their entire weight. Okay. I don't care if it's a six foot five, 350 pound guy. I always use a big draft horse. Once I know they're breathing and they're completely relaxed on that horse and giving the horse all of their weight without holding on, I ask them a very important question, which is, ‘When was the last time that someone could hold you up?’ Yeah, that usually brings a tear to an eye, because most of the time the answer is, ‘I don't remember’ and ‘I've been holding my – somebody else– up for so long.’

“Then we also have them lay down on the back so their head is on the butt of the horse, and their arms and their chest and their heart is open and their legs are open. So, one of the things that we have to understand is that when we get in an office and we sit down, we are closed off. And when you are laying on that horse and you're wide open, the emotional and the spiritual are connected. And that can't necessarily happen in an office.”

Connection

When asked about any specific processes or mechanisms that bring about change for her clients, Elaine emphasized connection as a significant mechanism of action within her equine program by stating: “What's important is connection. Not just practicing how to overcome a problem. We're not problem focused, we're connection focused.” Within Elaine’s description of connection, were four significant phenomena: relationship, partnering, congruence, and authenticity.

Relationship

One aspect of connection which was emphasized within Elaine's interview is relationship. She shared: "So, one of the most important things for me is relationship. And that's what we now know. If you see the 80-year- old Harvard Study [of Adult Development], the thing that matters most, and they get the same result every year, is our connection to other people. So, it seems to me that we try to do that when we're in families, but most families [do away] with this idea of connection and they keep passing down a way of being that isn't necessarily helpful in terms of connection. So, it was important to me that this equine therapy would actually increase and open people up to be able to practice how to be in connection with and in partnership with others."

Partnering

Elaine also emphasized partnering as a significant aspect of connection. Elaine shared: "So, all these wonderful practices that help you have what I would call a more balanced way of being in relationship are all – the stuff horses know. They want you to be a good leader and they want you to be a good follower. They want you to be safe. And they also want you to, they want you to be vulnerable and they want you to set boundaries. So, they are much more centered and balanced than we are. They want to be guided; they don't want to be controlled. So, I think what's important is to understand that horses give us an opportunity to be better humans."

Congruence

Elaine's interview emphasized congruence as a significant aspect of connection in the context of EFP, since, by requiring congruent mood and affect in order to engage with humans, horses teach emotional awareness. Elaine stated: "So, one of the most important aspects of [my method] is that – the horses are not codependent. We are; they're not. Therefore, they don't *have*

to be with us. In order for them to *want* to be with us – you do have to be congruent. Your thoughts, your feelings, your actions have to be the same. You must practice being honest and being mindful, and also being able to set boundaries and being consistent."

Authenticity

Finally, Elaine emphasized authenticity as a significant aspect of connection within her equine practice. She stated: "And the other thing I want to share is, I am so tired of my peer group saying that the reason why this works is because horses are prey animals. Number one, just because they don't eat meat doesn't make them prey all the time. I have watched many a horse go after an intruder, set boundaries, protect other horses and fight for their mares and for their friends. So that's not true.

"And number two, the other hurtful thing we say, because we are the most narcissistic animals on this planet: we say horses mirror us. That is not true either. They respond to us in an authentic way based on their experience and their past with human beings as well. So. If they've had some very bad experiences with human beings, they are going to be very leery of who you are and what you are. And they're going to ask you to truly reveal yourself.

"And they may take a long time before they even want to get close to you, until they are absolutely sure that you are not going to impinge on them or be dangerous. So, I think it's really important to understand that each horse brings a different kind of practice to each human that it meets, and that we should stop saying that they mirror us. They are not 'mirrors.' They respond authentically to us."

Secondary Research Question: Challenges to the Growth of the Field

This interview yielded four significant statements that pertaining to the secondary research question of this project, which explores practitioners' perceived limitations and/or

barriers to the growth of EFP. Elaine was candid with her feelings about defining effective measures for equine facilitated practices and noted lack of clarity, accessibility, and funding concerns as significant limiting factors.

Measurability

When asked for any ideas or opinions she would like to share about how equine practices or outcomes could be made more consistently measurable, or if she believes equine psychotherapy could ever become an evidence based practice, Elaine replied: “Uh! That is a question that... I mean, I just want to say, like, I have a hard time with the entire, behavioral health department. [both laugh] Right? So, it's this thing called psychology, but it means we talk about behavioral health; change people's behavior. And evidence-based. Okay. So, let me get this straight. Every human being is very different in many ways, and we're very similar in many ways. And we have big differences in some practitioners and then therapists. So, unlike a surgical tool, which is the same. I know the surgeon will be a little bit different, and the veins, though, are pretty much the same. So, the idea that you could have something evidence-based when you have such a confined area of work, that makes sense to me. But to actually believe that you could have what's called an ‘evidence based practice’ when it comes to human beings and horses...everything else? I'm not so sure we should be even doing that. And so, I really struggle with that idea.

“The evidence is the person themselves. And the minute that we don't want to have the person who is doing the change and the healing, decide for themselves that this has changed them; that has helped that create the life they deserve... I still don't understand it. If we're – if we're supposed to, help people lead a better life, then they should be the ones to tell us that they've been able to do that, not me. And I don't need to be – to be quantifiable doesn't mean to

be validated. The only person that needs to be validated is the client themself. For having the courage to face their trauma and the effects of their trauma, the post traumatic growth, and then want to keep changing and growing. That's your evidence."

Clarity (Lack of)

When asked her opinions about some of the limitations and challenges to the growth of the field, Elaine stated that one of the difficulties she has encountered is the lack of clarity, not just within the EFP field, but within therapy as a whole. Her response indicated disagreement with the idea that psychotherapy can be appropriately understood within the medical model, citing hypocrisy as a particular frustration that arises for her when practitioners attempt to do so. She shared: "Yeah. So, part of the medical model is that a doctor – they can treat you even though they're not taking the treatment themselves.

"So, we can have a large amount of hypocrisy in the medical field. And, certainly in behavioral health. We have a lot of it. So, just one example, [one of the major equine organizations] was started by a man and a woman, a cowboy, and a licensed social worker. Okay. They said, 'this particular model will help you have better relationships.' And after, I don't know how many years of them working there, the board and the social worker, asked the cowboy to leave. So then, they were in an eight year legal battle. An *eight year* legal battle. So apparently the [organization name redacted] model didn't help them... So, my problem with most any model that doesn't have what I call 'the parallel practice,' is it's inherently hypocritical. Parallel practice means that I don't ask anybody to do anything I'm not doing, or haven't done. It's not okay for me to just come to help you create a better life and do a wellness practice that I am not doing myself."

Accessibility

When asked whether she feels that equine therapies are more effective as an adjunct to traditional clinical psychotherapy, or if they have value as a standalone, Elaine replied: “I understand that not everybody can get to the horse. I really understand the limitation of it. And why it is probably more of an adjunct than traditional therapy is just because it is oftentimes more difficult to get to. And, to get to a horse, it's a little bit difficult. I know we could make it easier. Even in New York City. There's Central Park. And there certainly could be a program in Central Park. There may be one already. Anyway. I think there always has to be choices. Not everybody can start off standing in front of a horse. I understand that, but if it’s easy enough for people to get to, I think it can work very well for certain people as a standalone treatment, rather than just an adjunct.”

Funding

Elaine’s answer to the above question continued with a significant statement about the financial challenges inherent in EFP practice. She shared: “At the same time, the way that it becomes more accessible to people is by making it more affordable. And that's something that we have to take a look at in terms of all therapeutic practices. How do we make them a part of a wellness life? You know, when you get older, they put you on Medicare and they offer you things like gym memberships for $25. Now, we pay for Medicare, that's for sure too. I understand that. But the fact is that we need, very much so, to change how we are paid. And how much it costs to be able to get to any wellness practice including equine therapy. And that's something that I'm working on [at my] ranch.

“We chose to become a nonprofit so that we could get donations and we don't have to charge anybody. And so, what's interesting is, even though many people come who are very

wealthy and can pay for the service, we don't charge them. But what we do is, they – we don't actually [request] it, but once they go through [our program], they many, many times – if not every time – they give us a very large donation. With a 'thank you. Thank you,' because they really feel other people deserve to have this experience as well."

Interview Seven

Participant Seven: Jillian

Jillian (a pseudonym to protect anonymity) is a lifetime horsewoman who practices Equine Assisted Learning (EAL) on her own, and occasionally acts as a horse specialist for Equine Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP) when called upon to participate in sessions led by a licensed psychotherapist. She holds an MA in literature and her first career was teaching at the post-secondary level.

When asked what populations or diagnoses she typically works with, Jillian replied, "I'm not a therapist, so I'm not actually acquiring that kind of information. So, anything I have is really more of just kind of my observation. And I think that I tend to get people with chronic health issues. I get a lot of people with anxiety, that are stressed. People trying to figure out their life and what's going on and what their options are. You know, when people come to me for private sessions, they are usually coming for a health issue, or relationship issue, or a work or career issue. So that's typically the categories of things that people come to me for."

When asked about her entry into the EFP field, Jillian shared: "That was a long time ago. Um, around 2002, I think it was. So, I really started on my own because – I had adopted a mustang and found a place to board him where they just had gotten a contract to work with the local VA, with Vietnam vets who had been sort of non-functioning for the past, almost 30 years. And so, at that time [prominent EFP certification program] was out, but it was new and we didn't

know it existed. [Another EFP training program] existed, but we didn't know about it. So, we were just, you know, we thought we were inventing the wheel. So that's how I got started. And really, I mean, I was an English professor, and I taught at a community college because I liked it better than the university. I did a lot of, at that time, learning communities and community service type classes, or I tended to add those designations into the classes I taught. Cause that was – I liked that stuff.

"And near where I lived at that time, there's a permanent holding facility for mustangs. And so that was kind of the setup. So, I just started moving into it because of that. I had been giving riding lessons since I was young and I had shown horses. And I'd done all sorts of things with horses, and I was primarily a horse person, but I also worked wilderness therapy in the summers because of the environmental lit kind of focus I had. So, this brought all my passions together, so yeah.

"But at the time, I didn't know, it existed. I thought I was creating it. I had gotten the idea when I worked wilderness therapy and I used to, you know, after the kids went to bed, we, the staff, would sit by the fire and I would tell them about this thing I had in mind that I thought would be really profound for kids. And I wanted to create a program possibly through the University or whatever, but anyway."

Although horses had always been an integral part of her life, the full scope of their influence on Jillian's own healing path emerged shortly after she began her practice, when tragedy struck. She shared: "So, I got cancer. I lost everything. I mean, I lost my facility, my home, my husband, and everything else right before I got cancer -- then I got cancer. And then I couldn't work cause I was very sick. They didn't expect me to live but a few months. So, how I survived that was, naturally with my horses and with nutrition and with, sort of, you know, Reiki

and, you know, anything someone would give me for free. Because the little bit of medical care I got took all the last of my money."

Jillian's experience of overcoming her illness and financial hardships brought about a spiritual awakening. After that, her approach to EFP shifted from utilizing horses to help people learn, to *assisting* horses to help people *heal*. Since that time, Jillian shared: "I don't know anything *but* spiritual. In my opinion. So, even by that I just mean energetic. Like the horses don't care what labels we put on it, but what I've moved away from is anything that's actually -- I mean, I still get Experiential Learning. That's what I call it sometimes. But I often call it healing.

"Because now that I've been doing it for 20 years, that's what's happening. I mean, people are healing in quantum ways and the horses really amplify any healing. So yeah. I think they amplify whatever we create. So, you know if we want to call it therapy, fine. They amplify the therapy. But I think the more we get out of their way, the more [the horses] heal directly. And, you know, actually, if we stop trying to be a therapist while the horses are working with people, then that helps the horses work with the people more. And so, I really follow the horses a lot. You know, I follow what they're telling me needs to happen and I help try to help the person see what to do. I try to help them see what's happening. I'm their validation of what they're feeling and seeing and sort of their witness. Like a translator or – not even a translator. I think people can translate pretty quickly. I think the quicker I can move out of 'translating for them,' quote unquote the better. I don't think they need that." In Jillian's practice, she sees herself as a facilitator for the work her horses do. This is directly informed by her own experience of how the horses have worked with her. It is this experience that she now passes on to her clients.

When asked what populations or diagnoses she feels can derive the most benefit from her equine practice, Jillian replied: "Yeah. I think, you know, it obviously works with PTSD. That's

where I started this. With a Vietnam vet who had PTSD. That was their diagnosis. I have a colleague who calls it moral injury. I don't know if you've heard that term. It's a term they're now using instead of, or in addition to PTSD. And I think that's a really good way to see what's happening too. And I think the horses really show that. That what's happening is there is an injury to your soul for – killing someone or, from having to be in a situation where there was no choice but to kill someone. You know, those types of things. PTSD is more about what happened to you. Moral injury is more about, sort of, the things that you've done and what it – and the cost to your psyche from those things. To some degree, that's a really important difference. And I think it works really well for depression. And borderline – really, any sort of personality disorder, or depression, anxiety. Or even people who are thriving, but are seeking to thrive more. I mean, I've worked with a lot of people from Europe who are leaders in their, you know, corporate organizations or whatever, and from America. And I had an English husband whose clients were all from France and England, and different parts of Europe. And I worked with them a lot. And, so, all of these. Everyone seems to get a ton out of it. I mean, I haven't seen anything it doesn't work for.

"Oh, wait – the only thing I've seen that it does *not* seem to work well for, at least from my perspective, is someone with some kind of psychosis. Or maybe that's just the way that I practice. But so... yeah. And it seems to be harmful to the horses, and not very effective for the person, necessarily. Or if it's effective for the person, it seems to be bad for the horses. So, I can't do it if I know the person has psychosis. And now my horses show me; they know too. They will not engage with someone that comes in, or is brought in, where maybe they haven't told me that – that they're diagnosed with some kind of psychosis. But the horses won't work with them.

“In fact, when I worked at a residential treatment facility, we did use the horses to help us decide what we thought the diagnosis was, when that's been a question. And then we would go back to their psychotherapist and say, ‘This is what we think.’ Because yeah, we had a lot of borderline clients and [frequently] they’d be those ones that sometimes the horses would show us ‘This is someone we will not work with.’ So yeah, when that happened, they usually didn't get to stay in the program much longer. Because we trusted the horses so much. And if the staff were already having trouble with the person – so if they caused a lot more trouble with staff and the other students. It's just not fair in a program like that, you know, where there's a lot of freedom. It wasn't the kind of program that worked for them.”

When asked which specific EAL modality she practices, Jillian shared: “Well, I practice my own modality. I have trained with [three prominent training and certification organizations]. I've gone through a lot of the sort of, more well-known trainings […] but by then, I just felt like I already – I mean, I started on my own. And then I trained when I found out there were trainings, but a lot of times I felt like the training was – I kept moving forward. Cause I was doing this full time when people were still trying to – when no one was, you know? And so, I worked full time. I had a full-time job doing this work and then I also worked with some 40 therapists over the course of time at a place where I was the contract Equine Specialist for [a prominent training and certification model]. So, I’ve had a lot of experience.”

When asked her opinion about whether EFP is effective as a standalone service or better as an adjunct to psychotherapy in a traditional setting, she replied: “I think both. I think whatever works. I've seen it be very effective for the person to have couch time and have these sessions. I think if someone's in therapy, yeah, I think they should stay in therapy and then their therapist can – so it can be a great augmentation. Sometimes, you know, one equine session could be so

rich, you could really keep processing it with your therapist for four or five sessions, you know, before you come out to the horses again.

"But then, there are people who just don't want to work with a therapist. And those are the ones I get. You know, for whatever reason they don't want to go to therapy. Because they don't trust therapists, or therapy hasn't worked for them or whatever. A lot of times, for me, it's people who have a high profile. Like, whether it's a high profile in their community, or whether it's because they're a politician or, because they are from Hollywood or whatever. You know, you kind of get the idea that those kinds of people – they don't really necessarily want to reporters to find out that they're going to therapy. But if they're going out to go riding within the experiential learning program, that just sounds cool. Right? So, that is kind of person I see a lot."

Jillian's lived experience narrative as an equine practitioner yielded several statements significant to the primary research question of this study which seeks an understanding of the essential mechanisms of EFP. These phenomena can be understood as within the categories of mindfulness and communication.

Mindfulness

The specific mindfulness phenomena which emerged as significant within Jillian's practice were coded as intentionality and openness to experience.

Intentionality

When asked her views on how Jillian feels change comes about for her clients, she replied: "There are so many ways that it's happening. So, it's hard to know where to start. So, you know, [as an EFP practitioner] you're really focusing as a facilitator, and that person may have particular goals that are based on things they're struggling with. And they're practicing those particular goals. Like leadership or teamwork, or self-confidence, or whatever it is, you know?

"What I always find is if you can set a goal like that, or you can have a theme. And if that theme is relevant, the horses will use it. But like whatever's going on in the person's life. So, let's say they're focused on leadership. Like, the guy who's a head of a financial organization. You know, whatever comes up in his role as a leader often also comes up in other areas of his life, like his home life or – everything else. As we already know. So, to me, the facilitator's job is to frame that stuff. The horses, they're just looking for what – what's the biggest block in this person's life, or what needs to be healed."

Openness to Experience

Jillian's description of how change comes about for her clients indicated the significance of openness to experience, considered for purposes of this study as a mindfulness phenomenon. As is true with Elaine (see Interview Six above), for Jillian, this openness refers to experiential phenomena associated with spirituality, intuition and/or perception of subtle energies, which hold high significance within her lived experience both personally and as an EFP practitioner. She shared: "I also work with constellations therapy, which came out of Germany, from a guy named Hellinger. It has a lot of similarities with systems therapy, but in many ways, it is a very spiritual process. So, I was trained in that mainly because I kept seeing the horses do it. So, for me, that's my main thing —the horses show me if someone needs that.

"And I can often get a sense, even when they're scheduling a session, especially like a private client, they're telling me already what's going on. And then they fill out paperwork that I see it again. So sometimes I just see that 'this is a constellating issue' because if they've been to a lot of therapy or, you know, like CBT therapy or something, and they've worked on this issue for a while, but it's still an issue – to me, that's because there's something constellating in their

system that is the problem. And so, they've done the best they can with it; now it's time to actually ask for – healing, really.

Embodiment

Jillian's lived experience narrative also included a indicating the theme of embodiment as significant to her EFP practice. As with other practitioners interviewed, this phenomenon is closely linked to the mindfulness phenomena described above. However, Jillian's reference to embodiment links her understanding of both embodied experience with the concept of embodied constellating energy.

Continuing with her description above, Jillian shared: "And so, constellation work leads to other kinds of healing. My horses know. They've, you know, they have had Reiki given to them. So, they're, sort of – they know. Any kind of healing I think happens from that. They healed me from cancer, in my opinion. And you know, when I was diagnosed, I was supposed to die within a few weeks.

"So, what I saw the horses doing was intentionally choosing. When someone would be talking about the issue, I'd see the horse step in their position. And I started to realize that if I could step in that position, then I could feel what that horse, his body language, was showing. And I was like, 'Oh my gosh! There's energy that we think of as sort of internal worlds and stuff, that actually takes a place in space. In our, in our physical world.' And the horses will take a place in space and then they'll start to play something out. And so maybe you can work through issues in that way, you know? Like, physically. Energetically. Experientially.

"And so that's what I do with horses." An example of this embodiment phenomenon is included in Jillian's case description below.

Communication

When asked to describe a case that stood out in her mind, Jillian's reply provided an example highlighting the phenomenon of horse to human communication as a significant mechanism of therapeutic action within her practice. This vignette illustrated how her horses communicate about the constellating energy (described above) [about] which the client is unaware that she may be projecting through her unconscious. Jillian shared: "So, the client was working in a round pen and the other horses were around. This place with the [tiered landscape] worked really well. So, because the horses were at different levels, we could use fence lines to say like, 'This is your inner world. This is your family,' like, in the arena. So, I had the round pen and the arena and the pasture was surrounding that. And there were gates that were open, so the horses could come in and out.

"And as they did, that would sort of show how that – that particular energy, or person in that client's life moved through those different areas of their life. So, I often have the people label. Like, 'Okay. What does the round pen represent for you in this session that you want to have?' Or whatever.

"In this case, well, it turns out the woman is bisexual, but at that time was saying she was gay. All of her relationships with men always went badly and it seemed like that was why she'd decided, 'I'm just going to be a lesbian.' But she was saying that wasn't the reason. She said, 'I'm really attracted to only women.' So, when she got in with the horses this started to show. She chose this male horse and it just looked like they were having a blast together. And it was very flirtatious and she, you know, she was moving the horse around in the round pen. It was very loving and fun. And she was giggling and the horse's ears were up and his eyes were bright and they were – they looked so adorable.

"Then, though, it went from looking really cute and cuddly and she would go pet him… to him starting to get, kind of, more physical with her. To the point where pretty soon it looked almost scary. Like, you know, I knew he was play acting. So, he wasn't actually attacking her, but he was, like, pushing at her. Or looking like he could push at her. So pretty soon she said, 'This isn't fun anymore.' And she, at some point she said, 'This reminds me of my first boyfriend and how much fun it was.' And then she said, 'Well, this is exactly what happened with my first boyfriend. It was fun at first, but pretty soon it became really, almost abusive.' Like got scary, where he started hitting her and stuff, which wasn't quite showing up, but -- yeah. And then she said, 'In fact, this is what happens with everyone. Including my dad. This is what happens with my dad.' So, of course the insight that seems most profound was that every relationship is like her relationship with her dad. Right? And you know, over time, because I do the constellations, what we've [repeatedly] found is – this was a pattern in a number of people in her family's past.

"And so, that was the work for this client.

"She was working with a buckskin mustang with a lot of assertiveness, but a lot of playfulness. And so, then, we would take that horse out, and put a different horse in, and the exact same thing would happen with that horse too. So, [her sessions] just showed *that*. No matter what. And back then, you know, we were going from session to session to session. So, she'd use that little buckskin mustang. And then another person went in with that same buckskin mustang right after that, and the horse acted completely differently and it was a whole different session. Which you probably know. So, that's just a little vignette if you want it."

Secondary Research Question: Challenges to the Growth of the Field

Jillian's responses during this interview described four phenomena significant to this project's secondary research question, regarding factors that limit or challenge the growth of

EFP. Her responses reflected the following four themes: measurability, finances, public awareness, and cohesion.

Measurability

When asked whether she had any ideas or opinions about how EAL practices or outcomes might be made more consistently measurable, Jillian replied: “I don't really know. I mean, I've worked in academia, you know, I was an English professor. So, I wasn't really a scientist, but in my field as an environmental lit professor, I had to have a science as a second language, right? So, and then I taught at [redacted] college's psych department. I taught the human equine bond in that department for short time. And that question came up a lot. And I just found, I didn't really – it wasn't an interesting question to me. Because I'm practicing on a cutting edge and I'm not really, I don't – like a lot of stuff to get researched? I mean, I think what you're doing, the phenomenological questioning, and then trying to find a way to quantify that is probably almost the most interesting way to me.

“I did have a test – I created a self-test from some of the self-evaluation instruments that were out. And we were going to use that as research. And then, I moved on. So, I wasn't there for long enough for it to really – I think we only used it for about six months and when we did it was really great, because it was a great way for the clients to self-report. So, I don't know that I have a good answer for you because to me, my interest and focuses on the holistic aspects and not the quantification. If someone wanted to come out and create a study, then I would be willing to let them... if I felt like it didn't limit what I was doing with my clients. But I've decided, after being in a couple of academic settings, that just wasn't where I – what I cared about. So. Yeah. But I like what you're doing. I like that you're doing it.

Funding, Public Awareness

When asked her opinions about what barriers or challenges she perceives as limiting the growth of the EFP field, Jillian's reply reflected concerns around awareness and funding. She shared: "I mean, it still needs to become more mainstream because people, once they've done it, it blows them away. Right? But until they've tried it, people don't really know what it's worth. And so sometimes getting enough clientele to pay that amount, the amount that it should cost, you know, is difficult. So that's a limitation. It's just the awareness. Becoming a more mainstream way of practicing.

"Yeah. Awareness, and then, what people think should be charged for it. So, when I work with a therapist, you know, the clients pay their copay – they want to pay the same [for equine] as they pay for a normal therapy session, but now they're in a whole different space. You know, maybe that therapist has an office to pay for, but they don't have the overhead of horses and all that stuff. So, when I've worked with therapists, one of the challenges is to figure out what fee works. And usually what happens is the therapist has to take a hit. On cost. Well, that shouldn't be how it is. They should get the same amount, but so should the equine specialist, you know, as they would for any session. But then, you know, factor in whatever it takes to also pay for the facilities and so on. So, that's a big challenge. Yeah. Funding and then perceived value."

Cohesion and Clarity (Lack of)

Jillian also discussed the lack of cohesion and clarity in the field as challenges to its growth. She shared: "I think this is getting better, but there's still so much room for growth. And figuring out what works best in what setting too. I wouldn't want to limit things, but […] there's some gaps in what's available – where to get, sort of, standard operating procedures and best practices from. There is no training that offers that. And as a result, I think there's a lot of people

doing some things that are really great. And there are sometimes things where they're not so great. So, if someone has a bad experience, they're liable to think, ‘Well that was equine therapy,’ right? So, that's a problem. There's not enough consistency.

“So there needs to be a lot of respect for the fact that a human body, you know, system and vulnerabilities are being opened to us. And, you know, I think this work really challenges a lot of [what is generally known about therapy], and exactly how it's practiced. And therefore, you get people doing things that are like – you can really find a lot of therapists who are projecting onto their clients. And labeling. And there's that fishbowl effect that the work has on a client. And that can leave them feeling really vulnerable. And that, you know, maybe that requires some training, […] and, that training doesn't always happen, you know? So, I've seen some things happen that weren't good. And I guess, with [Jillian’s program name redacted] I've had people really want me to become a, you know, a gatekeeper. But I'm like, I'm really more interested in training people with the best knowledge possible. So that, rather than telling them, ‘You can't do it this way, or you can't do it that way,’ I'd rather they keep educating themselves. And that's how they improve, rather than blaming them or trying to track down who's doing it wrong.

“But, to me, the same things that are a problem are also I think why I wouldn't change it. Because they also lead to a great deal of creativity and exploration in a field that is moving really fast into new areas of consciousness that we don't really know that much about. You know? So, I would say [the lack of cohesion] is not something we can change right now, but it does create some problems. It's just where we are in the world right now. So, I wouldn't say it's a problem to me. It's a constructive problem, because it just means it's a young field and there's room to grow.

"I've thought about creating a training program that's sort of like continuing ed. For like, if someone already has all the certifications they want – say they're happily a [major equine certification] person or a [different equine certification] person or whatever, but they don't feel like they have enough experience in, say, understanding horses or whatever. Or maybe they're practicing in a different way as a coach with one particular client, so they want more coaching skills or whatever. So, not like a particular model being taught, but it's more, 'I need some skills in this area.' [Major equine certification] is a very good model to learn if you're a therapist and you don't know a lot about horses or if you're a horse person and you don't know a lot about therapy. You know, it's a great model of training for entry level people. And it can continue beyond that, but if you added some knowledge from say, what [major equine learning expert] does, or [major equine therapy expert], any of that kind of, different knowledge, you know, you're getting a much more – you're just really expanding what's possible."

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

In keeping with this study's approach, which combines phenomenological and grounded theory methodologies, what follows is a nomothetic analysis of the participants' statements that were coded as significant within the idiographic analyses outlined above. This project, while essentially phenomenological, also borrows heavily from grounded theory in that in addition to exploring specific phenomena common to practitioners of EFP, it also seeks to expand on the common understanding of its workings. However, while the study aims to define significant mechanisms of EFP, unlike traditional grounded theory, it does not define a specific theory beyond the contributing elements which may guide or frame future work in this regard.

Table 2

Mechanisms of Therapeutic Action

Practitioner	Observation	Communication	Mindfulness	Embodiment	Connection
Maya	*	*	*	*	*
James	*	*	*	*	*
Carol	*	*	*		
Steven		*	*	*	*
Hannah	*		*	*	*
Elaine	*		*	*	*
Jillian		*	*	*	

EFP Mechanisms of Therapeutic Action

The primary goal of this project was to gather significant statements based on the lived experience of EFP practitioners, with the specific aim to discover mechanisms of action within their work with clients. Coded statements from these narratives yielded several phenomena relevant to the "what and the how" of EFP. These followed on five main themes: observation, communication, mindfulness, embodiment, and connection. Of these, mindfulness phenomena were the most pervasive, appearing within all seven interviews, followed by closely by the theme of embodiment, which was present in six. Observation, communication, and connection also emerged as significant themes; each was emphasized within the narratives of five out of seven practitioners (See Table 2).

Observation

Observation is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as "the careful watching and noting of a phenomenon in regard to its cause or effect, or of phenomena in regard to their mutual relations, these being observed as they occur in nature" ("Observation" in Oxford English Dictionary, 2021. http://www.oed.com). This concept, as commonly applied within both clinical and educational contexts, takes place on both external and internal levels.

For purposes of this study, external observation refers to gathering and noting information from one's surroundings, and internal observation describes attending to information that emerges from within the self (i.e., ideas, associations, reactions, emotional responses, body sensations, etc.). The term observation implies neutrality – to observe is not to judge, rather to notice, become aware and, possibly, to be curious.

Observation recurred as a significant theme within the lived experience narratives of five of the seven EFP practitioners interviewed for this project (see Table 2).

Observation in EFP

Though simplistic at first glance, observation merits explication in the context of EFP, as it appears to be foundational to the experience its effectiveness, for practitioners as well as clients. In response to questions exploring their views on how EFP practice works, observation emerged as a significant mechanism of therapeutic action within the narratives of Maya, James, Carol, Hannah and Elaine (See Table 2). All five practitioners described direct invitations for observation that typically bookend each session, and take place on many levels, concurrently, throughout. These observations occur both externally and internally. The clients' external observations (e.g., clients noticing and sharing impressions of herd and horse behavior) frequently guide the practitioners' work, which involves offering their own observations as neutrally as possible. These interpretations then prompt and facilitate their clients' self-observations, both apart from and during their interactions with the horse.

For the clients, external observation activities with the horses ideally promote an attitude of curiosity and play, which in turn set the stage for self-observation which can then occur in novel contexts and at levels of depth and acuity which inaccessible previously. Maya, James, Carol, and Hannah all referenced observation as integral to the job of the equine practitioner.

As Hannah put it, "The first part of my job is to observe the interaction between a horse and a client and put aside judgment." She stated, "my job is to guide them, with the help of the horses, to tune into themselves in a nonjudgmental way so they can know and understand themselves better." She then added, "I think where the change comes is, having that visual and seeing how the horse reacts, really gives people feedback that they, maybe, can hear better than when it's coming from a therapist. I think really the experiential nature of it is kind of the key." These statements were echoed by Carol, a life coach and EFL practitioner, who shared: "It's

experiential […] my job is to ask the right questions to help them self-discover. What's going on, what's working or not working for them. And, then my job is to utilize the horse and the feedback the horse giving me, to help guide my questions and what I'm asking and probing for."

Hannah stated: "What I'm doing is just tapping into the horses in their free environment and the clients' unconscious just by interacting with the horses; that's what they do. They're very attuned to the unconscious." In her experience, "Just interacting with the horses draws out emotions in the client. […] It's a kind of, almost a spiritual thing. We try to remove ways in which our judgments or – our own obstacles or emotions would get in the way of helping a client. We want to remove as much of the countertransference as we can, so there's a pure interaction between the client himself and the horse. The therapist just helps them observe."

Communication

The Oxford English Dictionary defines communication as "the imparting or exchanging of information or news [and] the successful conveying or sharing of ideas and feelings" ("Communication" in Oxford English Dictionary, 2021. http://www.oed.com). For purposes of this study, communication includes verbal and non-verbal forms, taking place between individuals and/or groups of humans and/or animals, specifically horses.

Communication in EFP

Communication emerged as a significant mechanism of therapeutic action within the narratives of five out of seven EFP practitioners interviewed and appeared in both concrete and unexpected ways. Regarding human to horse and human to human verbal communication, Maya and Steven related experiences of children overcoming mutism and alexithymia by simply spending time in the presence of horses. Regarding non-verbal human to human communication, Maya described an activity she incorporates into corporate retreats, called "the appendages

activity," whereby small groups of adults engage in an experiential learning exercise about communication by assisting one another, along with a horse, to navigate an obstacle course without allowing verbal communication.

Regarding horse to human communication, Carol described how, during her healing horse meditation circle activity, indicated the site of her client's previous surgery, and appeared to communicate with her, through behavior and body language, about unprocessed emotions around surviving cancer. James' description also reflected the uncanny nature of horse to human communication by stating: "There's also this other energetic component… because [horses are] operating on these other levels that we can't detect." This energetic phenomenon was further illustrated by Jillian, who described the case of a horse communicating constellating energy around unprocessed trauma, through roleplay communicated her pattern of interactions with men that would begin playfully but end up abusive.

Hannah shared how learning to communicate with horses helps her clients communicate and with other people. She shared that she shifts as needed between interpreting the client's projections and assisting them to understand concrete horse behavior especially for "the clients that need a little more understanding to be able to read people's emotions. So, learning about how horses communicate their emotions, kind of gives them that clue, in a way."

Steven shared how students of his interspecies communication course study the way horses and other animals communicate with one other, using the watering hole example to illustrate horses' attunement to energy and intention, and how to apply this understanding toward communications with the horses: "We speak with our eyes and the horse understands that language better than we do." He also explained how, through their interactions with the horses, his students experience the difference between communication that is connected to emotions vs.

that which is disconnected, which is easily gauged by the horse's willingness to participate. He stated: "I'm teaching them how that horse responds to the energy level that we have, what we project from our heart center and how we say thank you from our heart and not from our left brain, see." He shared that his students, many of whom are recovering from severe trauma, experience breakthroughs when they bring these skills home. He shared the case of a previously veteran who told him that the horse helped him overcome suicidality, stating: "'After our class, I went home and I realized that I'm my wife and my little girl's safe place. And I need to be there for them. I can't imagine taking my own life now. […] That horse really helped me understand how important I am to my wife and my little girl.'" James commented: "So that's the kind of thing we see on a regular basis […] they're taking the experience with the horse and they're applying it to their life and its working."

Hannah shared that learning how horses communicate emotions helps her clients achieve more accuracy in perceiving communication. In certain instances she shifts from interpreting a client's projections, to educating them on concrete horse behaviors which she finds very helpful for "the clients that need a little more understanding to be able to read people's emotions. So, learning about how horses communicate their emotions, kind of gives them that clue, in a way."

Mindfulness

The concept of mindfulness has been defined as the intentional process of attending to one's present moment experience with an open and accepting attitude and from a curious, detached, and nonreactive orientation (Creswell, 2017; Kabat-Zinn, 1990). "Mindfulness interventions foster an ability to more objectively observe one's moment-to-moment experience, and this decentered mindset (also described as metacognitive awareness or nonattachment) may be an important psychological mechanism of change" (Creswell, 2017, p. 504). By this

understanding, mindfulness phenomena emerged as significant within the lived experience narratives of all seven EFP practitioners interviewed for this project.

Mindfulness in EFP

When considered within the context of EFP, the definition above can be applied as categorical term for significant overlapping phenomena which occurred repeatedly among the narratives of all seven study participants. These were presence, intentionality, and openness to experience.

Narratives from Maya, James and Hanna included descriptions of presence as a mechanism of action within their practice. James shared how horses model and inspire the state of presence “because horses live in the present. They're always ready to act, but they're not going to waste the energy, like humans do, future-tripping or dwelling on regrets. So, they're always right where their feet are, which can be really relieving. Especially in our culture since we're always focused on forward motion and getting things done, with our to-do lists. So just to be in the presence of other beings that actually know how to be present, is therapeutically beneficial, I think.” Hannah shared about experiences with clients who have been to conventional therapy for years and “can tell their stories and it's more detached. But using that mindfulness perspective of them being in the moment with the horse and they have to engage, things just come up whether they want them to or not.”

Openness to experience appeared significant as a mechanism within the EFP practices of Maya, Carol, Steven, Hannah, Elaine, and Jillian. All described how experiences as simple as entering the pasture, observing and being present with the horses cultivates an openness to the unknown, frequently with uncanny results, like the client invariably gravitating toward, as Maya

put it, “the right horse for them, and what they came to work on.” Or vice versa: “Either they pick a horse or a horse ends up kind of picking them.”

Narratives from all seven practitioners stressed the importance of intentionality as a mindfulness mechanism within EFP practice. Steven and Carol shared the value in their routine practice of engaging clients in meditation circles, which take place either before, during or after their encounters with the horses. James and Jillian highlighted how deliberate intention setting can serve as a frame that guides their clients’ emergence of unconscious material through their interaction with the horses.

As Jillian shared, “What I always find is if you can set a goal like that, or you can have a theme. And if that theme is relevant, the horses will use it.” In the case description shared by James, intentionally assigning meaning to tasks completed during his session gave his client the opportunity to process his traumatic experiences obliquely, which the horse was somehow able to facilitate in truly uncanny ways which carried deep impact.

Embodiment

Embodiment is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as "a tangible or visible form of an idea, quality, or feeling” ("Embodiment" in Oxford English Dictionary, 2021. http://www.oed.com). In the context of psychotherapy, this definition of embodiment can be understood as an experiential phenomenon in which awareness of an idea, quality or feeling originates and/or is tangibly felt to originate at the level of the body. Though closely associated with mindfulness practice (Kabat-Zinn, 1990), for purposes of this study, the concept of embodiment bears exploration as a distinct phenomenon. This in part because studies on neuroimaging have determined that bodily arousal frequently precedes conscious recognition of even the most intense emotional states (Engels et al., 2007).

Over the past decade somatically based many "bottom up" treatment modalities have emerged as effective for the treatment of trauma, particularly of the type which is considered to be developmental and/or complex in nature (i.e., Somatic Experiencing, Sensorimotor Psychotherapy, Hakomi Mindful Somatic Psychotherapy, Neuro-Affective Relational Model, and more). These models focus on ways in which "the body keeps the score" (van der Kolk, 2014) via, for example, emotional flashbacks and/or fragmented self-states which originate from unresolved trauma that has been stored somatically as triggers to maladaptive nervous system responses. The goal of these treatments is to assist clients in resolving trauma through disconfirming embodied experiences which access the body's innate restorative mechanisms (Heller & LaPierre, 2012, Levin, 2010; Ogden & Fischer, 2016; Porges, 2009; Schore, 2003; Siegel, 2012; Silberg, 2013; van der Kolk, 2014). The interviews conducted for this project indicate that working therapeutically with horses naturally supports and facilitates this type of corrective embodied experience.

Embodiment in EFP

The idea of embodiment as an important mechanism in EFP practice recurred within the lived-experience narratives of six out of seven practitioners: Maya, James, Steven, Elaine, Hannah and Jillian. In the context of EFP it is important to differentiate between top-down mindfulness phenomena, in which awareness of emotional states typically originates at the level of the mind (or cognition), from bottom-up phenomena in which the pathway to emotional awareness originates in the body (somatically). One aspect which sets EFP apart from other therapies is the way in which it appears to seamlessly marry the benefits of both top-down (cognitive, behavioral) and bottom-up (embodied, experiential) processing strategies.

Maya, James, and Steven all discussed embodied experiences of co-regulation which occur naturally around horses. Maya reported that frequently her clients "instantaneously feel themselves calmed down as the horse calms. So, it can help them regulate." James shared: "Some studies say that our cardiovascular system can actually link up with the larger animals [which] can actually help to regulate your cardiovascular system and engage the parasympathetic nervous system and come down from the fight or flight." Or, as Steven put it: "It's pretty evident that the horses are […] changing us metabolically."

In addition to the physiological effects described above, according to James working with horses also promotes embodied awareness of emotional states. He stated: "If we are pretending to be brave or something like that, when we're actually nervous, they're not going to walk with us. They're not going to participate with us, because we're not a safe partner. So, for us, emotionally, that lets us check in with ourselves and see what's really going on. Or it lets the therapist cut through a lot of defenses quickly and say, 'sorry, I'm just not believing you because your horse doesn't lie, and he is saying no.'"

This phenomenon was echoed by Hannah, regarding her experiences with the child who could only learn congruence and self-regulation through embodied experience, as taught by a therapy horse: "With his presentation – all of his energy, his body language and stuff – the horse would just keep, like, bolting away from him. […] So, it was kind of getting to the point of like, 'You know, what do you think the horse needs in order to feel safe? What do you think, how could you do that?' […] To make a long story short, he learned to connect with that horse. And eventually was able to halter the horse, take the horse for a walk… and then actually manage his behavior in school better. He had heard all this before; he just needed that experience to understand."

Elaine's EFP practice includes embodied experiences which take place on horseback. As she shared: "We call it 'moving with the horse,' not riding. […] And so that person gets to feel the entire movement of the horse's body. When they are moving, and being walked around the arena, I ask them to talk to me about some of the things that they would like to see in their life. Some of the changes they would like to try and practice. And what's interesting is, I'm telling you, it's like EMDR on steroids. They are doing a bilateral movement: themselves moving with this horse. Talking and moving, all of their feelings and actions through their body and being connected not only to themselves, but to the horse as well." The combination of movement, body positioning and the support of their weight by the horse beneath them affords Elaine's clients the opportunity for embodied experiences that can be quite profound. She stated: "Then we also have them lay down on the back so their head is on the butt of the horse, and their arms and their chest and their heart is open and their legs are open. […] And when you are laying on that horse and you're wide open, the emotional and the spiritual are connected. And that can't necessarily happen in an office."

Jillian described referred to the phenomenon of embodiment in terms of her horses' ability to perceive energies that humans typically cannot. She shared: "When someone would be talking about the issue, I'd see the horse step in their position. And I started to realize that if I could step in that position, then I could feel what that horse, his body language, was showing. And I was like, 'Oh my gosh! There's energy that we think of as sort of internal worlds and stuff, that actually takes a place in space. In our, in our physical world.' And the horses will take a place in space and then they'll start to play something out, you know? And so maybe you can work through it in that way, you know? Like, physically, energetically. Experientially. And so that's what I do with horses." James alluded to similar experiences with regard to horses' ability

to perceive and respond to embodied energy: “they read us physically, but there's also this other energetic component; they're like giant biofeedback machines because they're operating on these other levels that we can't detect.”

Connection

The Oxford English Dictionary defines connection as "a relationship in which a person, thing, or idea is linked or associated with something else" ("Connection" in Oxford English Dictionary, 2021. http://www.oed.com). For purposes of this project, connection can be considered in three intersecting ways. First, in terms of nature connectedness, the benefits of which have been studied amply by the field of environmental psychology (Fido, Rees, Clarke, Petronzi & Richardson, 2020; Kamitsis & Francis, 2013; Leong, Fischer & McClure, 2014; Mayer & Frantz, 2004). Secondly, connection can be understood as relational – inasmuch as horses’ need for a herd mirrors our human need for community and belonging; concepts which are emphasized by relational-cultural therapy (Jordan, 2018). And third, it can be considered in terms of a person’s ability to connect to one’s own emotional states – as in, the antidote to problems associated with alexithymia, which are both individual and social (Porreca, De Carli, Filippi, Parolin & Simonelli, 2020; Wastell & Booth, 2003).

Connection in EFP

The concept of connection emerged as a mechanism significant to five out of seven practitioners interviewed (see Table 2). Descriptions of the phenomenon appeared in interviews with Maya, James, Steven, Elaine, and Hannah. Through these conversations it became clear that connection is a phenomenon better understood through embodied experience than intellectual conceptualization. Sometimes referred to as “joining” or “partnering with,” this key to effective

engagement with an equine partner is as much required by the horses as it is taught by them: experientially, via their innate ability affirm or deny its presence.

Based on the narratives of EFP practitioners, the most important aspect of connection on the part of the horse is safety, or trust. Since his herd and survival instincts depend on instantaneous responses to even the slightest shifts in energy and intention, the horse has evolved to be exquisitely attuned to the emotional states of other beings he encounters. Therefore, when given a choice whether or not to engage with a human, a horse's ability and willingness to connect with that person becomes contingent on his sense of safety. Thus, the horse requires authenticity and congruence in a human partner in order to connect, attributes which ultimately depend on that human's ability to connect, emotionally, to himself. Before the concept of connection is understood it can seem confusing and out of reach; this is because it defies words. However, once it has been experienced, the concept is remarkably simple. Until we can begin to connect to our bodies and our emotions, horses will not feel safe connecting with us. Fortunately, however, the very instant we can, they demonstrate this by partnering with us gladly.

As Elaine shared, humans, unlike horses, are taught from an early age to disconnect from our true feelings. She stated: "When we're little, we naturally notice when one of our parents is upset. We say, as the child, 'Are you upset?' And the parent looks right at us and lies and says, 'No, I'm fine.' And we stop using that ability." This happens, for example, because surviving infancy and early childhood frequently depends on maintaining attachments with mis-attuned caregivers who, in survival mode themselves, are unable to connect to and validate their own emotional experience. And no parent can give something they haven't experienced themselves. So, as children, hoping to get along in our families and in fit in with society, we internalize the world's intolerance of inconvenient, unpleasant, or otherwise unwanted emotions and learn over

time to suppress them. As a result, these unwelcome aspects of our being are denied – deemed unimportant and relegated to the unconscious, where we hope to forget they exist. Thus, for many of us, incongruence – our ability to present with an affect that does not match our internal emotional experience – becomes a matter of survival. At least at first.

However, since what is denied does not simply cease to exist, our disavowed aspects, including intolerable affect states, nonetheless seek expression. Whereas a highly skilled therapist can help us to discover these unconscious aspects and collaborate verbally to bring them to our awareness over time, a horse, whose survival depends on his instantaneous responses to subtle shifts in energy (including the affect states of other beings) can detect and communicate emotional incongruence immediately. Connection is the mechanism through which this is accomplished.

Connection, in EFP, can also be a great motivating factor. As Hannah shared about her child client, "It was really his desire to connect with the horse that gave him that motivation to change." Once the clients have experienced partnering with a horse (or horses), many feel seen, accepted, and validated in unexpected ways. As Maya described it: "To get any horse to do what they want, you know, to partner with them and to accomplish any task – knowing that a 1200 pound animal is willing to do this because they simply ask? It gives them that much more power and confidence in themselves of being able to communicate something to somebody else or even just for themselves to know, like, 'I did it.'"

Learning to connect with horses offers EFP clients' opportunities to understand how they operate in the world, and to adjust accordingly. As James shared: "So, if we are pretending to be brave or something like that, and then we're actually nervous, they're not going to walk with us.

They're not going to participate with us, because we're not a safe partner. So, for us, emotionally, that lets us check in with ourselves and see what's really going on."

Over time, EFP clients come to understand both the value and safety in connection. As Steven shared: "A lot of our veterans come back and they're trying to reintegrate into their communities and their families, and they feel really disconnected. It's really important for them to understand how valuable they are in this relationship, what we call, you know, a herd of two. And they become the leader of that herd of two. And so, when they experience the value, of being this horse's safe place, it changes their perspective of themselves." Through the mechanism of connection, EFP clients learn experientially that observing, trusting, and processing their emotional states is beneficial not only for themselves, but for how they engage with others. This understanding emboldens them to navigate the world with increased authenticity, freedom, and confidence.

Elaine stated: "So, all these wonderful practices that help you have what I would call a more balanced way of being in relationship are all – the stuff horses know. They want you to be a good leader and they want you to be a good follower. They want you to be safe. And they also want you to, they want you to be vulnerable and they want you to set boundaries. So, they are much more centered and balanced than we are. They want to be guided; they don't want to be controlled. So, I think what's important is to understand that horses give us an opportunity to be better humans."

Challenges to the Growth of the EFP Field

The secondary goal of this project was to gather significant statements regarding perceived challenges and/or barriers to the growth of the EFP field from the practitioners' perspective. Participants' descriptions of their lived experience identified six significant

challenges: cohesion, funding, awareness, clarity, and accessibility. All seven interviews contained significant statements regarding funding; cohesion held significance within six out of seven interviews; awareness was addressed as significant in four of the interviews; clarity in three; and accessibility held significance in two (See Table 3). Additionally, one interview question was included in the interview sought participants' perspectives on the question of EFP's measurability. All seven interviews yielded significant statements on this topic.

Table 3

Challenges and Barriers to Growth of the Field

Practitioner	Cohesion	Funding	Awareness	Clarity	Accessibility
Maya	*	*			
James	*	*	*	*	
Carol	*	*			
Steven	*	*	*	*	*
Hannah	*	*		*	
Elaine		*	*		*
Jillian	*	*	*		

Funding

Funding was discussed as a significant hurdle by all seven participants (see Table 3), and commonly interwoven the other secondary phenomena. Maya commented on the financial challenges involved in starting an EFP practice. She shared: "I'm starting my own business and I'm trying to build my ranch and getting the facilities has been difficult. Especially with changes in weather and times of year, you know, having a place to set up when coming through a time of

year where I don't have as many sessions because it gets rainier, and I don't have a facility yet…I'm privileged to have other people nearby with barns and stuff that I can use. But money is a factor in trying to get established."

When discussing the funding challenges encountered by his group practice, James stated: "Insurance. Especially in [my state], it factors into how expensive it is to have a facility or offer equine assisted healing. And then there's the cost of having horses and rent. Hay and all that. And transportation. Like, for example, in the fires, we've had a 12-horse trailer on the ready. Like my spot can barely pull it off and they charge between $150 to $250 a session. So, yeah, there's a lot of obstacles to overcome."

Steven shared that he approaches funding hurdles through donations: "During the period of time that I was that I was a self-employed private investigator and made decent money, I could fund this program for the most part. Now I'm retired from the PI practice, so I have no income. I'm relying, now, strictly on donations and benefactors that want to help support these folks that need the help. Well, fundraising is a big issue."

Carol addresses her funding challenges by offering introductory options: "I do this group program so people can come in, they can experience it, they can see a little bit more about what the horse is doing and their value to the program and gain confidence in the person who's facilitating. And then they might be willing to come back and do a private session. Because that's when it gets more expensive. So, I think that the cost has been a hurdle. The understanding and an awareness of the value of the horse has been a hurdle."

Hannah discussed financial hurdles with regard to health insurance companies. She shared: "I get a lot of calls, but I just take straight cash pay. Where obviously, a lot of people would like to go through their insurance and I think it would be great for them to go through

their insurance but having that barrier of the insurance companies not covering it, I think is a huge detriment to people being able to participate in it. I think most people, you know, organizations will have the nonprofit side so they can get around it and just see whatever clients they want to see without worrying about the payment aspect of it. Yeah, I think really – the cost. I think more and more people know about it, especially because I think of all the publicity that the veterans' programs are getting. So, you know, my calls and everything have definitely gone up, but that barrier with the cost and with the insurance companies, it's really kind of the biggest limiting factor."

Elaine shared: "We chose to become a nonprofit so that we could get donations and we don't have to charge anybody. And so, what's interesting is, even though many people come who are very wealthy and can pay for the service, we don't charge them. But what we do is, they – we don't actually [request] it, but once they go through [our program], they many, many times – if not every time – they give us a very large donation. With a 'thank you. Thank you,' because they really feel other people deserve to have this experience as well."

Awareness

Awareness was addressed as a challenge to the growth of the EFP field in four participant interviews (see Table 3), again, frequently tied in with the other challenges and barriers discussed. Carol stated: "First off, just people don't understand the work. So, when you have people that aren't familiar with it, and then you have a high price to it, and then originally people were asking for people to commit half day or full days to these types of programs, I think it was just very difficult to sell. So, I think that we've had to find ways to reduce the price."

Regarding awareness, Steven shared: "You first have to make sure that your communities know that it's available." Jillian discussed awareness in terms of perceived value: "I mean, it still

needs to become more mainstream because people, once they've done it, it blows them away. Right? But until they've tried it, people don't really know what it's worth. And so sometimes getting enough clientele to pay that amount, the amount that it should cost, you know, is difficult. So that's a limitation. It's just the awareness. Becoming a more mainstream way of practicing."

Cohesion (Lack of)

The problem of a general lack of cohesion within the field was discussed by six out of seven study participants (see Table 3). James highlighted problems created by the proliferation of different training and certifying organizations. He shared, "I think it's really dangerous to continue to make these specializations. I think it cuts out a lot of the population who could be great healers, but maybe they're not school people. Maybe they don't have money for certifications. And I think it also cuts out a lot of the population because then by the time you go to school and all of that, you have to charge a lot of money. Yeah, I think, I don't think that those [organizations] specifically are a barrier, but I think if it became mandatory to have – like if it became where if you have a horse and you want to see a client, you have to either have one certification or another, I think – you know, there are benefits of course, because it protects the consumer in some ways to know that there's oversight. But on the other hand, I think it's becoming too proprietary."

Maya echoed James' discomfort with the apparent proprietary nature of various training programs. She shared: "In terms of the equine work and services, I think there's value in all of them. But some practitioners get so stuck in certain certifications that they've gotten… like, 'this is the best way. The only way. You can't do this and do another.' The idea that you have to only be certified in one and you can't touch the others. For me personally I think that if your focus is really client based, you might need to pull from some different trainings to really help the clients.

That has kept me from getting certain certifications because I don't want to be forced to only use specific tools and techniques. So, as a whole, it'd be nice if there could be more open-mindedness to, like, collaborating and learning from each other. You know, just to be able to have more knowledge in general to be able to provide better and more services for our clients."

Steven shared: "There are a lot of equine programs out there. And while they're good, I thought, 'Well, why can't we do this? And why can't we add that?' And, and so I thought, you know, the way to do that is to create my own program so I can have all these things […] without mentioning any names, I can tell you that I have people come to me and say, 'Well, I went off and got certified under such and such a program.' And their certification is involving high level riding techniques that mean nothing to the person with PTSD or emotional struggles. You know, I don't know how to get a horse to do a flying lead change or, ah, a piaffe, or dressage or how to, you know, get horses to do these things. But that isn't going to help someone heal who feels like they're a monster because they were involved in combat, or that their daughter hung herself. No, that's not really of any help at all. And so, I'm not interested in certifying people to be wazoo competitive horsemen. I'm interested in people getting into the hearts of people and the hearts of the horses. And connecting them.

"And then, I've run into a number of people doing equine assisted therapy because they're, you know, a nationally recognized competitor in dressage or rodeo, or you know, some discipline. And – I was a competitor for years. I played polo for 25 years and I was kind of an over-the-top competitor. I had to reel myself back in because you know, I got wrapped up in the competition and I was being abusive to my horse. And so, I know from a past competitor's perspective I can unequivocally say that there's no room for competition in healing. You have to put that aside and you have to put that behind you. In fact, if anything, it's one of the experiences

that you can have in life that brings you to a new place of recognition and awareness of, you know, how we all fit in this oneness of creation."

Hannah shared: "My one concern for this growing exponential field is there are so many different 'certification programs.' There are so many different modalities and you know, using the word therapy and therapists, where a lot of these people don't really have any mental health background per se; they're using things from coaching or, things like that. I think it lends itself to such a wide range of quality. And I know [major EFP organization] is trying really hard to crack down on that. To have that uniform and that standard... But I really don't know how that can be done." Jillian stated: "I think there's a lot of people doing some things that are really great. And there are sometimes things where they're not so great. So, if someone has a bad experience, they're liable to think, 'well that was equine therapy,' right? So, that's a problem. There's not enough consistency."

Clarity (Lack of)

Four study participants mentioned clarity as a significant challenge to the growth of the EFP field (see Table 3), most in connection with the theme of cohesion. Steven expressed that just as practitioners who are overly focused on horsemanship can be problematic, so are those who do not know enough about it: "One of the issues with EAPs is, you know, I know several people that are doing equine assisted psychotherapy, and they've gone off to this — um — school to become certified horse specialists, they call them. And they come back and they say, 'Well, now I'm a certified horse specialist. It was the first time I ever touched a horse, but in, you know, a week I became a certified horse specialist,' you know? And so, they don't really understand, you know, the depth of the horse, and really, what's happening. So, I've gone and audited other programs where psychotherapists are using horses for therapy and — and it's sad to

me because I sat there and I watched this disconnect between the horse and the human. And it makes me realize that many people think equine therapy is having a horse in the room. Like a piece of furniture. They're missing the value that the horse has to offer."

Hannah expressed: "One thing I have a hard time with is the 'equine specialist.' If you have a very savvy person who has, maybe, gone through their own work or have had that level of insight, I think they could be very valuable. But I've seen a lot of equine specialists who are way... overstepping. Boundaries. I know they're supposed to just be focusing on the horse and the horse's behavior, but a lot of them don't. A lot of them, you know, will start asking those digging questions or making more reflective statements. You know, where obviously, if you have a mental health professional, there's some level of certification behind that. But with the equine specialist, it's just, you know, 'have you worked with the horse for so many hours?' So, I think that's one thing that has made it hard. I know for [one major EFP organization] – that's just – the basis of their program is having that team approach. But I think it's very, very hard to standardize and look at a quality standpoint for that. Yeah, so, that's a concern. And I mean, they're obviously coming from good places, but we as professionals know our roles. This is all foreign to the equine specialists. They don't have the rules and ethics and laws and everything the licensed psychotherapists have. So, I think throwing them into that world, you know, can cause some issues."

Jillian shared: "There's some gaps in what's available – where to get, sort of, standard operating procedures and best practices from. There is no training that offers that. So, I've seen some things happen that weren't good. And I guess, with [Jillian's program name redacted] I've had people really want me to become a, you know, a gatekeeper. But I'm like, I'm really more interested in training people with the best knowledge possible. So that, rather than telling them,

‘you can't do it this way, or you can't do it that way,’ I'd rather they keep educating themselves. And that's how they improve, rather than blaming them or trying to track down who's doing it wrong.”

Elaine expressed strong views on personal and program integrity, stating: “So, my problem is with most any model that doesn't have what I call ‘the parallel practice.’ It’s inherently hypocritical. Parallel practice means that I don't ask anybody to do anything I'm not doing or haven't done. It’s not okay for me to just come to help you create a better life and do a wellness practice that I am not doing myself.”

Accessibility

Accessibility was mentioned by two study participants as a significant challenge to the growth of the EFP field. Elaine addressed accessibility in the context of whether EFP could be considered as a standalone rather than an adjunct to therapy in traditional clinical settings. She shared: “I understand that not everybody can get to the horse. I really understand the limitation of it. And why it is probably more of an adjunct than traditional therapy is just because it is oftentimes more difficult to get to. And, to get to a horse, it's a little bit difficult. I know we could make it easier. Even in New York City. There's Central Park. And there certainly could be a program in Central Park. There may be one already. Anyway. I think there always have to be choices. Not everybody can start off standing in front of a horse. I understand that, but if it’s easy enough for people to get to, I think it can work very well for certain people as a standalone treatment, rather than just an adjunct.”

Steven spoke of accessibility in the context of public awareness in terms of stigma and clients’ comfort with the idea of EFP. He stated: “You’ve got to make it comfortable for people to engage in it. Because most of us who've got PTSD or have struggled with trauma really don't

want to stand up and wave our hand, say, ‘Hey, I got PTSD’ or, ‘Hey, I need help.’ So, the awareness is kind of multifaceted. You're making the communities aware that you're there and then making it possible for them to be comfortable coming.”

Measurability

In addition to the above, an interview question was included to gather perspectives on the measurability of EFP based on the lived experience of practitioners. All seven interviews yielded significant statements on this topic, which primarily centered on themes of feasibility and perceived value toward addressing the other challenges and limitations discussed above.

Maya expressed frustration at how little quantitative research exists to validate EFP, stating: “Yeah, when I was in school, we kept running into that as well. Research hasn't – you know – is poor in that regard.” She shared her experience with pre- and post- self-report outcome measures and using physiological measures like blood pressure and heart rate and shared her idea of “possibly doing neuroimaging to see if there's any changes in the clients before or after […] to see if there's any changes in the brain after working with the horses.” Carol stated that she also collects self-report before and after outcome measures and commented: “there's a lot that we have yet to learn, we need a lot more research […] on the benefits of equine therapy or learning.”

Hannah shared: “I've always done outcome measures. I use the PHQ-9, the GAD-7 and the YOQ to give some sort of objective data, versus the wonderful subjective data that we get. And to get, the different validity to, ‘hey, you know, they're not just coming out here petting horses, there's change going on.’ I think to lend more credibility to this field, I think we'd need more professionals, more data, more of that standardization to eventually get it to a place of an evidence-based practice. But with so many different people doing it and so many different styles – and I would love for it to be. But I'm really not sure how we would get there.”

Steven shared: “We're working on a program right now to start measuring vitals […] to demonstrate what metabolic changes occur with their heart rhythms and frequencies and heart rates. And sleep is a big deal. […] Because I'm getting so much feedback from students saying, you know, ‘I sleep better,’ you know, ‘I'm not waking up in the night,’ and ‘I'm not having the bad dreams I was having.’ So, I'm kind of anxious to get that data collected. I have two different universities interested in helping me do that.”

Elaine expressed strong feelings about the idea of objective measurement, stating: “To actually believe that you could have what's called an ‘evidence based practice’ when it comes to human beings and horses...everything else? I'm not so sure we should be even doing that. And so, I really struggle with that idea […] if we're supposed to help people lead a better life, then they should be the ones to tell us that they've been able to do that, not me. And I don't need it to be – to be quantifiable doesn't mean to be validated. The only person that needs to be validated is the client themself. For having the courage to face their trauma and the effects of their trauma, the post traumatic growth, and then want to keep changing and growing. That's your evidence.”

Jillian shared: “So, I wasn't really a scientist, but in my field as an environmental lit professor, I had to have a science as a second language, right? So, and then I taught at [redacted] college's psych department. I taught the human equine bond in that department for short time. And that question came up a lot. And I just found, I didn't really – it wasn't an interesting question to me. Because I'm practicing on a cutting edge and I'm not really, I don't – like a lot of stuff to get researched? I mean, I think what you're doing, the phenomenological questioning, and then trying to find a way to quantify that is probably almost the most interesting way to me.”

Conclusion

This project began with an extensive literature review which identified that, while ample qualitative research exists suggestive of its value as a mental health treatment, particularly for trauma and related conditions, thus far the evidence base for EFP lacks the clarity and cohesion necessary for empirical validation. Primarily, this study sought to address the issue of clarity by probing for greater understanding of the therapeutic mechanisms of EFP. A secondary goal to was to gather insight around the lack of cohesion within the field, and to explore other phenomena representing challenges to the growth and mainstream acceptance of EFP as a standard mental health treatment.

A combined methodology of phenomenology and grounded theory was chosen for data collection and analysis. After interviews were transcribed, idiographic analyses of seven practitioner narratives were completed, resulting in coded descriptions of many intersecting phenomena which contribute to change for EFP clients. A nomothetic analysis was then applied, through which this data was aggregated into five main phenomenological categories representing EFPs mechanisms of therapeutic action. Also, as the study's secondary aim, six phenomena were identified as significant challenges to the growth and mainstream acceptance of EFP.

Five Theoretical Pillars

Regarding the primary research question, this study identified mechanisms which occurred with relative uniformity across all participant interviews, regardless of practitioner credentials or the specific equine modality practiced. As such, this study's findings suggest the following five categories as pillars to a nascent theoretical model for understanding EFP: *observation*, *communication*, *mindfulness*, *embodiment*, and *connection*. With each of these mechanisms. practitioners served as facilitators to guide interactions with horses, with the gentle

expectation that “the clients typically have their own answers” and neutral curiosity about how their equine partners might draw them out. A brief narrative summary of each pillar follows below.

During EFP sessions, horses facilitate heightened observation on many levels by offering novel opportunities to notice thoughts, beliefs, impulses and body sensations without the burden of words or judgement. EFP practitioners support this mechanism by making their own observations as neutral as possible so as to gently guide, without interference.

During EFP sessions, horses communicate and invite communication on many levels, ranging from very clear and concrete (i.e., behaviors and body language) to extremely subtle and uncanny (i.e., perceiving and inviting the emergence of unconscious material). EFP practitioners support this mechanism through neutral questioning (i.e., inviting curiosity) and very basic interpretations (i.e., educating on herd and horse behavior).

During EFP sessions, horses naturally promote mindfulness by modeling presence (i.e., being in the moment). Just being near them inspires awe, respect for nature, and openness to experiences which transcend the everyday and which frequently defy material explanation (i.e., spiritual, energetic, intuitive). EFP practitioners facilitate these mindfulness mechanisms by guiding opportunities for reflection and curiosity about the unknown, by inviting intention (i.e., the assigning of meaning to horses and/or tasks), and/or by emphasizing safety (on many levels).

During EFP sessions, horses facilitate embodiment by modeling self-regulation and quick resolution of nervous system activation cycles, by naturally co-regulating with clients, and by teaching them through embodied experience. EFP practitioners facilitate this mechanism by engaging clients in embodied experiences with equine partners and gently inquiring into their effects.

During EFP sessions, horses teach connection by requiring congruence (i.e., between internal mood and outward affect), by offering feedback related to interpersonal safety, and by rewarding heartful integrity and genuineness. These experiences of connection with an equine partner disaffirm autonomic trauma responses, penetrate cynicism and gently confront maladaptive schemas around hopelessness and isolation. EFP practitioners facilitate this mechanism by patiently guiding ample opportunities for the client to achieve connection with the horse, and by inviting reflection in ways that support generalization to other domains (i.e., connection to loved ones, to emotions, to oneself).

Vexing Challenges

With regard to the study's secondary research question, several significant phenomena emerged as limiting factors to the growth and advancement of EFP as a viable, mainstream mental health treatment. Six interconnected issues were identified as: *funding*, *awareness*, *cohesion*, *clarity*, *accessibility*, and *measurability*. While participating practitioners expressed similar views on logistical challenges like funding, public awareness and accessibility, their viewpoints on the field's persistent difficulties around cohesion, clarity and, therefore, measurability served as much to demonstrate as clarify these problems, with consternation being the main unifying factor.

For instance, it seems that notable contention exists around best practices i.e., how these should be arbitrated and by whom and for whom. Participants indicated some divisive and/or proprietary dynamics which appear to exist between and among different EFP modalities. These seem to mirror competitive aspects of "the horse world" in which equines are used primarily for sport. The resultant lack of cooperation appears to contribute a significant limiting factor for the field of EFP. It appears that practitioners are faced the dilemma of choosing between costly

certification programs that require adherence to protocols which they find limiting and/or otherwise not ideal (i.e., add expense and/or derail the therapeutic process), resigning themselves to work in relative isolation, or "inventing the wheel" by starting a program of their own.

Additional reported concerns included stark contrasts in quality and emphasis, such as "show riding, but packaged as therapy" or "regular therapy, but with a horse present" or "non-horsey people and non-therapists, kind of trying to do both." Unfortunately, these factors do not bode well for establishing legitimacy or advancing the reputation of EFP as a field, particularly in the eyes of the psychological community and/or potential funding sources, such as insurers.

Although the intent of this project was more descriptive than prescriptive, it does bear mention that the field would benefit from more oversight, clearer and more detailed enumeration of its specific benefits to clients and how these come about, along with the careful elimination of factors that inadvertently work against its therapeutic aims.

Limitations

Limitations of the current study included its very small sample size and potential for sample bias due to self-selection for participation, along with its basis on self-report, i.e., practitioners may not have chosen to be completely forthcoming in response to the interview questions, etc. Although it was not initially understood as such, during the course of the interviews, this researcher came to recognize the bias implied within the idea that existing EFP protocols should be manualized or new ones created so that an equine psychotherapy model might achieve recognition as an evidence-based practice. Not all practitioners interviewed agreed that this should even *be* a goal, let alone one that might be possible to accomplish. Perhaps the greatest benefits of EFP may in fact lie within its aspects which remain as yet immeasurable.

Implications and Future Directions

Projected benefits of this work include a clearer understanding of EFP mechanisms and their specific impacts on clients, particularly those recovering from trauma or traumatic stress. Ideally this project has contributed a nascent conceptual framework that begins to capture the essential aspects of EFP, which might guide conversations and future research can build, whether those serve to confirm, refine or refute it. Future directions of study should seek to advance theoretical understandings of EFP and contribute to its suitability for empirical validation. Additionally, and perhaps paradoxically, this project has sought to bring to light those factors which currently inhibit its growth and advancement as a mainstream therapeutic treatment, so that these concerns might be taken into account when determining the trajectory of future research and practice.

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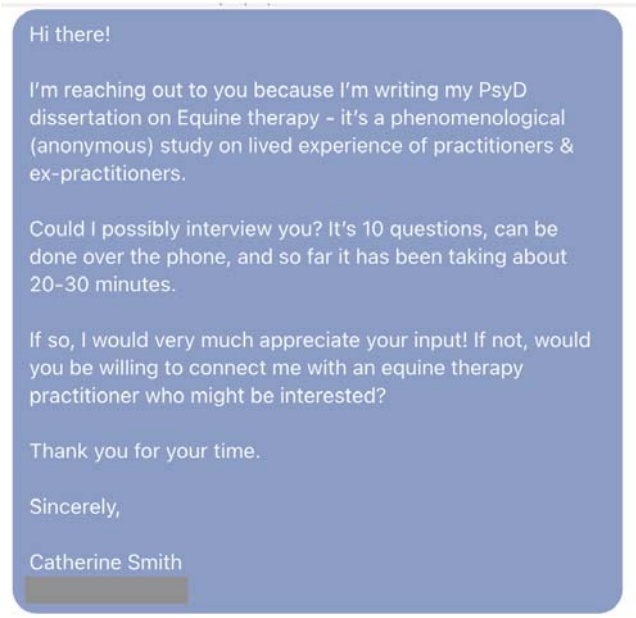
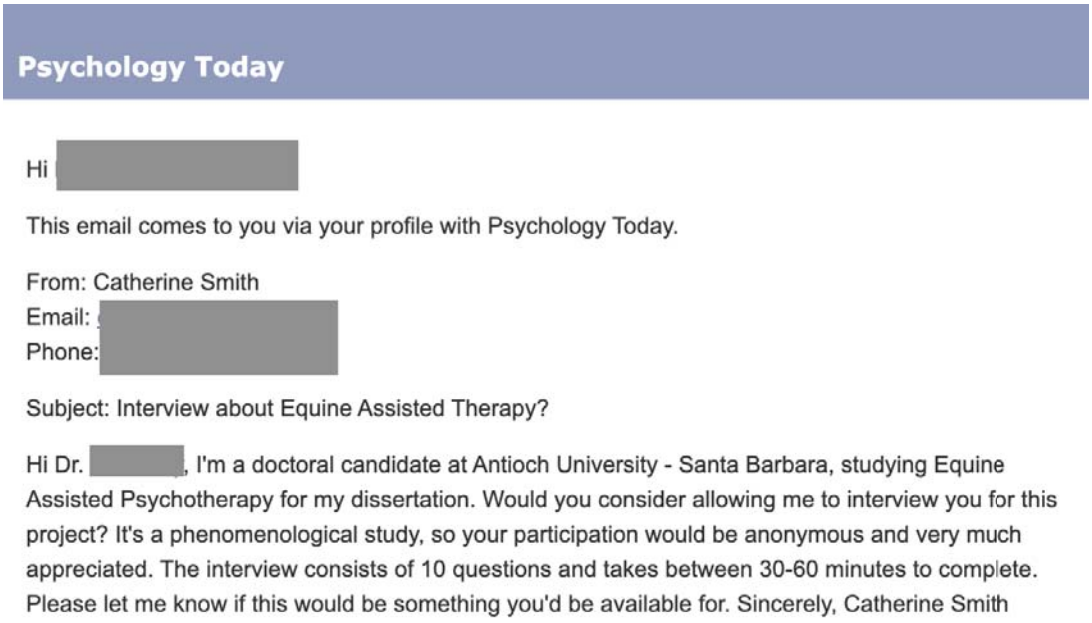
Appendices

Appendix A – Recruitment Letter Examples

Sample inquiry as sent via Facebook Messenger:



Sample inquiry as sent via Psychology Today web contact form:



Appendix B – Study Participation Informed Consent Form

ANTIOCH UNIVERSITY
SANTA BARBARA

CONSENT FORM

Title: "What is it About Horses?" Exploring Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy

Project Investigator: Catherine Smith, MA

Dissertation Chair: Allen Bishop, PhD

1. I understand that this study is of a research nature. It may offer no direct benefit to me.

2. Participation in this study is voluntary. I may refuse to enter it or may withdraw at any time without creating any harmful consequences to myself. I understand also that the investigator may drop me at any time from the study.

3. The purpose of this study is: to clarify mechanisms of action of equine facilitated mental health practices, and to identify challenges/barriers to the growth of the field.

4. As a participant in the study, I will be asked to take part in the following procedures: interview (digitally recorded). Participation in the study will take .5-1 hour of my time and will take place in person, by phone, or via online meeting (i.e. skype or zoom meeting).

5. The risks, discomforts and inconveniences of the above procedures might be: Risks for participation in this research are minimal. There is no physical risk. Emotional risk might exist if difficult topics emerge from open-ended interview questions. Financial, social, or professional risks may exist if participants' and/or their clients' identities are not kept strictly confidential and HIPAA compliant, therefore, the utmost care will be taken to avoid them. Personal identifiers will be removed and your information will not be used or distributed for future research.

6. The possible benefits of the procedure might be: a clearer understanding of the mechanisms of action of equine facilitated mental health practices as well as their specific impacts on

(continued on next page)

clients/participants. Ideally this work will contribute to a stronger theoretical foundation upon which further (empirical) research can build. Additionally, open-ended exploration of equine practitioners' lived experience may afford a more complex, detailed understanding of barriers and/or challenges affecting the growth of the field.

a. Direct benefit to me: to give voice to impressions, ideas, lived experience.

b. Benefits to others: to increase understanding of equine facilitated mental health practices and to ultimately broaden their accessibility.

7. Information about the study (including methods, aims and privacy practices) was discussed with me by Catherine Smith, MA . If I have further questions, I can call her at [redacted].

9. Though the purpose of this study is primarily to fulfill my requirement to complete a formal research project as a dissertation at Antioch University, I also intend to include the data and results of the study in future scholarly publications and presentations. Our confidentiality agreement, as articulated above, will be effective in all cases of data sharing. If you have any questions about the study, you may contact Catherine Smith at telephone # [redacted] or via email at csmith25@antioch.edu. If you have any additional questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact Brett Kia-Keating, EdD, teaching faculty, Doctoral Program in Clinical Psychology, Antioch University, Santa Barbara at [redacted] or [redacted], or Barbara Lipinski, PhD, JD, Provost and Chief Executive Officer Antioch University, Santa Barbara at [redacted] or [redacted]

Date:_____ Signed:_____

Email address: _____ Phone: _____

Appendix C – Interview Protocol

Interview Questions

1. (a) Are you currently licensed or pursuing licensure as a psychotherapist? If so, what type/level of license? (b) Are/were you a certified practitioner or pursuing some type of equine therapy (or learning) certification? If so, what is the equine therapy/learning model you practice/d and what is entailed in the training/certification for that modality? If not, why not?
2. What led you to become an equine practitioner?
3. Why did you choose the specific modality you practice? Can you describe a typical session?
4. Does/did your equine practice involve riding and/or do you believe it should? Why or why not?
5. How does EFP work? In your experience, how does change come about for the client? (i.e. Can you name specific processes or categories to describe what is going on when a client works with you and an equine partner?)
6. What type of population(s) do you find benefit most from equine work? Who do you end up seeing most in your practice? What are some common presentations and/or diagnoses you have worked with?
7. Without revealing identifying information, can you describe a specific client/case/person you worked with? that was particularly interesting to you? How did EFP unfold for them?
8. Do you have any ideas or opinions about how EFP practices or outcomes could be made more consistently measurable? Could it ever become an 'evidence based practice"?
9. Can you tell me your opinions about some of the limitations of EFP? What do you perceive as barriers to participation and/or challenges to the growth of the field?
10. Do you feel EFP is more effective as an adjunct to traditional "time on the couch" psychotherapy or would you prefer it were more commonly used a stand-alone modality? Why or why not?